

This Day in History... April 14, 1866

Birth of Anne Sullivan

Anne Sullivan Macy was born Johanna Mansfield Sullivan on April 14, 1866, in Agawam, Massachusetts. Sullivan is most well-known for teaching Helen Keller to communicate by spelling out words on her hand.

Sullivan was the oldest child of Irish immigrants who moved to the US during the Great Famine. When she was five years old, Sullivan suffered from a bacterial eye disease known as trachoma. This led to repeated eye infections that eventually left her nearly blind. By the time she was 10, her mother had died and her father abandoned Sullivan and her siblings. Sullivan was sent to an almshouse where she underwent two eye surgeries that failed to help her vision.

Sullivan was eventually permitted to attend the Perkins Schools for the Blind in Boston in 1880. While there, she learned the manual alphabet, a form of sign language. She also had several eye surgeries that helped improve her vision. Sullivan graduated from Perkins as valedictorian in 1886. That summer, Arthur Keller contacted the director of Perkins. He was looking for a teacher for his seven-year-old daughter Helen who was blind and deaf. The director instantly recommended Sullivan.

Sullivan began teaching Helen on March 3, 1887 and they formed an instant connection that would last 49 years. Sullivan started as her teacher but eventually became her friend. Sullivan struggled to make progress initially. She developed a strict schedule and introduced new vocabulary words frequently. Helen struggled to keep up. Sullivan then changed her tactics. She focused on teaching Helen words that were more centered on her interests and the world around her. She did so by spelling the words out on Helen's palm.



Anne Sullivan is one of the world's most famous teachers.

Sullivan's method proved successful – in six months she had taught Helen 575 words, some multiplication tables, and the Braille system. She then convinced Helen's parents to send her to the Perkins School where she could get a full education. They eventually agreed, and Sullivan accompanied her there in 1888. Sullivan continued to teach Helen and eventually Helen became famous for her significant progress. She became the public face of the school and helped raise donations. Thanks to Sullivan's efforts, Helen eventually became the first blind-deaf person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Sullivan's eyesight worsened over time and she was completely blind by 1935. She suffered a coronary thrombosis the following year and died on October 20, 1936. Sullivan received an honorary fellowship from the Educational Institute of Scotland and an honorary degree from Temple University. The story of Sullivan's success in teaching Helen was later made into the play and movie, *The Miracle Worker*, which has been remade in both formats over the years.



This stamp was issued on Helen Keller's 100th birthday.



These stamps honor American Sign Language.

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