ASL FOR EVERYONE

THE HISTORY OF ASL

1

Early Roots of Sign Language in America

Before ASL existed, different forms of sign language were already in use across the United States. Many hearing families with deaf children developed their own home sign systems, which were often highly sophisticated. Long before European settlers arrived, Indigenous peoples of the Great Plains used a complex sign language to communicate across tribes and languages.

2

Village Sign Languages in New England

In the 19th century, several communities in New England developed their own village sign languages—notably in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; Henniker, New Hampshire; and Sandy River Valley, Maine. On Martha's Vineyard, where a high rate of genetic deafness existed, sign language became a part of everyday life. Both deaf and hearing residents used it regularly, even in situations like church sermons or between fishing boats at sea.

3

The Birth of ASL

American Sign Language was born in 1817 at the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, Connecticut. The school was founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, who traveled to Europe to study methods of teaching deaf students. There, he met Laurent Clerc, a teacher from the French school for the deaf, who joined him in bringing French Sign Language (LSF) to the United States.

At ASD, students came from places like Martha's Vineyard, New Hampshire, and Maine, each bringing their own sign systems. When these signs blended with LSF, a new language emerged—what we now know as American Sign Language.

4

Growth and Spread of ASL

After the founding of ASD, more schools for the deaf opened across the country, spreading ASL further. Deaf organizations like the National Association of the Deaf and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf helped strengthen the Deaf community and encouraged the nationwide use of ASL through conventions and gatherings.

5

Supression and Rediscovery

In the late 1800s, the Milan Congress promoted oralism, an educational movement that emphasized speech and lip-reading while discouraging the use of sign language. As a result, ASL was banned from many schools, though it survived through Deaf communities, churches, and advocates who continued to teach and use it.

By the mid-20th century, ASL's status began to change. William Stokoe, a linguist at Gallaudet University, recognized ASL as a true language with its own grammar and structure. His research in the 1950s and 1960s, alongside the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement, helped establish ASL as a legitimate, respected language and a cornerstone of Deaf culture.