

Deaf History Notes

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This book was created out of a need to guide my students who were studying ASL and the interpreting process. I wanted them to move toward a greater understanding of the history of the American Deaf Community, American Sign Language, and how language, culture, and social pressures all affect the work of bilingual, bicultural mediation – Interpreting. The result has been this book, which in its first version was only about twenty pages long, but kept growing semester after semester as I included more and more information.

I have segmented this work into six Units. It is intended that students would work their way, in order, from the first Unit to the Sixth Unit. I have also divided each Unit into separate, easily readable (I hope), segments. This allows an instructor to target certain areas and even ignore others very easily. It also provides a targeted approach so that all of the related information for a segment is easily found together. I have included questions at the beginning and end of each Unit to help students further understand, analyze and synthesize the content of each Unit. Students are exposed to semiotics (the study of communication) linguistics (the study of language), sociology (the study of human social structure) and anthropology (the study of humans and their cultural development) without being overwhelmed by big labels like "Semiotics" or "Linguistics"¹

At the beginning of each Unit are these big-picture concepts. Unit One, for example, starts out by describing the properties of communication and language, then identifies the events which fostered the creation of American Sign Language. Unit Two begins by talking about language policies and oppression, then identifies the events and organizations which played a role in the battle over the use of signed languages in educational institutions. Unit Three begins by exploring the pathological view of deafness and examining the ethics of science and research to promote specific viewpoints; then explores the anatomy related to signed languages. Unit Four introduces the reader to the power of linguistics as a tool for fostering cultural identity and also explores language variety within the Deaf community. Unit Five compares the concepts of empowerment and paternalism. Unit Six introduces the reader to the profession of interpreting and the keys to being a professional interpreter of ASL and English in the United States.

Throughout this text I intend to keep the information clear and easily understandable. There is no need to use thirty words to explain something when fifteen will do. I do consider this text permanently under revision. So please take the time to tell me if a sentence was hard to read or if any facts are either confusing or just plain wrong. It is through communication that we learn and improve; I do not intend the communication contained in this book to be only one-way. Check the publisher's web site for instructions on how to send your comments to me.

I hope you actually enjoy this text and I also hope that you enjoy any course work connected with it. Your exploration of the Deaf community only begins and ends where you set your own limits. Make the decision to remove all boundaries from your potential; and let the adventure begin!

¹ The fact that you are actually READING this preface proves that you are such a diligent student that you would never be overwhelmed with big labels ... but DON'T tell your classmates that this book exposes them to such "ivory tower" concepts as Sociology and Anthropology! (shhhh!)

The Origins of American Sign Language

Chilmark [is] an "up-island" town in the southwest part of Martha's Vineyard. It's a town of rolling hills, threaded with stone walls; of undulating sandy cliffs offering sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean. Over those hills the wind blows soft and sometimes howls. The ocean rushes onto the shore at Windy Gates and bubbles over the rock-strewn beach at Squibnocket. On murky days foghorns warn boats off. Always there are the sounds of seagulls, bell buoys, the wind, the surf.

If you lived in Chilmark in the 18th or 19th century, up to a quarter of your neighbors never heard these sounds. And in a place that was itself isolated – a trip "down-island" took a day over rutted roads – the deaf of Chilmark could have been excruciatingly lonely. Yet they lived full lives, grew up, were happy or unhappy, farmed well or farmed poorly, married well or badly, and got on or didn't get on with their neighbors like anybody else. They just spoke with their hands. (Jamie Kageleiry, 1999:52)

Martha's Vineyard represents part of the origins of American Sign Language. A school in Paris, France also plays a large role and so does a young man in his mid twenties who stumbles upon a deaf girl in Connecticut. The intertwining of these pieces represents the beginnings of the most widely known signed language on Earth.

This Unit explores the differences between communication and language and the reasons that American Sign Language is a legitimate language. You will discover the importance of Residential Schools to the stabilization of new signed languages and to the wide-spread use of signed languages within large geographical regions. You will also discover the origins of American Sign Language.

Unit One – *The Origins of American Sign Language* 7

Look for the answers to the following questions as you read:

- 1) What are the similarities and differences between communication and language?
- 2) How are expressive and perceptive modalities of communication linked?
- 3) What requirements must be present before a communication system can be considered a language?
- 4) What are language Modalities, language Channels, and Language Encoding Systems?
- 5) Identify several language modalities for each of the three language channels.
- 6) Who conducted the initial research of ASL that met these requirements?
- 7) How did Spanish Catholic monks impact Deaf education?
- 8) How did the first public school for deaf children in the world come into existence?
- 9) What role did this school have upon the stabilization of French Sign Language?
- 10) Who was the first deaf person to teach deaf students?
- 11) Who was the first deaf person to teach American deaf students?
- 12) What educational experiences did these two teachers have in common?
- 13) What role did French Sign Language play in the formation of American Sign Language?
- 14) What role did the signed language of Martha's Vineyard play in the formation of ASL?
- 15) How did the first permanent school for deaf children in the United States come into existence?
- 16) What role did this school have upon the stabilization of American Sign Language?

Section 1 – Communication & Language**Communication**

What does it mean to communicate? **Communication is one mind's perception of a message that another mind has expressed.** Communication can be immediate – such as seeing someone smile or saying hello; or delayed – such as seeing an arrow painted on a tree or an old sign which describes an historical landmark. Communication takes place between living things, but it is not limited to humans. Most (if not all) animals have the ability to communicate. Animals can indicate that they are angry or injured. They can stake out territory, seek and find mates, issue warnings, and indicate submission. Some forms of communication are more complex than others: Many mammals are able to growl and bare their teeth to communicate a threat or warning to a potential foe. Bees can indicate sources of pollen through complex dances. Whales are said to produce a new complex song every year that is shared throughout their species. Human beings who share no language in common with each other are still able to bargain and negotiate over the cost of a piece of pottery. Communication simply requires at least two minds and some way of expressing and perceiving information between those two minds.

Communication is a broad category that includes all possibilities of language; but communication includes much, much more than only language. Animals have the ability to communicate at least within their species and generally between species. Humans, being a specific kind of animal, share some of these communication abilities; but humans are able to move *beyond* mere communication when they use *language*. Figure 1.1 shows the relationships between animal communication, human communication, and language.



