What is American Sign Language?

The Birth of ASL

In 1815 Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet traveled to Europe from America to study about the education of Deaf people. He wanted to help his neighbor's young Deaf daughter, Alice Cogswell. After several months in Europe, Gallaudet returned to the United States with Laurent Clerc, a Deaf instructor from a school for the Deaf in Paris. Sailing over the Atlantic Ocean for more than three months, Gallaudet and Clerc exchanged their signs, a combination of Gallaudet's home signs and Clerc's French Sign Language. Today it is known as American Sign Language.

Reference: National Association of the Deaf (NAD)

American Sign Language (ASL) is:

- A fully developed, autonomous, natural language with a unique grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and cultural heritage; the gestures, visual components, and structures of which are neither derived from English nor a simplified version of English. It is not used simultaneously with voiced English.

- Like all verbal languages, ASL evolves over time to accommodate the needs of its native users.

- The first language of many Deaf North Americans. For ASL users, English is considered a second language.

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What is American Sign Language?

• One of several communication options available to Deaf individuals.

• Recognized as the predominant and preferred language of Deaf people in the United States.

• Not a universal language. Each country has its own sign language, much like the thousands of languages spoken by hearing people all over the world.

For more information, contact the nearest DSDHH Regional Center or visit www.ncdhhs.gov/dsdhh.