

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet: Visionary Pioneer

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The historical aspect of the education of the deaf almost always contains stories about mankind's attempts to salvage the heathen souls of deaf people. St. Augustine made matters worse when he declared that "handicapped" children were the products of their sinful parents. It was not until the 16th century that benevolent St. Frances de Sales baptized the first deaf souls in France.



*Yrs truly,
Thomas H. Gallaudet*

It was a similar mission which launched deaf education in America when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet determined that deaf children *must* learn about God. As a result of his pioneering efforts, Gallaudet's legacy as "father of American deaf education" is firmly engraved in history.

Born in 1787 in Philadelphia, Gallaudet was an intelligent, sensitive, reverent child. Although he initially began a career in law, he soon turned to other pursuits which eventually led him to Andover Seminary in Mass., the first institute which trained missionaries to serve in foreign countries. Gallaudet proved to be an excellent student who enthusiastically embraced the principle that he had an obligation to help the weak and dependent. It was during this time that he met a young girl named Alice Cogswell, a deaf child whose need for a language touched a part of Gallaudet's soul and proved to be the impetus for his life-long vision.

A small, frail man with innate puritanical roots and deeply religious convictions, Gallaudet often found himself almost overwhelmed. So many souls—hearing and deaf alike—to save! Drinking, gambling, profanity, and carousing were everywhere, and he was convinced of the wickedness of women's "lipcolor-

ing" and rouge. But Gallaudet was not the typical New England Cotton Mather "thou-shalt-burn-in-hell" preacher. Sophisticated and eloquent, Gallaudet was convincing in a quiet, unassuming way.

While anti-slavery rhetoric was developing in the North, Gallaudet believed in the rights of African-Americans; he was convinced that they were as "savable" as the deaf. An inveterate advocate, he joined the early anti-abolitionist movement in New England, as well as other popular causes of his day: suffrage and education rights. The desperate plight of the mentally ill deeply disturbed Gallaudet, and he

devoted much of his life to helping them as well.

Yet with all of his interests, converting deaf souls was one of Gallaudet's enduring missions. Within a year after teaching young Alice the word "hat," he was en route to Europe in pursuit of methods to help deaf children learn of God. His quest ultimately led Gallaudet to improve the quality of public education in general and deaf education in particular. On his return from Europe, Gallaudet brought a deaf Frenchman, Laurent Clerc, who had been teaching deaf children in Paris. Their plan was to establish a school for deaf children in America. The following year, 1817, the two teamed up with Dr. Mason Cogswell (Alice's father) to establish the first school for the deaf in America, and the first school for handicapped children in the Western Hemisphere—the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons. Later, the school was renamed the American School for the Deaf (ASD).

In modern parlance, what Gallaudet actually advocated could be called bilingual, bicultural deaf education in context, a concept now popularly accepted by many educators of deaf children. Gallaudet's 52-day

journey home from France with Clerc, who readily grasped English as a second language, had convinced Gallaudet that having a strong native language foundation would lead to an effective second language.

Gallaudet married one of his deaf students, Sophia Fowler, in 1821. The two bore eight (hearing) children. Gallaudet's youngest son, Edward Miner Gallaudet (1837-1917), carried on the Gallaudet tradition of advocating for deaf rights and deaf education, taking on formidable opponents, such as Alexander Graham Bell, in philosophical debates on the best way to educate deaf children. It was Edward who led the campaign to expand the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind in Washington, D.C., to a college. In 1864, the school became the only liberal arts college with a deaf student body in the world. Today that college is known as Gallaudet University, named in honor of Edward's father.

There were problems, of course, as Thomas H. Gallaudet tended to his myriad responsibilities. His 13-year sojourn at ASD was fraught with quarrels with his board of directors, faculty, and students. As a perennial voice for underdogs and minorities, he was scorned by his Brahminic-minded neighbors in Old Hartford. And as a sincere ally to his Catholic, Jewish, and other denominational friends, he was sometimes given the cold shoulder by his Protestant counterparts.

Nonetheless, Gallaudet persevered when the going was rough. By 1850, 12 schools for the deaf had been established due to the direct or indirect involvement of Gallaudet and Clerc. A master teacher, Clerc clearly demonstrated the importance of respect for the deaf's first language and culture in a "Deaf-friendly" environment in fostering a meaningful education. Clerc's influence on deaf education and American Sign Language (ASL) is still felt today; many of the idioms found in ASL can be traced back to him.

