

## Who Was Abbé de l'Épée?

- **Full Name:** Charles-Michel de l'Épée
- **Lived:** 1712–1789
- **Nationality:** French
- **Profession:** Catholic priest and educator
- **Known For:** Founding the first free public school for Deaf children and helping develop manual signed education

He wasn't Deaf himself, but he became one of the first people in Europe to recognize the potential of Deaf people and to teach them using sign language.

## How Did He Get Involved in Deaf Education?

Around 1760, l'Épée met two young Deaf sisters in Paris who had lost their religious tutor. Their mother asked for help, and l'Épée accepted.

- He quickly realized that these girls used hand signs to communicate.
- Rather than force them to speak, he learned their signs and built a teaching system around them.
- This was revolutionary: most educators at the time believed Deaf people couldn't be educated at all, or that they should only be taught to speak (oralism).

Instead, l'Épée believed sign language was a natural and valid language.

## Founding of the First Public Deaf School

In the 1760s, he established the first free public school for Deaf children in Paris, France, called: Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets à Paris ("National Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris")

This school was different because:

- It was free and open to children from all social classes.

- It used manual signs — not speech — as the main teaching method.
- It taught Deaf students to read, write, and understand religion using sign.

This was the first time Deaf children were taught as a group, in a classroom setting, using their natural visual language.

## His Contributions to Sign Language

### 1. Preservation of Natural Sign Language

L'Épée observed Deaf people signing with each other and respected their language.

- He called it "la langue des signes naturelles" ("natural sign language").
- He saw it as a complete and expressive form of communication, not just gestures or mime.

### 2. Manual Alphabet and "Methodical Signs"

He created methodical signs, a combination of French grammar and sign vocabulary, in an attempt to teach French using signs.

- This was a bit artificial and not fully natural to Deaf people.
- However, it showed that sign language could express grammar, abstract ideas, and religion.

### 3. Publication of His Teaching Methods

He published several books, including: *"Instruction of Deaf and Mute Persons by Means of Methodical Signs"* (1776)

This spread his ideas throughout Europe, inspiring schools and teachers in countries like Germany, Austria, and Italy.

# His Global Legacy

## In France:

- His school eventually became the Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris.
- One of its graduates and teachers was Laurent Clerc, who would later travel to the U.S. with Thomas Gallaudet to help found the American School for the Deaf.

## In the U.S.:

- French Sign Language (LSF), taught by l'Épée and passed down through Clerc, mixed with other local signs to help form American Sign Language (ASL).
- So, ASL has historical roots in l'Épée's teaching methods and LSF.

# Beliefs and Philosophy

Abbé de l'Épée believed:

- Deaf people were fully intelligent and deserving of education.
- Sign language was a gift from God, and forcing speech was not necessary for knowledge or salvation.
- Education should be free and accessible, regardless of class or ability.

These ideas were revolutionary in a time when many believed Deaf people were unteachable or unable to think abstractly.

# Death and Recognition

- L'Épée died in 1789, just before the French Revolution.
- In 1791, the French National Assembly declared him a "Benefactor of Humanity" which is an extremely rare honor.

Today, he is honored in Deaf communities around the world for:

- Recognizing the value of sign language
- Advocating for Deaf rights and education
- Laying the foundation for modern Deaf schools and ASL

## Summary Chart

Category	Details
Full Name	Charles-Michel de l'Épée
Lived	1712–1789
Known As	Father of Deaf Education
Country	France
Major Accomplishment	Founded the first free public school for Deaf children
Language Impact	Helped preserve and develop French Sign Language
Legacy	Influenced the creation of ASL through Laurent Clerc