

# **American Sign Language has a long and proud past**

by [Access Press Staff](#) // February 10th, 2014

American Sign Language or ASL is believed to be the fourth most-used language in the United States.

In oral history interviews by the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Metro Division of the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Kim Wassenaar and the late Douglas Bahl are among those who spoke of the importance of ASL as a means of communications. In fact, both used ASL as the first language in their interviews, which were later transcribed.

Histories indicate that today's ASL is believed to have its roots in languages dating back centuries. The *Perigee Visual Dictionary of Signing* by Rod R. Butterworth and Mickey Flodin notes that the first book on teaching sign language that contained the manual alphabet was published in 1620 by Juan Pablo de Bonet. That book credits an Italian physician with helping to develop the first sign language.

More than a century later in Paris, the first free school for deaf people was founded by Abbe Charles Michel de L'Epee. There students learned a system of conventional gestures, hand signs, and finger spelling, which evolved into French Sign Language.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was a Congregational minister who became interested in helping his neighbor's young deaf daughter, Alice Cogswell. Gallaudet, for whom Gallaudet University is named, is cited by many historians as pioneering sign language in this country. He traveled to Europe in 1815, when he was 27, to study methods of communicating with deaf people. While in England he met Abbe Roche Ambroise Sicard, who invited him to study at his Paris school.

After several months Gallaudet returned to the states with Laurent Clerc, a deaf sign language instructor from the Paris school. In 1817 Gallaudet then founded the American School for the Deaf (ASD), in Hartford, Conn.

Students who came to the school in the early days sometimes brought regional versions of sign language with them. Over time a new form of language, ASL, emerged. Similar schools began to open throughout the country. Deaf community organization and conferences sponsored by groups including the National Association of the Deaf and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf drew people from all over the United States. This helped spread ASL use.

By 1863, when what is now Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf opened, the nation had 22 schools for deaf community members. That was followed a year later by the opening of Gallaudet College, in Washington, D.C. What is now Gallaudet University is the only liberal arts college for deaf people in the world.

Minnesotans who are deaf are featured in this issue of Access Press. Longtime activist Wassenaar was honored by Gov. Mark Dayton. She was the first person from Minnesota's deaf community to receive the award.

While Wassenaar 's award was celebrated, there was also sadness as longtime community activist and historian Bahl passed away last month.

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