

ASL & Deaf History Timeline

Key milestones in American Sign Language and Deaf culture, from the 1600s to today

1600s

1694

Martha's Vineyard

A village where sign language was widely used by both deaf and hearing residents, so deafness was not a barrier to full participation in public life.

1700s

December 1785

Laurent Clerc is born

Born hearing, Clerc lost his hearing and sense of smell at age one after a fire, which also left severe burns on the right side of his face — the origin of his sign name.

December 1787

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet is born

An American educator who co-founded the first permanent institution for the education of the deaf, alongside Laurent Clerc and Mason Cogswell.

1800s

August 1805

Alice Cogswell is born

Deaf daughter of a doctor. Gallaudet noticed her isolation, learned she was deaf, and was inspired by her to establish the American School for the Deaf.

1806

Gallaudet brings Clerc to America from France

Gallaudet recruited Clerc, then a teacher in France, to come to America, where Clerc became the first Deaf teacher in the country.

April 1817

First American school for the Deaf opens

The Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons opened in Hartford, CT, with Alice Cogswell as its first registered student.

December 1830

Alice Cogswell dies

Alice contracted pneumonia on December 10th and died 20 days later at age 25. Some accounts say she died of a broken heart after refusing to eat following her father's death.

March 1847

Alexander Graham Bell is born

Best known for inventing the telephone, Bell was primarily an educator of deaf children. He strongly opposed sign language in favor of oralism, though his mother and wife were both deaf.

September 1851	Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet dies Gallaudet died from complications of a lung disease he had suffered from since childhood.
1864	Gallaudet College becomes a college Congress authorized the institution to award degrees, and the bill was signed into law by Abraham Lincoln.
1867	Clarke Schools for the Deaf is founded Clarke educated deaf and hard-of-hearing children using oralism and banned sign language. It was renamed Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech in 2010.
July 1869	Laurent Clerc dies Clerc died at home, believed to be of natural causes.
June 1880	Helen Keller is born At 19 months old, Helen became deaf and blind after an unknown illness, possibly rubella or scarlet fever.
August 1880	National Association of the Deaf (NAD) is founded Founded in Cincinnati, Ohio, to preserve, protect, and promote the civil, human, and linguistic rights of Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened people in the U.S.
1885	Kendall School for the Deaf is established Amos Kendall donated land after being approached about founding a school for deaf and blind children; the school opened with 12 deaf and 6 blind students.
1893	The Helen Keller National Center is established Created to help empower people who are blind, DeafBlind, or have combined vision and hearing loss to live more independently.
1894	The huddle is invented Created at Gallaudet College to prevent opposing football teams from seeing the players' signed plays.
1898	The first hearing aid device is created Miller Reese Hutchinson developed the first electric hearing aid, called the Akouphone.

1900s

1901	The first hand signals in baseball are created Deaf player William Hoy wanted to stay informed in the outfield, leading to the creation of hand signals to aid communication.
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1910s

1912

Girl Scouts of the USA is established

Founded by Juliette Gordon Low after multiple ear injuries left her with near-total hearing loss.

October 16,
1916

Detroit Association of the Deaf (DAD) is founded

Not the first Deaf club in the U.S., but the longest continuously running one.

1920s

1924

The first Deaflympics Summer event is held

Called the International Silent Games, held in Paris with 9 countries and 145 athletes.

1940s

1949

The first Deaflympics Winter event is held

Held in Austria as the International Winter Silent Games, the first after a seven-year, WWII-driven hiatus, with 33 athletes from 5 countries.

1950s

1957

The cochlear implant is invented

French doctors Andre Djournio and Charles Eyries performed an experimental surgery attempting to restore hearing in a deaf patient.

1958

First International Week of the Deaf is celebrated

The World Federation of the Deaf held the first celebration in Rome, later expanded from a single day to a full week, held annually in the last full week of September.

1960s

1960

William Stokoe proves ASL is its own language

Gallaudet linguist Stokoe identified 19 distinct ASL handshapes and fought to establish ASL as a true language.

1961

The Jr. NAD is established

Created to promote leadership among deaf youth and encourage them to reach their highest potential.

1964	The teletypewriter (TTY) is invented Developed by Dr. Robert Haig Weitbrecht, the TTY let deaf and hearing people communicate remotely, though both parties needed the device.
June 1964	RID (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf) is established Created to advocate for excellence in interpretation and transliteration between sign language and spoken language users.
August 1965	Marlee Matlin is born At 18 months old, an illness left Matlin with total hearing loss in her right ear and 80% loss in her left, making her legally deaf.
1967	National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) is founded Became a long-running national and international performing arts organization.
1967	Aspen Camp for the Deaf is founded Founded by Reed Harris, Tom Sardy, and Lt. General William Martin, Aspen Camp has hosted over 25,000 campers and remains the only year-round camp for the deaf population.
1968	NTID collaborates with RIT The National Technical Institute for the Deaf partnered with Rochester Institute of Technology to provide technical, liberal arts, and science education for deaf and hard-of-hearing students.
June 1968	Helen Keller dies Keller died in her sleep just weeks before her 88th birthday.
January 1969	Silent News is established A newspaper for the deaf community, founded by Julius Wiggins after he moved to New Jersey from Toronto.
1969	MSSD is established The Model Secondary School for the Deaf was authorized in Washington, D.C., through an agreement between the U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare and Gallaudet College.

1970s

1971	Linda Bove becomes first deaf actor on Sesame Street Bove played Linda the Librarian from 1971 to 2002, becoming the first Deaf actress in the show's recurring cast.
1972	The first Miss Deaf America pageant is held Held at the NAD convention in Miami Beach, Florida; Ann Billington was crowned the first titleholder.