Figure 1.1 - Communication and Language

Communication begins with the intentions to communicate. This requires intelligence and therefore a brain, or mind, capable of thought and knowledge. The mind's intention, or meaning, may be either *Conscious* or *Unconscious*. Conscious intentions, where the mind is aware of its own intentions to communicate, are the most easily recognized. Requesting assistance, issuing a warning, or expressing affection are all possible conscious intentions for communication, especially when words are used such as "give me a hand, please", "back off!", or "you're so sweet!"

Unconscious intentions, where the mind is not directly aware of its own intentions to communicate, are less obvious. A request for assistance may be expressed as simply as a glance toward a nearby person. A warning can consist of a fierce stare. An expression of affection may be communicated by the dilation of pupils (of the eyes) when a certain person comes into view. Vocal inflections or facial expressions can also reveal unconscious intentions. People who are lying often find it difficult to make direct eye contact with the people they are lying to. A liar is usually not aware of the fact that his body is warning us not to believe what he is saying. In many cultures a nodding head is an indicator of truthfulness. Shaking one's head side to side while strongly affirming a

statement (such as is commonly seen in advertising, e.g. "I use it every day!") may be a result of the person's subconscious expression of communication. Their words say "I use this product every day" but their body language says "I am not telling you the truth." A child may state that she is "not scared" but her vocal inflection and facial expression reveal that she is actually quite frightened. Our *unconscious mind* is almost always expressing our *emotional state*. Our *conscious mind* provides the ability to communicate things *beyond emotion*.

The Four Components of Communication

Four components are always present in any act of communication: 1) Background Knowledge of Participants, 2) Expressive Modalities of Communication, 3) Perceptive Modalities of Communication, and 4) Physical Context.. An understanding of each of these variables will make us more aware of the communication that can co-occur with language and help us understand the truthfulness or emotion surrounding a message.

Background Knowledge is all the information that a person (or animal) has. Background Knowledge can help us to understand the topic of discussion, to make predictions about how it might be organized, and to know when communication is inappropriate for the situation at hand. If we fail to consider another person's background knowledge then we might confuse them by giving them too much new information in a lecture or bore them by repeating things that they already know. Figure 1.2 shows the mind (human or animal) and some of the various kinds of background information that can influence communication.

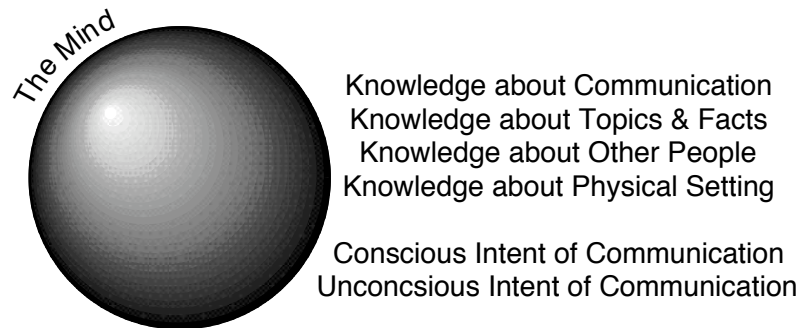


Figure 1.2 - Background Knowledge

Expressive Modalities of Communication are all the ways that a person creates communication, whether by making a sound, drawing a picture, nodding one's head, or making eye contact. *All conscious expressive modalities of communication require muscle movement.* It is possible to use several expressive modalities of communication at the same time: a person may gesture to indicate that an unseen person is able to overhear the communication in a room (such as one's boss) while the conversation is conducted with the intention that the unseen person will "overhear" it. A deeper understanding of Expressive Modalities of Communication may help us detect conflicting information: a person's facial expression and body posture may indicate extreme anger while their

words are produced with amazing calm. Conscious expressions of communication typically use speech, facial expressions, and manual gestures. Remember that these include things that are not words such as humming a song (such as the theme music from the "Jeopardy" game show to encourage someone to hurry up), rolling one's eyes in disbelief, or waving to greet a friend.

Unconscious expressions of communication are also possible. Linguists have discovered that people who are lying tend to avert eye gaze and raise their eyebrows during the lie. While these two expressions of communication require muscle movement another form may also happen when a person is lying: increased perspiration. For our purposes in contrasting communication and language we will focus only on the consciously controlled aspects of communication (those that require muscle movement). Figure 1.3 represents both the mind (with its background knowledge and communication intentions) and the various ways that the mind may express communication.

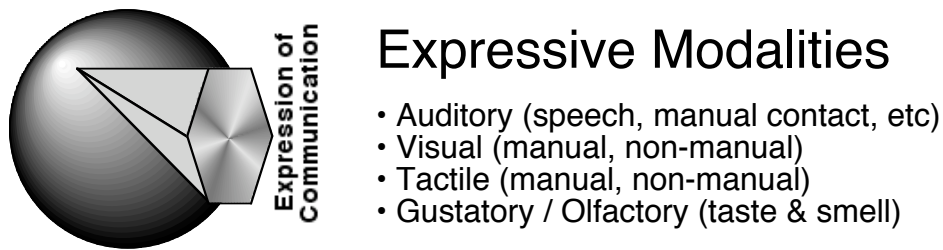
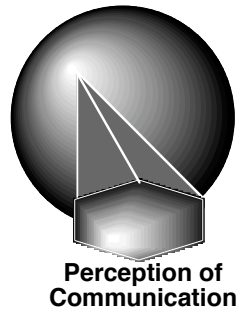


Figure 1.3 - Expressive Modalities of Communication

Perceptive Modalities of Communication are all the ways that a person receives information, whether by hearing, seeing, feeling, or even smelling or tasting. *All perceptive modalities of communication involve the senses.* Knowing about perceptive modalities helps us to analyze physical settings and eliminate potential sources of noise or disruption to the communication. It also helps us to understand potential mis-perceptions of information.

We may see a person smiling as we simultaneously hear them speak and feel their hand during a handshake. All of these perceptions would help us understand that we are being greeted; but we might also see and feel that their hands are cold and shaking and hear that their voice is not steady as they speak. These additional perceptions might indicate that the person is nervous or not feeling well. We may consciously perceive some parts of the communication while unconsciously perceiving others. It is often this unconscious perception which leads us to having a "gut instinct" not to trust someone or to think they might be lying to us. Figure 1.4 represents both the mind and the various ways that the mind may perceive communication.



