

# **HISTORY NOTE: A century ago, Braille won status as the language standard**

by [Access Press Staff](#) // November 9th, 2018

How people with blindness and other visual disabilities enjoy printed materials has changed over the years. An array of apps, text-to-speech software and assistive technology “read” content for many people. Others faithfully listen to Radio Talking Book, which marks 50 years’ service in January 2019. Prerecorded books are also popular.

Many people still read using Braille. Braille is a system of touch reading and writing in which raised dots represent letters of the alphabet. Braille also contains equivalents for punctuation marks and provides symbols to show letter groupings.

2018 marks a key centennial for this language. Several histories indicate that in 1918, Braille was accepted as the national standard for tactile reading for the blind. Prior to 1918, there were several competing tactile reading methods, which sometimes led to strong differences of opinion as to which was best.

Braille is read by moving the hand or hands from left to right along each line. Both hands are usually involved in the reading process, and reading is generally done with the index fingers. The average reading speed is about 125 words per minute. Proficient Braille readers can reach speeds of 200 words per minute or more.

Braille actually has roots going back many years. It got its start in the early 1800s, when Charles Barbier, a soldier in Napoleon Bonaparte’s French army, developed a unique system known as “night writing” so soldiers could communicate safely during the night. Barbier had seen too many men killed because they used lanterns to read and write at night.

Louis Braille improved on that system. Born in the village of Coupvray, France in 1809, Braille was blinded at a very young age after he accidentally stabbed himself in the eye with his father’s leatherwork awl. Braille spent years refining the system of raised dots that bears his name.

Braille’s code was based on cells with only six dots instead of 12. This improvement was crucial because it meant that a fingertip could encompass the entire cell unit with one impression and move rapidly from one cell to the next.

Braille died at age 43, one year before his home country of France adopted Braille as that nation’s official communication system for blind individuals.

Various forms of raised-dot and raised-letter language continue to be used until 1918 when Braille replaced them all in the United States.

Most people who are blind or have visual disabilities in the United States routinely learned Braille until the 1960s. The National Federation for the Blind (NFB) notes that by the 1980s, the Braille literacy rate among blind people was reported to be near 10 percent. That organization has taken steps to change to reverse the decline in Braille literacy, raising public awareness about

the benefits of Braille and working to adopt state laws that strengthened access to Braille instruction and instructional materials for blind children. The NFB Braille Readers are Leaders Literacy Campaign promotes the learning of Braille.

Recently an alternative to Braille was unveiled. Andrew Chepaitis, a former equity research analyst, founded a startup called ELIA Life Technology. ELIA, which stands for Education, Literacy, and Independence for All, aspires to challenge Braille's dominance through an easy-to-learn system based on letter-forms of the Roman alphabet. It was announced earlier this year. Could it replace Braille? Only time will tell.

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*Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at [access@accesspress.org](mailto:access@accesspress.org) or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.*