1973	Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Prohibited disability discrimination in federal agency programs, federally funded programs, federal employment, and federal contractor practices.
1975	American Sign Language Teachers Association is established Founded to perpetuate, preserve, and promote ASL and Deaf Culture through excellence in teaching.
1976	The spread of the “I Love You” sign begins Richard Dawson popularized the sign by using it to close each episode of Family Feud starting in 1976.
1977	The first deaf Roman Catholic priest is ordained Father Thomas Coughlin was ordained at the Basilica of the Assumption in Baltimore, in a ceremony conducted in both sign language and spoken words.

1980s

1980s	The Bilingual-Bicultural (bi-bi) movement begins Pioneered by Marie Jean Philip, this approach uses sign language as Deaf children's first language and emphasizes immersion in Deaf culture.
1980	Sears sells the first closed-caption TV sets The first caption decoders were delivered to Sears on March 15, 1980; the first regularly scheduled captioned program aired the next evening.
1980	Phyllis Frelich wins the first Tony for a deaf woman Frelich won Best Actress for her role in “Children of a Lesser God.”
1981	Florida establishes the QA interpreter screening process Interpreters seeking state certification took the Quality Assurance test and received a QA1, QA2, or QA3 rating based on performance.
1982	Camp Mark 7 (CM7) is established Located in New York, CM7 offers recreational, educational, leadership, and spiritual programs for deaf, hard of hearing, KODA, and hearing participants.
1983	The term CODA is coined Coined by Millie Brother during graduate research at Gallaudet University to describe hearing children born to deaf adults.
October 1986	Gallaudet becomes a university An act of the U.S. Congress granted Gallaudet full university status.

1986	Marlee Matlin wins the Academy Award Matlin won Best Actress for her role in "Children of a Lesser God."
March 6, 1988	Deaf President Now (DPN) protests begin Protests erupted after Gallaudet's Board of Trustees selected a hearing candidate as the university's seventh president.
March 13, 1988	Gallaudet gets its first Deaf president in 124 years I. King Jordan, who became profoundly deaf after a motorcycle accident, was named president after earning his degrees at Gallaudet.
1988	California is first state to approve ASL for foreign language credit California became the first U.S. state to accept ASL as fulfilling a foreign language requirement.
1988	Deaf Life Magazine is established A monthly magazine giving visibility to the Deaf community and a forum for Deaf perspectives.
1989	DeafWay I is hosted Over 5,000 people from 80 countries gathered to share ideas, talents, art, and performance about Deaf life.
May 1989	Nyle DiMarco is born An American model, actor, and Deaf activist.

1990s

1990	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is passed Originally the Education of Handicapped Children Act (1975), later amended and renamed IDEA to ensure equal access to education.
July 1990	The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is signed Signed by President George H.W. Bush, the ADA guaranteed equal employment opportunity, interpreter access, closed captioning, and protections against hiring discrimination.
1991	Deaf West Theatre is founded Founded in Los Angeles to engage artists and audiences through theater and media inspired by Deaf culture.
1992	Shirley Jeanne Allen earns her doctorate Allen became the first Black, deaf woman in the U.S. to earn a doctorate degree; she became deaf at 20 after typhoid fever.

2000s

2001

The BEI interpreting test is administered

Administered by various states, offering BEI 1, 2, and 3 certification levels; not all states require certification.

2002/2003

Sidekick becomes first phone for unassisted TTY & Relay calls

The Sidekick let users make TTY and Relay operator calls through the phone's own operating system, becoming popular in the Deaf community for texting and messaging.

July 2002

DeafWay II is hosted

More than 9,700 Deaf people from around the world gathered in Washington, D.C., to share arts, research, and languages.

October 2002

First deaf person stars in a TV program

Deanne Bray-Kotsur became the first deaf lead, playing Sue Thomas in "Sue Thomas: F.B.Eye."

2003

The first DeafNation Expo is held

The Expo has since grown into a free, wide-reaching series of events across the U.S. each year.

2003

Silent News ceases publication

The newspaper closed due to minimal community response.

2003

Christy Smith becomes first deaf Survivor contestant

Smith appeared on CBS's Survivor and surprised her tribe by announcing her disability on the first day.

October 2003

DeafNation Expo tours 10–15 U.S. cities

The touring trade show became the foremost event for, by, and about deaf people.

July 2005

NAD passes the Code of Professional Conduct for interpreters

The CPC ensures interpreters act with respect, neutrality, and cultural sensitivity toward all parties.

September 2005

Video Relay Service centers open across the U.S.

Companies including Purple, ZVRS, Convo, and Sorenson launched services letting non-signing hearing callers connect via videophone.

2008

ASLdeafined is established

Created to make learning sign language accessible to everyone, regardless of age.

2010s

2015

California passes LEAD-K legislation

California became the first state to approve Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids, creating language acquisition resources for parents of DHH children ages 0–5.

2015

Nyle DiMarco becomes first Deaf winner of America's Next Top Model

DiMarco won season 22, becoming the second male winner and the first Deaf winner.

July 2016

CASLI is founded

The Center for the Assessment of Sign Language Interpretation was created by RID as a separate entity to administer and develop its certification exams.

March 2017

Utah passes Bill HB60

The law replaced the term “hearing impaired” with “deaf or hard of hearing.”

March 2017

VSYN+ streaming service is established

An innovative streaming service spotlighting sign language entertainment for all audiences.

2020s

2021

The movie CODA is released in the U.S.

Originally a French-Belgian film, CODA was remade into an English-language version.

2022

CODA wins Best Picture

The first film with a predominantly Deaf cast to win an Oscar.

2022

Troy Kotsur becomes the first deaf man to win Best Actor

Kotsur won the Academy Award for his role in CODA.