

# The World Around the Show



Helen Keller, circa 1896.  
Photo courtesy of the  
American Foundation for the  
Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

## Helen Keller

**H**elen Keller was born on June 27, 1880 on the Ivy Green plantation in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Helen lost her ability to see and hear when she was nineteen months old. With the help of her teacher, Annie Sullivan, Helen learned to use sign language and written language to communicate.

In 1888, Helen moved to the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston. In 1904, Helen Keller became the first person with deafblindness to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree when she graduated from Radcliffe College.

Helen used her love of language to become a political activist and author. She was an out-spoken suffragette, pacifist, and socialist. Helen advocated for women's rights and helped to form the American Civil Liberties Union. Helen founded an organization called Helen Keller International, to raise awareness for vision research. She became a world traveler, accompanied by her lifelong best friend, Annie Sullivan,

to speak on behalf of people with disabilities.

In addition to political activism, Helen was an established writer, precociously writing her first work when she was only eleven years old. In 1903, she published her autobiography *The Story of My Life*. By the time Helen died, she had published a dozen books.

Since her death in 1968, Helen has received many posthumous honors. She was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame. Her visage is seen on the Alabama state quarter, and hospitals, statues, and streets worldwide are named in her honor.

"I long to  
accomplish a **great**  
and noble task,  
but it is my chief duty  
to accomplish  
small tasks as if  
they were  
**great and noble.**"

~ Helen Keller, as an adult

“The most important day I remember  
in all my life is the one  
on which my teacher,  
**Anne Mansfield Sullivan**, came to me.”  
~ Helen Keller, as an adult

## Johanna Sullivan

Johanna (Anne or Annie) Sullivan was born in Agawam, Massachusetts on April 14, 1866. At the age of three, Annie started to lose her sense of vision due to a bacterial infection. Her mother died of tuberculosis when she was eight, and her father subsequently abandoned her and her four siblings. Three of her siblings were sent to live with different relatives. Annie and her brother, Jimmie, who had tuberculosis, were sent to Tewksbury Almhouse where the children endured horrifying circumstances. Jimmie died three months after they moved to the institution.

Annie was forced to live at Tewksbury for four more years. While there, Annie underwent several eye surgeries, but none cured her blurred vision. In 1880, Annie attended the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston. There she had another surgery, which restored part of her vision. Annie graduated in 1886 as valedictorian. The director of the Perkins Institute, Michael Anagnos, encouraged Annie to move to Alabama to become a teacher and governess to Helen Keller, a six-year old with deafblindness.

Annie and Helen became constant companions. The two lived together, along with Annie's husband, John Albert Macy. John and Annie married in 1905, but separated in 1914. Annie and Helen traveled the world advocating for more research on vision, nutrition, and health. In 1936, Annie had a heart attack and went into a coma and died, with Helen by her side. Annie Sullivan's ashes are in the Washington National Cathedral.



Anne Sullivan Macy, 1894.  
Photo courtesy of the  
American Foundation for the  
Blind, Helen Keller Archives.



Anne Sullivan Macy manually signing into Helen Keller's left hand, circa 1893. Photo courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

## The 1880s

**T**he *Miracle Worker* takes place in the late 1880s during a time when the United States felt a great cultural divide between the North and the South. Northern industry grew more profitable, while in the South, farmers struggled to revive their economy in the aftermath of the Civil War. This divide provided emotional momentum for women's suffrage and the socialist movement, both of which had a great impact on Helen Keller's life.

### Notable Events:

- President Garfield was assassinated
- North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington admitted to statehood
- Brooklyn Bridge opened to the public
- Statue of Liberty dedicated in New York Harbor
- Debut of the automobile in Germany
- Inception of the Eiffel Tower in France
- Construction of Panama Canal began
- Mark Twain published *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

### Inventions:

- Ballpoint pen
- Dishwasher
- Drinking straw
- Electric fan
- Kodak hand camera
- Phonograph
- Cash register
- Trolley car
- Contact lenses

## The Role of Women

**K**nown as "The Gilded Age," this time period was the height of 19th century American wealth, but also a time of growing poverty. More and more poor or working-class women took jobs to support themselves and their families outside of the home.

In the South, working-class women were permitted to work as teachers or as house servants. Since slave labor was prohibited, many women took on double duties of running a household and helping to share-crop. In the North, immigrant women and other working-class women typically worked in textile mills and factories. They were paid less than men so employers were willing to hire them. However, these women were expected to leave their work once they married.

At the end of the 1800s as more women became accepted in traditionally masculine work places, like factories and offices, fewer women took domestic jobs. And unlike their predecessors, many women in the 1880s insisted upon receiving an education and enrolling in college. These newly educated women began championing to better the lives of all women.