Perceptive Modalities

- Auditory (ears / hearing)
- Visual (eyes / sight)
- Tactile (skin / touch)
- Gustatory (tongue / taste)
- Olfactory (nose / smell)

Figure 1.4 - Perceptive Modalities of Communication

Physical Contexts are the places where communication takes place, whether in an auditorium, in a forest, free-falling 1,000 feet above the earth, or in a cave. Noisy physical contexts may make it difficult or impossible to communicate by sound. Dark physical contexts can prohibit visual communication. Physical contexts shape all of our communication not only because of potential noise, but also because certain settings are restricted to certain kinds of communication (and vice versa) such as sermons in a church, lectures in a classroom, or cheers at a basketball court.

Figure 1.5 represents two minds expressing and perceiving communication within a physical context.

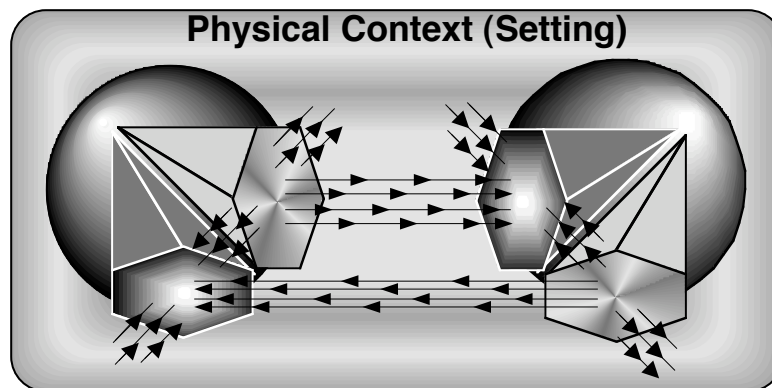


Figure 1.5 - Communication within a Physical Setting

Modes of Expressing and Perceiving Communication

Image, Sound, and Texture are the three most easily manipulated modalities for expressing communication. Images and Sight allow for visual communication. Non-linguistic visual communication includes eye contact, facial expressions, body postures, gestures, pictures or drawings, and written or printed symbols. The physical environment is largely perceived through sight as well. Communication about the physical

environment to another person can be accomplished as simply as making eye contact with a person and looking at an immediate danger to that person (such as an oncoming car).

Visual information should be conveyed to blind people as part of interpretations. When English words such as "this" and "that" are used, they are often accompanied by gestures that identify the referent of each word. The body posture and facial expression of people can provide significant input to understanding a message. This information should be fully identified for a blind consumer to understand the message correctly. Knowing that a person has just raised her hand will help explain why a lecture comes to a sudden halt and the teacher asks "Do you have a question?"

Sound and Hearing allow for auditory communication. Non-linguistic auditory communication includes grunts, squeals, sighs, hiccups, humming, music, footsteps, rustling paper, banging doors, and kicking furniture. Sounds permeate almost every physical environment. Even very quiet rooms often have some hum or hiss such as from electrical lights or wind. A sigh may be an indication of frustration. Footsteps may indicate that someone is about to knock at the door. Rustling papers may indicate nervousness. Banging doors and kicking furniture may indicate anger. If an interpreter working with a deaf consumer does not provide access to these sounds, then the consumer is not receiving the same communication as hearing people who are in the room. These auditory environmental stimuli may seem trivial, but there have been many instances where a door being slammed shut was the impetus for an angry lecture about a person's attitude.

Think about the auditory information that is taken for granted. If someone knocks at a door, it is perfectly logical for someone inside the room to approach the door, ask who is there, and perhaps open the door. If you didn't hear the knock, it would seem bizarre that someone in the room arbitrarily decided to walk to the door, talk to it, and suddenly cause a person to appear at the moment that the door was opened. Knowing that there is a knock at the door clearly helps explain why a person is standing there when another person decides to open it.

Similarly, a person who is continuously coughing in the back of the room communicates several things with every cough: 1) the cougher is not feeling completely healthy, 2) the cougher might actually be very ill, 3) the cougher is still in the room and has not yet left. If the cougher decides to leave, you would understand that they may wish to get a drink of water and that they are not being deliberately rude. If at some point you are expected to meet and shake hands with each person in the room you may understand why the cougher does not shake hands with you (or you might consider washing your hands if the cougher does shake hands with you). If at some point another person asks the cougher to leave the room and get a drink of water, you will understand such a request to be fairly normal.

Touch and Texture allow for tactile communication. Non-linguistic tactile communication includes holding hands, giving a hug, pats on the back, tickling, massaging, punching, and scratching. Certain aspects of physical environments are perceived tactually including the temperature of the room. A warm room in the winter may indicate that one's host is concerned for her guests and wishes to ensure they are comfortable.

Our sense of smell and of taste can also contribute to perceptions of communication. The odor of perfume or the taste of your favorite meal can be meaningful. But we do not

use odor or taste for communicating with language. Language is restricted to the three modalities of Image/Sight, Sound/Hearing, and Texture/Touch. The chart below gives some examples of Images, Sounds, and Textures that can communicate. Examples typed in UPPERCASE are specific examples of communication which are also examples of language.

Expressive / Perceptive Modalities of Communication		
<i>Image / Sight</i>	<i>Sound / Hearing</i>	<i>Texture / Touch</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drawings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cartoon figures - lifelike sketches • Markings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - arrows - PRINTED WORDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human Sounds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - screams - SPOKEN WORDS • Mechanical Sounds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - doors slamming shut - MORSE CODE TONES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fences - sculptures • 3-D Markings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 3-D arrow on a sign - BRAILLED WORDS

Figure 1.6 - Examples of Communication Modalities

Language Versus Communication

Any animal may use 1) *symbols* (such as sounds or body movements) to convey information between members of 2) *a community*, but the word *language* can only describe certain types of *human* communication systems. **Language** is a *specific kind of communication* that meets all four of these *additional* requirements:

- 3) The communication system must have rules for the sequencing of the symbols (ie. grammar).
- 4) The communication system must have an infinite number of ways to encode any given message.
- 5) The communication system must pass between at least two generations of active users.
- 6) The communication system must be flexible enough to accept change over time and between users.

In sum, **language is the systematic use of symbols to express and perceive information between members of a community in which the system is rule-governed, has infinite production possibilities, is intergenerational, and changes over time.** Humans are the only species on Earth that have demonstrated the ability to communicate via language.

