1. 1760: Abbé de l’Épée
Charles Michel de l’Épée, a Catholic priest (abbé means father), met 2 deaf girls while doing charity work in Paris. He felt compassion for them and wanted to bring them salvation, so he began teaching them. Soon other students joined and he started the first public school for the deaf in the world. Due to his contributions, Abbé de l’Épée is considered “the father of the Deaf”.

De l’Épée saw that the deaf must learn “through the eye what other people acquire through the ear” and recognized the importance of sign language in teaching the deaf.

2. 1760: Abbé de l’Épée
De l’Épée learned the signs his students used among themselves. However, he felt the existing sign language in Paris was limited, so he created a sign system called “methodical signs” to include French grammar.

In this system, which Epée called methodical signing, even the simplest sentence took on enormous complexity. One example: a line from Racine, “To the smallest of the birds, He gives their crumbs,” required forty-eight signs from Epée’s pupils. “Gives” alone required five signs: those for verb, present, third person, singular, and “give”. To the deaf pupil accustomed to expressing such an idea in five or six signs in a different order, the sentence in methodical signs lacked unity, was full of distractions, was far too long for a single unit of meaning, and, in the end, was unintelligible. This did not prevent Epée’s pupils from signing French sentences given a text and, conversely, from writing perfect French given a sentence in manual French; it just prevented them from understanding those sentences – they had to be explained in French Sign Language. For the same reasons, the fact that Epée’s pupils could write French sentences from signed dictation did not mean they could construct any of their own; they could not, and hence Epée never asked them to. “Of course they can’t,” he wrote to Sicard. “Don’t hope that they can ever express their ideas in writing. Our language is not theirs; theirs is sign language. Let it suffice that they know how to translate ours with theirs, as we translate foreign languages ourselves, without knowing how to think or express ourselves in that language.” (When the Mind Hears, pg. 62)

It was awkward, but a successful beginning.

3. Jean Massieu
Jean Massieu was one of de l’Épée’s early students. He learned from de l’Épée, but he taught him a lot about how Deaf people think. When Massieu graduated, he stayed at the school as an instructor. Therefore, he was the first teacher of the deaf who was himself deaf. He spent his entire life at St. Jacques, the school for the Deaf in
The History of Deaf Education and ASL

Part 2

Paris. He wrote an autobiography of his experiences growing up which was hugely popular at the time because people was amazed that a deaf man could write a book. He became a “poster child” for educating the Deaf, and still is today.

4. 1789: Roch-Ambroise Sicard

After a long career, Abbé de l’Epée passed away and the school was now under the direction of Roch-Anbroise Sicard, who was also a priest in the Catholic church. He had a long and dedicated career at St. Jacques and wrote several books on Deaf education.

5. 1789: Abbé Sicard

Though a priest, Sicard was not known for being humble. He loved attention and fame. On Saturdays, he would make public demonstrations of his students, and people would flock in every week to see him teach. He might show how a new student is taught the connection between an object, the sign and the printed word, then show how students can use methodical signs to write sentences in French, then have advanced students show their understanding of complex theological issues. He was open with his methods and was willing to train others.

Sicard supported the King, so he was put in prison when Napoleon came to power. His deaf students had to write a petition and begged to have their teacher returned to them so they could continue to learn.

6. 1778: Samuel Heinicke

Samuel Heinicke was one of many people at that time who believed speech was necessary for abstract thought. Therefore, his school supported speech only and no sign language. He opened an oral school for the deaf in Germany. A lot people were watching both Sicard and Heinicke because of the humanist movement – how much can we as a people overcome?

7. 1778: Samuel Heinicke

Heinicke was successful, but only with a few students. Most of the children he worked with were post-lingually deaf, meaning they lost their hearing after they had already learned to talk, or they were hard-of-hearing and not completely deaf. After they graduated and left his school, their speech often became unintelligible without the constant practice.

8. 1816: Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet

Shortly after graduating seminary, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet went to visit his parents in Hartford, Connecticut. He was watching his little brothers and sisters playing outside, but there was one little girl who was on her own. He discovered her name was Alice Cogswell and she was deaf. He handed her his hat, then wrote the word “hat” in the dirt with a stick. She learned that this object had a name, and they were both excited that she was able to learn the name for something.
Gallaudet talked to her father, Mason Cogswell, who was a prominent physician. He had tried to send Alice to school, but she wasn’t successful in a hearing school. There were no deaf schools in America at this time. Mason Cogswell got a group of friends and community leaders together to raise funding, and they hire Gallaudet to establish a school for the Deaf in Hartford.

8. 1816: Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet
Gallaudet goes to Germany to visit the oral school, but Heinicke wants to charge Gallaudet a fortune to learn his methods. His funders in Connecticut don’t have the resources to pay Heinicke’s outrageous fees. Historians suspect that part of the reason Heinicke didn’t want to share his teaching techniques was that he really didn’t have any. He only chose students who he felt would be successful and turned away those who wouldn’t learn speech.

9: 1816
Meanwhile, Sicard wants more fame beyond Paris and needs more money to fund St. Jacques, so he does public demonstrations in London. At this same time, Napoleon is returning to power and Sicard wants to leave so he isn’t arrested again.

10. Laurent Clerc
He takes Jean Massieu and another student-turned-teacher with him, Laurent Clerc. Jean Massieu was de l’Epee’s best student, and Massieu’s best student was Clerc.

Gallaudet comes to see their demonstration in London and tells of his plans to start a school in America. Sicard says they are happy to have Gallaudet learn from their school in Paris.

10. Laurent Clerc
While in Paris, Gallaudet learns to run a school from Sicard and how to sign from Clerc.

Gallaudet invites Clerc to go with him back to the US to help start the first Deaf school. Clerc, who wanted to leave the Paris school and was frustrated his plans to teach in Russia were cancelled, is thrilled at the chance.

On the 26-day journey, Clerc teaches Gallaudet to sign while Gallaudet teaches him English.

11. Hartford School
They found the American Asylum for the Deaf with 7 students, including Alice Cogswell. The school in Hartford is still open, now called the American School for the Deaf, and their legacy continues.