Early on, Gallaudet identified the need to establish vocational or industrial training in residential schools for the deaf, a concept he also promoted for "normal" schools. Such training was crucial, and as a result of his efforts in this area, many of Gallaudet's students were able to become productive members of the non-signing hearing society.

Once Gallaudet left ASD in 1830, he was the most sought-after preacher in the country. A host of enticing offers came his way, from an invitation to take the superintendency at Perkins School for the Blind (he was immensely interested in bettering the lives of the deaf/blind) to proposals that he set up university teacher training programs. More interested in advocating for the social causes he held so dear, Gallaudet

declined all offers and devoted himself to writing religious children's books and schoolbooks, which were not only popular but widely translated and distributed throughout the world. Unfortunately, he never realized all of his literary goals. With so much to share, he had little time to actually materialize most of his ideas into writing.

One of the most interesting offers Gallaudet entertained could have given him a chance to head the first "normal" or public school system in the country—years before Horace Mann received the dubious honor as "father of free public education." But he rejected this opportunity as well. During this turning point in his life, he chose to become a chaplain for the insane at an asylum in Massachusetts, a post he retained until his death in 1851.

A debilitating case of dysentery finally put a stop to Gallaudet's philanthropic activities at the age of 63. That same year, as he lay on his deathbed, he sent word to the delegates at the 4th Convention of American Instructors for the Deaf in Hartford to endorse the concept of "High School Education for the Deaf," an issue, like so many others he promoted, ahead of its time.

It had taken a life-long vision, prompted by a poignant encounter with young Alice Cogswell, for Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to bequeath the quality education he envisioned for the deaf people he loved so dearly. ☺

Special thanks to: Susan Anderson, Richard Norton, Mike Olson, Dr. Mike L. Moore, Ruth Seeger, Dr. Ralph H. White, Marcus Myers, Larry D. Evans, Danielle Ross, and Dr. Jack Gannon.

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The Gallaudet Statue Caper

Before concluding my account of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, I wanted to take a photograph of a replica of the Gallaudet University statue of him with Alice Cogswell. Knowing such a replica is situated at the Texas School for the Deaf (TSD) auditorium lobby, I grabbed my camera and headed over to the campus.

While taking the photos, it dawned on me that there was something peculiar about Gallaudet's oversized hand on Alice's left hip. Interestingly, the original, life-sized statue at Gallaudet University has the hand placed farther up and slightly under Alice's left arm. *Why the difference?*

A little investigation in the TSD archives yielded a program book entitled "Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet Unveiling Ceremony," dated March 28, 1965, which pictures a tinted photo of the Gallaudet University statue--not the one which was actually unveiled!

Only one clue provided a partial answer to the mystery: The 27-inch plaster model used in creating TSD's replica was obtained from the American School for the Deaf (ASD), not Gallaudet University. Still, no one on the TSD campus could provide the reason for the difference in the hand placement.

Further research revealed that Daniel Chester French (1850-1931), the renowned American sculptor who also did the Minute Man and the seated Abraham Lincoln Memorial statue, made several plaster models in the process of creating the Gallaudet statue. (Commissioning French for the \$8,000 project proved somewhat controversial as he was selected over the up-and-coming deaf sculptor Douglas Tilden.) Since the model used for the replica at TSD obviously was *not* chosen, then what was the reason for the selection of the one used for the statue at Gallaudet University? The plot thickens. Back to the research trail.

Fortunately, the TSD program book lists several key people who still live in the Austin area, 31 years after the statue unveiling event. After interviewing many of them, I learned that Kelly Stevens, who was listed in the program only for his "advice and help in our club project (*Les Sourdes* Study Club)," was a primary person in the whole process of acquiring TSD's replica.

Stevens, a well-known deaf artist who is now deceased, had gone to West Hartford to look at French's broken plaster models. He brought back one of them and had a sculptor rebuild the model before shipping it to Italy for bronze casting. When he noticed that the hand placement was different, he contacted ASD.

Stevens learned that the TSD model had been the one originally chosen for the Gallaudet statue, but was rejected because it was "not appropriate to place a male hand on a female's backside." French then produced a second model showing a better proportioned hand lightly resting on Alice's middle left side.

Case closed.

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Statue of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Alice Cogswell by Daniel Chester French (unveiled in 1889). Photo courtesy of Gallaudet University Archives.



Note the position of Gallaudet's hand on this smaller replica located at the Texas School for the Deaf. Courtesy of our observant author.