The Three Language Channels

Now that we understand language as a subset of communication, we can further explore a few more ideas about language. To begin, let's consider the three possible language channels. **Language Channels are the three basic ways of expressing language: signed, spoken, and written.** English has two language channels (written English and spoken English) while American Sign Language currently has only one channel (signed ASL) but may some day adopt one of several writing systems proposed for ASL (although none are widely used at this time). Channels and Modes are related, but not as a one-to-one match. Generally, a spoken language is encoded through the modality of sound; written and signed languages are usually encoded through the modality of images. But spoken languages can be encoded visually via shorthand or manual cues. Written symbols can be spelled aloud or transformed into Morse code tones. Texture is a common language-encoding mechanism for blind and DeafBlind people and can easily encode signed, spoken, or written language channels. The point where language channel and modality converge is called Language Encoding Systems.

Multiple Language Encoding Systems

As we have seen above, the three channels of written language, signed language, and spoken language can be expressed through image, sound, or texture. Within the channel of writing we might first think of printing or cursive writing; but it is also possible to express written languages through dots and dashes for Morse Code or through raised dots on a flat surface for Braille. Morse Code and Braille are not languages – they are Language Encoding Systems. **Language Encoding Systems** are finite and closed sets of symbols which express the basic structural components of a language. If those symbols (letters of the alphabet, dots and dashes) are embossed so that they can be detected by touch alone, they still encode a written channel but the expressive modality is texture and the perceptive modality is touch. Speech is a Language Encoding System that can encode any spoken languages; Braille, Morse code, semaphore, printing and cursive writing are Language Encoding Systems which can encode any written language; and Signing is a Language Encoding System which can encode any signed language. If you know a language, then you know at least one Language Encoding System for it. If you did not know any Language Encoding Systems then you could not encode or perceive any languages at all. The chart below identifies a few examples of the different modalities that can encode each language channel.

Language Channels	Expressive / Perceptive Modalities		
	Image / Sight	Sound / Hearing	Texture / Touch
Written Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typed Symbols • Morse Code Symbols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morse Code Tones • Spelling Aloud 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brailled Symbols • Raised Letters
Signed Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signed Symbols 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tactile Signing
Spoken Languages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonetic Alphabets • Manual Cues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoken Symbols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tadoma • Tactile Manual Cues

Figure 1.7 - Language Encoding Systems

Identifying Communication as Language – The Case for ASL

Prior to 1960, the definition of language specifically excluded gestural communication systems. There was a widely held belief that languages could not include gestural communication and therefore was limited to written or spoken communication. In the late 1950's, William Stokoe [STO-kee] became the first person to systematically study a signed language. William Stokoe was an English professor at Gallaudet College. He was certain that there was structure to the signing his Deaf students used and that this structure was independent of English.

Stokoe began his investigation by exploring the first part of the definition of language. Specifically, **Stokoe analyzed the rules for the formation and organization of the symbols used in American Sign Language.** In 1960 he published a research article entitled *Sign Language Structure*. In that article, Stokoe identified three basic elements which come together to form signs: **location, handshape, and movement.** By 1974 other researchers – James Woodward (1973) and Robbin Battison (1974) – had identified a fourth element: **palm orientation.** These four elements of sign structure are known as the primary **FOUR PARAMETERS** of signed languages. They are essential elements of producing any sign in any signed language. Stokoe later expressed the parameters of signed languages as an even simpler notion of two things: *actor* and *action*. In other words, something acts (a hand at the side of the head, the muscles in the cheek to one side of the nose) and an action takes place (the tip of the hand taps the side of the forehead, the cheek muscle contracts and "wrinkles" one side of the nose).

Stokoe also was the first to identify the signed language in the United States as "American Sign Language" (ASL). His work paved the way for other researchers to complete the picture and prove beyond all doubt that American Sign Language is a legitimate language, as rich and complex as Spanish, Russian, Chinese, or Swahili. Following Stokoe's lead, other researchers identified the rules for ordering the signs (grammar), the ability to follow the rules while encoding the same message in an infinite number of ways (productivity), the fact that the language has been handed down through multiple generations of users (intergenerational transmission), and the ability for the language to adapt and change over time (chronological change).

- 1) **ASL has a system of creating symbols**
- 2) **ASL is shared by a community of users**
- 3) **ASL has rules governing the sequences of symbols**
- 4) **ASL has infinite production possibilities**
- 5) **ASL has been passed down across generations**
- 6) **ASL has changed with use across time**

Thus, ASL meets all the requirements necessary to identify a language. These requirements were established by linguists and have been applied to spoken languages long before anyone analyzed a signed language to determine whether signed languages would follow these rules. As a result of Stokoe's research, people began to understand that speech is not the only way for language to be produced; they began to accept the possibility that signing was a possible language channel.

With ASL meeting all six of the requirements to be considered a language, the old expectation that language must also be spoken has since been eliminated. Linguists around the world now acknowledge rule-governed signed communication systems as languages. Although William Stokoe was the person who gave the name "American Sign Language" to the signed language of the United States of America and most of Canada, other signed languages have different symbols, and different rules, than ASL. These other signed languages generally reflect the names of the countries or provinces in which the language is used such as British Sign Language, Australian Sign Language, French Sign Language, Italian Sign Language, Quebec Sign Language, etc. So far there have been no signed languages that have been shown to follow exactly the same rules for any spoken language. In other words, French Sign Language (LSF) is not based upon spoken French; and Italian Sign Language (LSI) is not based upon spoken Italian. These names of these signed languages simply indicate that the people who use LSF generally reside in France and the people who use LSI generally reside in Italy. Likewise the title ASL identifies that the users of the language generally reside in North America.

ASL Is Not A *Universal* Language

ASL is still the most widely recognized and researched signed language so far, but there are probably as many signed languages as there are spoken languages. ASL has historical connections to French Sign Language and many similarities between the two languages remain. There are many similarities among most European signed languages and these relationships are due to the School for the Deaf in Paris, France. No two of these signed languages are mutually intelligible, but the similarities in certain vocabulary items parallel the similarities between Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese (all of which have historical links to Latin and the Roman Empire). Signed languages in the European family share common links to French Sign Language and the Paris School for the Deaf. Educators from all over Europe traveled to the school, stayed, learned some amount of French Sign Language, and returned to their native countries to start educating deaf children. The French Sign Language of the teachers merged with the indigenous signs of the deaf people in each country. Thus each European signed language is unique, yet each has its own similarities with French Sign Language.

