



The Story of
Laurent Clerc
Pioneer in Deaf America

America ... the land of opportunity, whose torch of light and hope is held aloft in the right hand of the Statue of Liberty! A gift from France in 1886, the Statue of Liberty has long been the symbol of opportunity for countless immigrants who have journeyed to America in search of a life of fulfillment. It was most fitting, therefore, that the first deaf person to light the way for other deaf people should come from France. Such was the happy fortune of Laurent Clerc, whose arrival in New York harbor preceded the Statue of Liberty by 70 years!

When Laurent Clerc was born in LaBalme, France, on December 26, 1785, there was cause for much rejoicing in the Clerc household. His father was Mayor of the town and the family could boast of a long line of magistrates in the Clerc lineage. Suddenly, however, misfortune struck. At the age of one, the infant fell from a kitchen chair by accident into a nearby fireplace. He was severely burned on one side of his face and a resulting fever left him totally deaf.

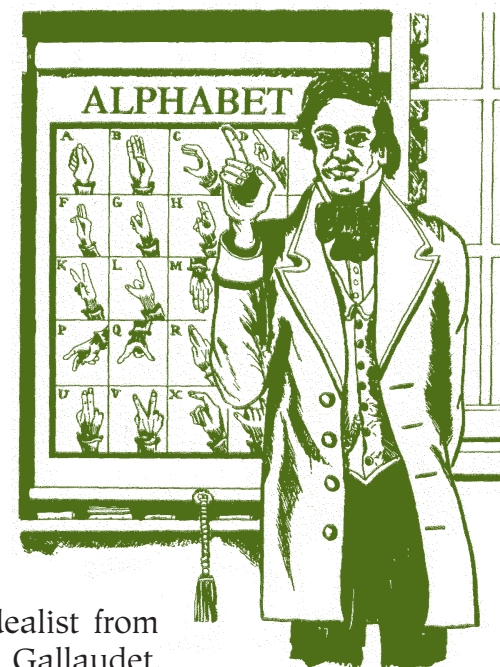
Desperately, his parents tried all kinds of medical advice and treatments in an attempt to cure his deafness. When all efforts failed, it appeared as though young Laurent was destined to spend his life in a “dungeon of darkness,” without an education and a means of communication.

Fortunately, he had a sympathetic and devoted uncle, also named Laurent Clerc, who heard about a school for the deaf in Paris. When he was twelve years old, his uncle brought him to Paris and enrolled him in the Royal Institution for the Deaf, where he was placed under the personal tutelage of its Director, the Abbe Roche-Ambroise Sicard.

Sicard’s methods of instruction, utilizing sign language and the manual alphabet, brought out the hidden genius in Clerc. The youth completed the course of study in seven years and was rewarded with an appointment as an assistant teacher in the Institution, in charge of the highest class.

In 1816, during his eighth year as a teacher, an event happened which changed the course of his life. He met a young idealist from America, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, who had gone to Paris to learn the best method of educating the deaf. Although Gallaudet could only spend three months at the Royal Institute, he had numerous opportunities to observe the brilliant work of Clerc, whom he called “a master teacher.” Gallaudet quickly sized up the situation and his needs. He realized that Clerc had the expertise and “the deaf experience” to help him fulfill his mission of founding the first school for the deaf in America, and he offered Clerc the opportunity to become his assistant.

It was a time of decision. Should he accept it or decline the offer? If he accepted, he would be leaving his homeland, his family and friends, his native language—everything he cherished. It meant going to a strange new world across the seas, learning



the English language, working with strangers, and coping with the thousand and one problems of founding a school for the deaf. “The first of its kind in America!” That was the challenge — and the crying need! He could envision the helpless deaf children in America, living out their lives in darkness and ignorance. How similar to his own experience, and how lucky he was to escape that fate by being educated at the Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris!

Like a true pioneer, Clerc accepted. Permission was granted to him by his mentor, the Abbe Sicard, who also gave him his blessing. Finally, after bidding farewell to his family and relatives, Clerc departed from France with Gallaudet on June 18, 1816, on board the *Mary Augusta*.

