

This Day in History... April 15, 1817

America's Oldest School for the Deaf

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc founded the first permanent school for the deaf in America on April 15, 1817.

The first school for the deaf in America opened in 1815. It was opened by William Bolling in Cobbs, Virginia, with John Braidwood serving as the teacher. The school was short-lived, however, closing in the fall of 1816. It was Thomas Gallaudet who would go on to found the first permanent school for the deaf.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was born December 10, 1787, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He originally wanted to be a priest, but that changed when he met a young girl named Alice Cogswell.



These stamps feature the "manual communication" taught at the American School for the Deaf.

Alice had suffered a terrible fever that left her deaf when she was just two years old. At the time, America had no schools that taught deaf children, so her father, Mason Fitch Cogswell, met with Gallaudet. After spending some time with the girl, Gallaudet believed that, contrary to popular belief, she could be taught. Cogswell and nine other citizens realized the need for a special school for Alice and the other 84 known deaf children in New England. They raised money and sent Gallaudet to Europe, where deaf education was far more advanced, to find qualified teachers.

Gallaudet's first choice, the Braidwood family, demanded compensation for every student taught using their method. After refusing to pay this fee, he met Abbé Sicard, head of the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets à Paris, and two of its deaf faculty members, Laurent Clerc and Jean Massieu. They invited him to Paris to study their school's method of manual communication.

Gallaudet was impressed with their teaching method and convinced Clerc to return with him to America to establish a school there. The pair toured New England raising private and public funds, incorporating their new school as the "American Asylum for Deaf-Mutes" in May 1816.

On April 15, 1817, Gallaudet and Clerc opened the American School for the Deaf in Bennett's City Hotel in Hartford, Connecticut. The first class had seven children, including Alice Cogswell. Two years later the school received its first annual grant from the Connecticut General Assembly. And in 1820, it received a land grant in Alabama Territory, making it the first elementary and secondary special education institution to receive federal aid. To date, over 4,000 students have graduated from the American School for the Deaf.

In 1864, one of Gallaudet's sons founded the first college for the deaf, which was later renamed Gallaudet University.



Gallaudet served as the school's first principal until 1830.



Panara went to Gallaudet University and taught there for nearly 20 years before helping found the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

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