

Who Was Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet?

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (1787–1851) was an American educator and pioneer in Deaf education. He is most famous for helping create the first school for Deaf students in the United States and playing a key role in the foundation of ASL.

Why Did He Care About Deaf Education?

In 1814, Gallaudet met a young Deaf girl named Alice Cogswell. She was nine years old and lived in his neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut. Her father, Dr. Mason Cogswell, noticed that Alice had trouble learning because she couldn't hear and didn't have access to language.

Gallaudet saw that Alice was smart but had no way to communicate. He began trying to teach her using drawings, writing, and gestures. This experience inspired him to learn more about how to teach Deaf children.

Gallaudet Travels to Europe

At the time, there were no Deaf schools in America. So in 1815, Dr. Cogswell and others helped Gallaudet travel to Europe to learn about methods used in Deaf education. While in England, Gallaudet found schools, but they refused to share their methods unless he stayed for years. Then he went to France, where he met Laurent Clerc, a Deaf teacher at the Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris.

This meeting changed everything. Gallaudet saw that the French method—which used sign language—was far more successful than oral-only education. He convinced Laurent Clerc to come back with him to America to help start a school. On their voyage back to the U.S., Gallaudet learned sign language from Clerc, and Clerc improved his English.

They were learning from each other, blending spoken language and sign.

Founding the American School for the Deaf (1817)

In 1817, Gallaudet and Clerc opened the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. It was the first permanent school for the Deaf in America. The school used a mix of French Sign Language, Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, and home signs from students all over the country. This blend became the foundation of American Sign Language (ASL). The American School for the Deaf was the birthplace of ASL as we know it today.

Why Is Gallaudet Important to ASL?

- Without Gallaudet's interest in helping one Deaf child, ASL might never have developed the way it did.
- He believed Deaf people deserved access to language and learning—a belief that helped form the heart of Deaf education.
- His partnership with Laurent Clerc helped blend languages and cultures to form something new: ASL.

Gallaudet's Long-Term Influence

Thomas Gallaudet's work:

- Gave Deaf children access to language and education in the U.S.
- Showed that sign language was a valid, effective method for teaching Deaf people.
- Helped create the conditions that allowed ASL to grow and spread across the country.
- Inspired his son, Edward Miner Gallaudet, to continue his work and eventually found Gallaudet University in 1864—the world's only liberal arts university for Deaf students.