American Sign Language has changed significantly over time. Prior to the 1800's deaf people in the United States may have had a variety of local signed languages, each different from the other. In 1817 the sign language of Martha's Vineyard merged with

French Sign Language to establish a new and independent language, which we now know as American Sign Language. The next chapter explores the origins of the Paris school and its impact upon the signed languages across Europe and the United States. The rest of this unit explains how these two languages came into contact and the greatest force leading to the solidification of all national signed languages - residential schools for Deaf children.

Section 2 – Deaf Education & Language Stability**Pedro Ponce DeLeón and Private Education for Deaf Children**

The earliest recorded mentioning of deaf people and their use of signed languages comes from Greek society and the age of philosophers. Plato's "Cratylus" dialogue quotes Socrates as having stated "If we had neither voice nor tongue, and yet wished to manifest things to one another, should we not, like those which are at present mute, endeavor to signify our meaning by the hands, head, and other parts of the body?" Aristotle would later note that "Those who are born deaf all become speechless, they have a voice, but are destitute of speech." Later Galen, the Greek physician, hypothesized that speech and hearing had the same source in the brain and that damage to one function ensured damage to the other. No significant challenges to these beliefs would take place for centuries. The change finally began in the 1500s.

The motivation for teaching deaf children has its roots in two areas: religion and money. Religion is involved in that Christianity works toward spreading the news of the Gospel to all the earth. Hebrew tradition prohibited most people with disabilities from entering the temple, yet deaf people were allowed to enter. But in the Catholic church of sixteenth-century Spain a person had to be able to make confession by speech. It was this very requirement that had prohibited Gaspard Burgos, a deaf man, from becoming a Benedictine monk. Pedro Ponce DeLeón, a Benedictine monk, apparently took interest in Burgos and is reported to have taught Burgos to speak and to write.

Money enters the picture due to the fact that sixteenth-century Spain was a world-dominating power that was colonizing much of Central and South America. One result of these efforts was the incredible fortunes of gold being returned to the wealthy elite of Spanish society. With the Spanish nobility striving to maintain its fortunes, intermarriage of extended family members was common. If each parent carried recessive genes for deafness then intermarriage increased the likelihood that some of their children would be born deaf. Indeed, this did happen and there was a great concern that arose because Spanish law (based in ancient Roman law) required a person to be able to speak in order to inherit the family's fortunes or to create a will to pass it on to the next generation. The deaf children of Spanish nobility needed to learn how to speak in order to preserve the families' riches.

So Pedro Ponce DeLeón was put to the task of privately teaching some of Spain's elite deaf children. By means of fingerspelling and writing he worked toward the goal of the children learning to read, write, and speak. Apparently he did not pursue the issue of lipreading with much interest, nor is there any record of him using a signed language to provide his instruction. Records indicate that around 1570 he was teaching a total of four deaf children of the Spanish elite.

Upon DeLeon's death in 1584, Juan Pablo Bonet and Emanuel Ramirez de Carrión continued to use DeLeón's methods for the private instruction of deaf children. Bonet became involved by working for the Constable of Castile, who was the great-nephew of three of DeLeón's students. The Constable's brother was deaf. While there is no clear record that Bonet ever directly educated any deaf children, he did manage to publish a text in 1620 that described the methods of instruction, including the one-handed manual alphabet. The alphabet pictured in his text bears significant resemblance to one published more than forty years previously. Legend suggests that this one-handed alphabet (which is the basis for ASL's fingerspelling) was originally created and used by Spanish monks who otherwise maintained a vow of silence.

Abbé de l'Épée and Public Education for Deaf Children

The Abbé de l'Épée lived in Paris, France during the 1700's. In 1760 he encountered twin sisters who were deaf. The girls were fifteen but had no form of education other than that of a priest who had attempted to teach them about the saints through pictures. The priest had died and the girls' mother asked de l'Épée to help teach her daughters. He taught them in his home by first having them teach him their signed language. He did not recognize that signed languages had the richness and complexity of spoken languages. He believed that signed languages could not convey abstract thoughts. De l'Épée decided to supplement French Sign Language with signs he invented in order to convey grammatical parts of spoken French. He then placed the signs in French word order and thus created his "methodical signs."

L'Épée would provide public demonstrations of his methods and in 1776 he published a description of his methods. This openness was unique because most education for deaf children at that time was conducted as private business with secret methodologies. Those educators with secret methods and profit in mind looked upon deaf children as automatons who simply needed to be trained in lipreading and speech production. L'Épée recognized that deaf people could be truly educated, not merely trained. He holds a place of honor in the hearts of deaf people because he began the first free school for the education of deaf people, which was called the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes.

L'Épée's school was very successful. Deaf people from all over France would attend the school. Educators from across France studied at the National Institution and then established more schools throughout France. In this way the National Institution was a key element in the stabilization of French Sign Language (LSF). Now there was truly such a thing as French Sign Language rather than the signing of Paris, the signing of Lyon, the signing of Calais, etc. The key to successfully creating a single national language was first bringing deaf children together, exposing them to a cohesive model of accessible language, and then letting them (the deaf children) develop and expand the language naturally.

Eventually similar schools were also established throughout Europe, all based on l'Épée's teachings. Educators who wished to learn more about how to teach deaf people came to observe l'Épée's methods and his students' success, then returned to their home countries to begin new schools. In this way a certain amount of the signed language used in France was carried to each of the new schools set up throughout Europe. The result is a similarity of certain signs in Europe and also North America. But these similarities are not anything close to a universal signed language. Each signed language remains mutually unintelligible between the different language users. Only a limited amount of vocabulary is shared between any two. One study done of 256 vocabulary items for basic concepts (colors, numbers, emotions, family relations, basic actions) identified only two signs that had "universal" similarities across just seven different signed languages (Cerney, 1987). The two concepts that were produced similarly were "stand" and the number "five".

The unique differences that emerged in each signed language are due to the fact that in each place that a new school was established, the deaf people already had their own various signed languages. With the introduction of a central school into each country, a

number of different signing varieties combined with the educational signing brought from France and created, more or less, a new standard signed language for each school region. There are many signed languages in Europe and North America. In several countries, such as Belgium and Canada, there are at least two distinct signed languages in wide use among different groups of deaf people. Belgium has Flemish Sign Language and Walloon Sign Language. Canada has American Sign Language and Quebec Sign Language.

