

Deaf Culture Question of the Week: August 31 – September 3, 2010

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This is the first DCQW for the 2010-2011 school year.

Greetings from WSD!

Which other sign language is ASL most closely associated with?

- a. American Indian Sign Language
- b. French Sign Language
- c. British Sign Language
- d. Spanish Sign Language

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: "b" – American Sign Language and French Sign Language are closely related due to the fact that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet ended up in France at the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets à Paris (School for the Deaf in Paris) when he went to Europe to learn about educating deaf children. He returned from this trip with Laurent Clerc a Deaf Frenchman and the first teacher of the Deaf in the US. Together they founded the American School for the Deaf in Hartford Connecticut which still operates today as the state school for the deaf.

Clerc's French Sign Language mixed with the sign language used among students to create modern American Sign Language. About 40% of ASL signs are cognates in French Sign Language. This means the same sign is used for the same concept. So for example the signs BOY, GIRL, GOOD, LOOK-FOR and many others are examples of cognates. The same sign is used in French Sign Language today for those concepts.

An interesting further point about this is the existence of "initialized signs" in French Sign Language and how they have carried over to ASL. The sign GOOD is an "initialized sign" in French Sign Language. The spoken word in French for "good" is "bon". The "B" handshape was used to represent this concept in the French sign BON. This sign was borrowed into ASL and is our sign for GOOD. In ASL the sign GOOD is not an initialized sign. Another example of this is the sign we use for "TO-LOOK-FOR". It is signed with a "C" handshape making circular motions in front of the face. The French word for "to look for" is "chercher". The "C handshape" was used to represent the concept which was an initialized sign in French Sign Language and in a non-initialized sign in ASL.