## Medical Practices

**W**hen Helen Keller fell ill as a baby, the doctor diagnosed her as having congestion of the stomach and brain. Though she recovered from this "congestion" she was left blind and deaf. Now, doctors believe Helen had either scarlet fever or meningitis.

Scarlet fever is a streptococcal infection characterized by a rash and a high fever. In the 1880s, when Helen may have contracted this infection, there was no way to treat it. In 1924, George and Gladys Dick developed a scarlet fever vaccine. Meanwhile, Alexander Fleming had discovered penicillin and by the 1940s the scarlet fever vaccine was unnecessary. Strep infections could be easily treated with a course of the penicillin antibiotic.

Meningitis is the inflammation of brain and spinal cord membranes. Though still a serious illness today, meningitis is often successfully treated with a course of antibiotics. People are also able to receive a vaccine to prevent meningitis. In the 1880s, people who contracted meningitis typically died a short time later.

Other diseases that were common in the 19th century were cholera, smallpox, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, pneumonia, dysentery, diphtheria, and rheumatic fever. Nearly all of these illnesses were

fatal, but now these illnesses are preventable or treatable. Immunizations and nutrition protect most children in the United States from these diseases. If they are contracted, a standard course of antibiotics or rehydration treatments will generally flush out the infections.

## Accessibility for People with Disabilities in the United States

In the 1800s, there was little advocacy in the United States for people with disabilities. Many people with disabilities, whether congenital or as a result of an illness or accident, were segregated into institutions. Though there were significant exceptions, such as the Perkins Institute for the Blind and Gallaudet University, most people with disabilities were treated as invisible members of society.

After World War I, attitudes toward people with disabilities shifted. Assistive technology such as hearing aids, microphones, and amplifiers were developed and people with disabilities, particularly veterans, had greater involvement in their communities.

In the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement reached its peak. Doctors and therapists started to help people with disabilities engage in their community rather than be institutionalized. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protected the civil rights of people with disabilities by guaranteeing equal employment opportunities and access to public transportation. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act provided every child the right to free education. In 1990, this educational act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and more specific legal mandates were put in place to maximize the success of all students.

Also in 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA guarantees that public buildings and systems include assistive technology such as ramps, elevators, chair lifts,

information in braille, closed-captioning, and doors and hallways wide enough to accommodate people who use wheelchairs, walkers, or service animals.

## American Sign Language

American Sign Language was developed in the United States by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a minister from Hartford, Connecticut. Gallaudet traveled to Europe where he was inspired by Old French Sign Language (OFSL). OFSL was developed by Abbe Charles Michel de L'Epee in 1755. L'Epee founded a school for people who were deaf and used natural hand gestures and finger spellings to help his students communicate.

Decades later, Gallaudet moved to Europe to study deaf communication so that he could better help his neighbor's daughter who was deaf. After spending some time studying in England, Gallaudet moved to Paris where he befriended Laurent Clerc, a sign language instructor. Gallaudet returned to Connecticut in 1817, where he and Clerc founded the first school for deaf people in the United States. Gallaudet and Clerc revised the language to include gesticulations, which were natural for Americans, hence the name American Sign Language (ASL). ASL, or Ameslan, is used in many deaf communities throughout the world, including the Philippines, Malaysia, Kenya, Puerto Rico, and nearly 20 other countries.

### Think About It...

- Countries outside of the United States have their own sign language vocabulary. For example, the United Kingdom uses British Sign Language which is completely different from ASL.
- ASL is the fourth most-used language in the United States.

“Although **the world** is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”

~ Helen Keller, as an adult

# The American Foundation for the Blind

Annie's work with Helen Keller became the blueprint for education of children who were blind, deaf-blind, or have low vision. The foundation still continues their work today. The American Foundation for the Blind website ([www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org)) includes photos, letters, artifacts, audio-visual materials and further information on both Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan. Use this site as a guide to learn more about these two amazing women who are still considered role models today.

**AFB** American Foundation®  
for the Blind

Expanding possibilities for people with vision loss

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## Things to Remember When You Meet or Speak to Someone Who is Blind or Has Low Vision.

- When speaking about a person with a disability, refer to the person first and then to the disability. For example, say "people who are blind" rather than "blind people."
- Greet people who are blind right away when they enter a room. Make sure to use your name if they aren't familiar with your voice.
- Speak directly to people who are blind or have a visual disability, not through their friend or guide.
- Do your best to refer to specific people or items by name instead of general terms like "you" or "they" or "this."
- Offer to guide people who are blind or have low vision by asking if they would like assistance. They won't always need assistance so respect their desires.
- For people who ask for assistance, allow them to take your arm just above the elbow when your arm is bent and walk ahead of the person you are guiding.
- Never grab a person who is blind or has low vision by the arm and push him/her forward.
- Never call or whistle to a guide dog or touch the dog's harness or leash. Guide dogs are working animals and doing so can distract the dog.