The Abbé Sicard and Jean Massieu

When the Abbé de l'Épée started teaching other people how to teach deaf children, one of these new teachers was the Abbé Sicard. Sicard had trained in Paris and then established a school at Bordeaux, France. One of Sicard's methods of teaching was to bridge the understanding of signed language to the understanding of written language. Sicard would draw outlines of various objects and would then write the name of the object within the outline drawing. Each word would be introduced by using the actual object, the sign for the object, and the picture with the written word of the object. In this way Sicard was able to directly and visually expose his pupils to written French. One deaf student who was educated under Sicard was named Jean Massieu. Massieu was one of six deaf children and they used their own form of signing within the family. When Massieu was nearly fourteen he went to Sicard's school in Bordeaux. There he learned how to read, write, and count.

When the Abbé de l'Épée was dying, the Monseigneur Champion de Cicé sent Sicard with the news that l'Épée's school would continue under the Assembly's protection. After l'Épée died, in 1789², Sicard took over the Paris school. Under Sicard's direction, the school prospered and more educators flocked to Paris to learn l'Épée's and Sicard's methods. Now there were over fifty schools throughout Europe based on the Paris school's teachings. Jean Massieu moved with Sicard to Paris. Soon, Massieu began teaching other deaf children at the school and became the first educator of deaf people who was deaf himself.

There was great political turmoil during Sicard's time as director of the Paris school. The French Revolution had begun the same year that l'Épée died (1789) and would continue for ten years until 1799 when Napoleon Bonaparte returned from military campaigns in Egypt to seize control of the French government. In 1791 the government made the Paris school the official National Institute for deaf education and Sicard remained in charge.

The "First French Republic" was formed in 1792. Marie Antoinette and King Louis XIV were both executed on January 21st, 1793³. Soon afterward was the reign of terror where many noblemen were also executed. There was a general distrust of the church and its representatives. Sicard was imprisoned many times as a member of the clergy but each time Massieu came to his rescue. Massieu's intelligence and patience impressed the revolutionary leaders. Massieu had gained much respect for both himself and his teacher, Sicard. It was largely due to Sicard's writings and Massieu's teaching ability that the Paris school continued to grow and continued to influence new schools that were being established throughout Europe.

² 1789 is also the year that George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States.

³ By January of 1793, Washington had won re-election as President.

Following Massieu's footsteps were many other deaf children who would become teachers of even more deaf children. In less than half a century the abilities of deaf people had changed considerably. Once thought of as uneducable, Epée and Sicard had demonstrated that deaf children could not only be taught how to write Latin, French, and any other written language, but they could also learn how to perform mathematical calculations, how to debate philosophical issues and were even in the position of teaching other deaf children how to do the same. One of Massieu's deaf students who would himself become a teacher of even more deaf children was Laurent Clerc.

Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet

Laurent Clerc was born in La Balme, France on December 26, 1785. When he was one year old he was left alone momentarily in a chair by the fireplace. He fell and burned his face. His parents discovered later that he was deaf and blamed the deafness on the fall, although it is highly uncommon to become deaf merely from falling. Most likely Laurent had been born deaf or had become deaf due to some early childhood illness but his deafness was not noticed until Laurent was older and was noticeably not developing speech or responding to environmental sounds.

Attempts at cures were tried with no success. Laurent's siblings used home signs to communicate. His parents did not. Clerc's father was the mayor, thus concerned with respect and dignity. When he learned of a school for deaf children in Paris he decided to send Laurent there, but instead of traveling himself, he had Laurent's uncle accompany the nearly twelve-year old Laurent on the week-long trip. He would spend most of the next twenty years of his life at the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes, first as a student, then as a teacher.

Laurent Clerc was one of Jean Massieu's star pupils. Massieu and Clerc would eventually perform together in Sicard's educational exhibitions, which demonstrated the success Sicard had in teaching deaf people. The general public still was amazed that deaf people could learn to read and write, but they seemed fascinated that deaf people could hold philosophical discussions, discuss abstract ideas, and express the whole range of human thoughts and feelings. Sicard's performances were in great demand and he began plans to take his demonstrations to England; but there was also new political turmoil in France. In the Spring of 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte left Elba⁴ and marched his way back into power. The king of France had already left the country and so did Sicard, ahead of schedule. He took a group to England for six performances. The group included Massieu, Clerc, and another deaf student. It was in London that Laurent Clerc first met Thomas H. Gallaudet.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was a bright American student. He was born December 10th, 1787. At the age of 14 he had completed his secondary education and was accepted to Yale, where he graduated (at the top of his class) three years later at the age of 17. Within another two years he had earned a master of arts degree from Yale and after

⁴ Napoleon declared himself the Emperor of France in 1804 and ruled from 1804 until 1814 when he was exiled to the Italian island of Elba. In 1815 he left Elba and regained control of France, but only for three months.

working a while as a salesman, he entered the Andover Theological Seminary at the age of 24. In 1814 he was 26 years old and had just graduated from the Seminary.

During a visit home in 1814, Thomas noticed that one of the neighborhood children, Alice Cogswell, was not being included in the games played by the other children. When Thomas asked his younger brother why she sat alone, the answer was that she was deaf. Thomas worked with Alice and managed to get her to understand some written English. Legend has it that her first word was "hat."

Mason Fitch Cogswell, Alice's father, was thrilled with Gallaudet's efforts. Cogswell had been working toward establishing a school for deaf children in the United States, but he had failed to recruit a teacher to establish a school in New England. Cogswell already owned a copy of L'Epée's 1776 book and was anxious to have someone in New England who could teach his daughter. Otherwise he would eventually have to send Alice overseas to give her the education he wanted for her. Cogswell quickly generated a rough count of the deaf population of New England, determined there were more than enough to justify a school for deaf children, and gathered the elite of Hartford together to reveal his plan. In just one day Cogswell raised enough money for Gallaudet to travel to Europe and learn about deaf education. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet would soon be on his way to England to begin learning about the methods for educating deaf children. It would be a trip that would change not only his life, but the lives of every generation of American deaf children born since then.

In January of 1815, the War of 1812 was concluding with its final battle: an Andrew Jackson victory in New Orleans. James Madison had returned to the White House (after British troops invaded Washington, DC in August of 1814) and was completing the last half of his second term as President. Francis Scott Key had already written the words to the "Star Spangled Banner" after witnessing the British attempt to take Fort McHenry at Baltimore in 1814. The war had begun in part because the British Navy was frequently capturing American sailors and forcing them to join the British navy in their fight against Napoleon. The major battles of the War of 1812 took place along the Canadian border. New England had been left largely unaffected by armed battles of the war.