The voyage across the Atlantic proved both hazardous and overlong. The ship was often buffeted by strong winds; at other times, it came to a standstill when not even a breeze stirred the sails. Altogether, the crossing lasted 52 days, but Clerc and Gallaudet made good use of this time. Gallaudet taught Clerc the English language and Clerc taught Gallaudet sign language. It was the start of a lasting relationship between these men, the one deaf and the other hearing, in which they would share their knowledge and skills.

They arrived in New York on August 9th, and then journeyed by stagecoach to Hartford where Gallaudet planned to establish the school for the deaf. First, however, it was necessary to influence people and raise the needed funds. With Gallaudet as his Interpreter, Clerc gave many speeches and demonstrations of methods of teaching the deaf. Beginning with October, they spent the next seven months traveling throughout the East, from Boston to Philadelphia, during which time they also interviewed parents of deaf children and prospective students.

Finally, their mission was accomplished successfully and the first school was established at Hartford. It opened its doors on April 15, 1817, with Gallaudet as the principal and Clerc as head teacher.

Clerc went on to become the most important influence on the

education of the deaf in the first half of the nineteenth century. His career as a teacher in America covered 41 years. During that time, he also taught sign language to new teachers and trained them in methods of teaching the deaf. As new schools opened up in America, their administrators and teachers came to the Hartford school to receive training in communication and methods of instruction.



His life was made happier by marriage to a former pupil, Elizabeth Broadman, and the four children who added joy to the thriving family. He was also honored in many ways. Excellent portraits of him were painted in oil by the noted American artist, Charles Willson Peale, and by the famed deaf artist, John Carlin. In 1864, he was invited to speak at the first Commencement of the newly-established National Deaf-Mutes College (Gallaudet College) in Washington, D.C. And in recognition of his pioneering achievements, Trinity College and Amherst College awarded him with honorary degrees.

At the age of 84, Laurent Clerc breathed his last on July 18, 1869. Several years afterwards, a dedication ceremony in his memory was held at Hartford by his many friends and admirers.

They unveiled a bronze bust of his likeness and the inscription underneath it bore the eulogy:

“The Apostle to the Deaf-Mutes of the New World”

In 1921, the school in downtown Hartford was moved to its present location in suburban West Hartford and renamed The American School for the Deaf. There, the memory of its first deaf teacher was preserved in stone when one of the new buildings was named The Laurent Clerc Residential Hall. His name was further perpetuated in verse by Stephen W. Koziar, a deaf poet and alumnus. Entitled “Laurent Clerc”, the following excerpts continue to honor his pioneering spirit:

“Forsaken of your friends and native land,
You came to guide our cause-great Servitor!
And in our deep and dark imprisonment,
We hailed you, Clerc-a stranger to our shore . . .

Your heart was steeped in cause of humankind;
You came as one heroic volunteer
To free us from the gall ... we know full well
How heart of yours came reaching to us here.

You helped us break the fetters of the mind.
You guided us with gestures eloquent
To make us sense and comprehend ... and, lo,
Our hands became a speaking instrument!

We welcomed you a stranger when you came
To serve and lead us through the trying tide;
And now we cherish you—and evermore—
O Clerc, our benefactor, friend and guide!”

Another alumnus, Gilbert Eastman, who is Director of the Theatre Department at Gallaudet College, spent several months

in France researching material for a full length play, which he completed in 1976. Entitled *Laurent Clerc: A Profile*, Eastman’s play dramatizes the turning points in Clerc’s life and it was performed by the Gallaudet College players on the occasion of the formal dedication of the Clerc Residence Hall at the American School for the Deaf. Thus, the spirit of Laurent Clerc lives on-in stone and in bronze, in poetry and drama-and, above all, in the expressive language of signs and fingerspelling which he brought over from France and passed on to us, like the torch of learning and opportunity.



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