

Samuel Gridley Howe

The First American Educator To The Blind

Samuel Gridley Howe was born on November 10, 1801. After attending Brown University and Harvard Medical School, he was distracted by the Greek revolution and spent two years fighting for Greek independence and practicing medicine. He finally returned to the United States with little more than the knowledge that he no longer wanted to practice medicine.

After a short time working for a newspaper, Dr. Howe was given the opportunity to take a position as the director for the New England Asylum for the Blind, which would be the first college for the blind ever to be established in the United States. He took this responsibility enthusiastically and spent a year in Europe studying the existing schools. He returned to the United States ready to revolutionize blind education. Since few educational materials were available for the blind, he spent a great deal of time creating his own textbooks, maps, and other materials. Many of these materials were eventually produced in bulk at costs far less than any materials previously available. In addition, they were more compact, enabling him to print the first New Testament for blind readers.

Howe spent a significant amount of time traveling and advertizing the success of his schools. It was during one of these trips that he first heard of a seven year old girl named Laura Bridgman, who was both blind and deaf due to scarlet fever. He saw this as the perfect opportunity to expand the focus of his work, and she was enrolled that October.

Laura's training was begun using raised letters that spelled out words, which were placed on common objects in an attempt to teach her the relationship between words and objects. She picked this concept up in a relatively short period of time. To facilitate communication Laura was taught the manual alphabet and was able to "hear" what others were saying to her by holding their hands and feeling shapes of the letters as they were spelled to her. Once she was taught to communicate, her desire to learn became incessant, frequently exhausting the tutor who had been assigned to her. Laura's successful education proved to the world, for the first time, that the deaf-blind were perfectly capable of learning and opened up a whole new field of education. In fact, it was Dr. Howe's work that guided the well-known teacher Anne Sullivan in her education of Helen Keller, who became a well-known author, speaker, and teacher. Although his name has been all but forgotten, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe's work will live on forever through the lives of these two women.



Laura Bridgman, Dr. Howe's first deaf-blind pupil.