By the spring of 1815, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet had left Connecticut and started his venture in England where he found his own frustration with the British. The national leaders of deaf education in Great Britain were the Braidwoods who had a franchised, for-profit organization that taught deaf children throughout England. The Braidwoods had one member of the family in Cobbs, Virginia. John Braidwood had been teaching Colonel Bolling's two deaf children and would formally open the first American school for deaf children in 1815; however, Braidwood was a drunkard and would not do well in the family business. The Braidwood school in Cobb, Virginia would be shut down by the end of 1817.

The Braidwoods in England welcomed Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and saw his arrival as an opportunity to expand their franchise further, and more solidly, into the United States; but Gallaudet would only be allowed to learn the Braidwood's "secrets" by contractually agreeing to operate an American school as a franchise of the Braidwood family and sending a portion of the profits to England. Gallaudet refused to sign the contractual agreement but continued to try to negotiate other terms with the Braidwoods.

In March of 1815, during Gallaudet's time in England, Napoleon Bonaparte regained power in France. In May of 1815 Sicard, Massieu, and Clerc had arrived in London and begun a series of performances demonstrating the success of L'Epée's and Sicard's

methods. Over several weeks they performed eighteen public performances (twelve more than the number originally planned). These performances included answers to questions from the audience. They were a sensation because they demonstrated that deaf people could actually reason and quite wittily, too.

In July of 1815, Gallaudet was still in England and attended one of the last performances by Sicard's traveling team. Gallaudet was impressed with Sicard, Massieu, and Clerc and wanted to learn more. They invited him to come to Paris since the French political scene was settling down⁵. Sicard and his group went home; but Gallaudet would instead travel to Edinburgh to the original Braidwood school to try to discover the secrets of deaf education there. Finally in February of 1816 he visited the Paris school and began to learn the school's methods from Sicard and Massieu.

Gallaudet's funds were running scarce, having spent a full year in Europe. He knew he had finally found the right place to learn the methods needed to establish an American school, but he no longer had enough time to learn everything he needed to know. Gallaudet asked Sicard's help in finding a knowledgeable assistant to travel to America and establish a school. Sicard recommended Clerc. Clerc had hoped to teach at a school for deaf children in Russia, but that job had been given to a less qualified hearing person instead. Although Clerc was not too anxious to leave Europe, eventually he agreed and traveled with Gallaudet back to Hartford, Connecticut to establish the first *permanent* school for the instruction of deaf children in America. Clerc fully expected that he would at some time return to France.

On June 18, 1816 the ship departed Le Havre, France for the United States. The trip took fifty-two days. Gallaudet had spent his time in the previous four months learning French Sign Language and Clerc had previously been exposed to written English. During the trip each worked with the other to further improve their language fluencies. Upon their arrival in the United States Clerc, 30, and Gallaudet, 28, began a tour of the Northern states to obtain funds for establishing a school. Classes began on April 15th, 1817. A few months later the recently inaugurated fifth U.S. president, James Monroe, would visit the school.

Martha's Vineyard

In the early 1600's English settlers were populating the new world. Among these new settlers were a group of several families from the Kent county area of England. Most of these people traveled together on the same boat and they settled in Southeastern Massachusetts. From there several descendents were among those who moved to Martha's Vineyard, an island off the Southern tip of Massachusetts, below Cape Cod.

Martha's Vineyard was a rather closed community. Transportation between the island and the mainland was too difficult for regular visits back and forth so the people on the island tended to stay close to home and marry other islanders and raise the next generation on the island as their parents had before them. The first recorded incidence of deafness was reported in 1714. The deaf person was Jonathan Lambert, who was born in 1657. Many more incidences of deafness were recorded over the next two centuries. For nearly three centuries there would be a disproportionately high number of deaf people born on the island.

⁵ Napoleon had just been defeated by the British in Waterloo, Belgium, on June 18th, 1815.

This kind of deafness was inherited. The people from Kent must have had a common ancestor who carried a recessive gene for deafness. As distant descendants married one another on the island, their children had the possibility of being born deaf. As a result, the majority of the population on the island was related in some way with at least one deaf person. This led to a widespread knowledge of signed language among both the deaf and hearing members of the community.

Signed language was used to help fishermen communicate across large distances of water and even to help them finish dirty jokes when a woman came among their presence. The majority of the community was bilingual in English and Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, and deaf people held the same kinds of jobs that their hearing friends and relatives did. The integration of deaf people among the hearing majority was so great that some residents had difficulty remembering whether well-known community members were deaf or not when they were interviewed by Nora Groce⁶ in 1978.

It was from Martha's Vineyard that several deaf students joined the first class of students at the Hartford School. These students, using Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, formed a significant influence on the creation of American Sign Language. As they interacted with their fellow students and their teacher, Laurent Clerc, they contributed portions of their language to the mix that has become ASL as we know it today.

The community of deaf people on Martha's Vineyard began to disappear with improved transportation and a greater number of new families moving to the island, while members of the old, long-standing family lines of Vineyard dwellers moved to the mainland. The last member of the "up-Island" deaf population was Abigail Brewer who died in 1952. Today there is no greater proportion of deafness on the island than anywhere else in the U.S. But there was a time when nearly everyone there knew signed language.

The Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons

Thomas Gallaudet had gone to England first, rather than France, because of the large chain of private schools for deaf children in England run through the Braidwood family. They kept their methods secret and thus kept a monopoly on their profitable school system. A few deaf children of wealthy Americans had been educated there, but not all succeeded. The school was predominantly oral in its methods, not allowing signed language to be used as a means of instruction.⁷

In 1812, John Braidwood, a grandson of the founder of the British franchise founder, started privately teaching deaf children at the home of Colonel Bolling in Cobbs, Virginia. In 1815, the same year Gallaudet was in Europe to learn educational methods, the first American school for deaf children was established in Cobbs, Virginia. Due to John Braidwood's mismanagement, however, this school would be closed before 1817, recreating the need for a school for deaf children in the United States. The first

⁶ Groce's 1985 report of her research, "Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard" provides most of the data for this chapter.

⁷ And yet there is written documentation indicating that some Braidwoods knew and used signed language to communicate with deaf people. Their secret methods may in fact have made some use of signed language.

permanent school for deaf children would be established a few hundred miles to the North, in Connecticut.

The Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons was established by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet. It opened its doors to seven students on **April 15, 1817**. Many of the original students came from Martha's Vineyard off the Massachusetts coast. They had a strong and cohesive signed language there and brought it with them to Hartford. Laurent Clerc knew French Sign Language. When he began teaching his first seven students, he no doubt encountered the signed language of Martha's Vineyard along with a variety of signs used by the other deaf people among themselves in their own hometowns. As the students and their teacher began their lessons they also began to forge the new beginnings of American Sign Language. Clerc incorporated these signs into his own vocabulary and became the model of American Sign Language as we know it today.

One major piece of evidence of this amalgamation is the ASL counting system. Neither wholly American, nor wholly French, it incorporates features of both as evidenced by the use of the American gesture handshapes for the numbers "one," and "two," but using the natural French gesture (and therefore also the French Sign Language handshape) for the number "three." LSF handshapes are used for the numbers 20, 21, and 23 through 30 but not for the number 22, which is based on American gestures.

Under instruction from Laurent Clerc, four of the original seven students would eventually become teachers of even more deaf students. Educators, both deaf and hearing, from across the United States and Canada also visited the school in Hartford, Connecticut. The new American Sign Language, which had only recently been created out of French Sign Language and Old American Sign Language, was learned by every visiting educator. As these educators spread out and established new schools in the United States and in Canada they brought with them the new American Sign Language. This was the essential element needed to ensure the widespread use of American Sign Language in North America.

ASL has a direct, though partial, connection with French Sign Language; it is therefore considered a part of the European Signed Language Family. ASL shares more vocabulary with French Sign Language than with British Sign Language. Yet similarities within the European Signed Language Family allow a certain amount of understanding (and a certain amount of confusion) between users of different European signed languages. The model school program in Hartford, Connecticut established a national center for deaf education in the United States and laid the foundation for a unified American Sign Language, thus preventing the development of a different signed language in each state.

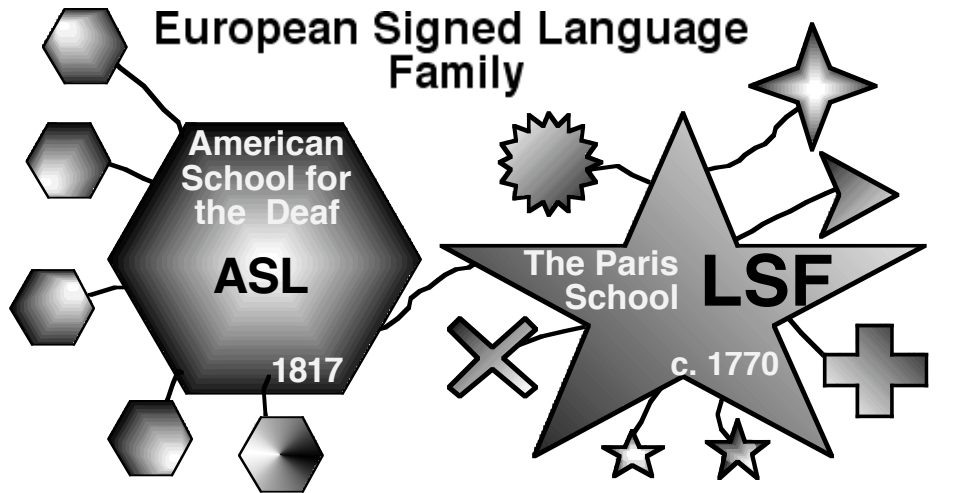


Figure 1.8 – LSF & ASL as Part of the European Signed Language Family

Summary

This Unit presented the history of American Sign Language with its roots in French Sign Language (the language of Laurent Clerc) and the signing of Martha's Vineyard (the majority language of Clerc's first American students). We have learned about three hearing teachers, the Abbé de L'Épée, the Abbé Sicard, and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. We have learned about two deaf teachers, Jean Massieu, the first deaf teacher of deaf students in recorded history, and Laurent Clerc, the first deaf teacher of deaf students on the American continent. We have learned about the influence of residential schools for deaf children upon stabilizing and spreading a standardized signed language and how the influences of the Paris school were felt in Hartford and are still obvious today across the United States and in Canada.

Additionally we have seen that this language with its rich history was not acknowledged as a legitimate language for nearly 150 years, even by the deaf people who used it on a daily basis. We have learned about William Stokoe, a hearing man with no native understanding of signed languages, explored and researched American Sign Language and demonstrated that it meets the definition of language. Thanks to Stokoe's efforts, the Deaf community would find pride, rather than shame, in their language. The next Unit will explore the origins of this shame as part of a systematic oppression of the Deaf community.

Timelines in History

The French Revolution began on July 14th, 1789 – 5 months later the Abbé De l'Épée died at the age of 77. In 1790 the Abbé Sicard was selected to run the school. In 1799 Napoleon Bonaparte seized control of the French government. Napoleon's military actions in Europe lead the British navy to make a practice of confiscating American ships and their crews. President Madison declared war on England in 1812. Napoleon was defeated by a European alliance in 1814 and was exiled to the island of Elba. This removed the original conditions of the war of 1812. Napoleon briefly returned to power from March 20th until June 22nd of 1815, having been defeated by the British and Prussian allies at Waterloo, Belgium. T. H. Gallaudet met Sicard and Laurent Clerc in July of 1815 and brought Clerc to America the next year. The Hartford School opened on April 15th, 1817.

Section 2 Review Questions

- 11) Who was Pablo Ponce De Leon and where did he live?
- 12) How did the abbé de L'Epée begin teaching deaf children?
- 13) How did Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet become involved in teaching deaf children?
- 14) Where did Gallaudet spend the first several months trying to learn about teaching deaf children?
- 15) Where did Gallaudet eventually succeed in learning about deaf education?
- 16) What year did de L'Epée publish his book?
- 17) What war had just concluded before Gallaudet began his journey to learn about deaf education?
- 18) Who was Mason Fitch Cogswell?
- 19) Who was Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet?
- 20) Who were the Braidwoods?
- 21) Who was the Abbé de l'Epée?
- 22) Who was the Abbé Sicard?
- 23) Who was Jean Massieu?
- 24) Who was Laurent Clerc?
- 25) What European leader's activities lead Sicard, Massieu, & Clerc to flee from France?
- 26) How did the Paris school influence signed languages in other European countries?
- 27) What kinds of communication were common in Martha's Vineyard in the early 1800's?
- 28) Why were there so many deaf people on Martha's Vineyard in the early 1800's?
- 29) What date did the American School for the Deaf open?
- 30) How did the American School for the Deaf influence signed language in the United States?

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