

Laura Dewey Bridgman

Laura Dewey Bridgman was born December 21, 1829 in Hanover, New Hampshire. She was the third child of prosperous farmers. When Laura was two years old, the scarlet fever epidemic struck her family. Her two older sisters died of the illness, and Laura became very sick with a high fever. After the fever broke, Laura's mother realized that Laura had lost her hearing. Later it became obvious that she had also lost most of her vision, her sense of smell, and her ability to taste. Her mother nursed her back to health, but Laura was unable to walk or get out of bed without help for nearly a year. It was a full two years before she regained her health and strength. Laura's only remaining sense was her sense of touch. Touch became very important for her.

Before Laura became sick, she was a very bright toddler. She spoke a little and understood a lot of language. After her illness, Laura stopped speaking when her family could no longer converse with her. Laura and her family did invent a simple sign system. She could tell them by using gestures that she wanted food or drink. Her parents could tell her she was doing the right thing by praising her with "pats", light reassuring touches on her back or head. Laura's mother would let her know that she did not approve of her behavior by "tapping" her back or rubbing her hand. Her father was less patient and would sometimes stamp his foot loudly on the floor which frightened Laura into behaving. Laura also learned to perform some household chores and to sew.

An elderly man in her town, Asa Tenney, took an interest in Laura. He took her for walks in the nearby fields and forest and let her explore the plants, trees, and the brook. He helped her to learn about nature. Laura's happiest childhood memories were her times with Asa.

But, most of the time, Laura was very lonely and isolated. Laura's parents had three more children, and there was a great deal of work to be done to run the farm. They did not have very much time to spend with Laura. When Mrs. Bridgman was busy with the younger children or doing chores, she would leave Laura alone. Sometimes Laura became so upset that she would scream, throw a tantrum, or cling to her mother.

Just a few years after Laura was born, in 1832, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe began teaching a handful of blind students in a private home in Boston, Massachusetts. This was the beginning of the Perkins School for the Blind, the first school for the blind in the country. At that time, many people believed that blind people could not learn. They thought that blind people should be hidden away from society. Dr. Howe's work was considered groundbreaking.

Dr. Howe wanted to prove that people, including those who were blind or deaf, had a basic ability to learn. His work was treated as scientific. His teaching methods were experiments. Howe wanted to prove his theories by being the first person to teach a deaf-blind child. He heard about Laura from a student at Dartmouth College. Howe thought that Laura would be a perfect subject for his teaching experiment. During a visit to the Bridgman farm, he made an offer to Laura's parents to take her to his school and teach her. Given Laura's periodic difficult behavior and her parents' lack of time, it is not surprising that Mr. and Mrs. Bridgman were willing to send Laura away to school. They thought that Laura might do better at a school for blind children. In 1837, when Laura was eight years old, she enrolled in the school as the first deaf-blind student.

Even though being in a new place, among strangers, was frightening to Laura, she adjusted quickly. She learned to move about in her new home and to trust Dr. Howe.

Although Braille had been invented, it was not used in the United States at that time. Blind children used raised letters to read. Dr. Howe began teaching his new pupil using these letters and objects. Soon enough, Laura understood that the raised letters were the names of the objects.

Next, Laura learned finger spelling. With this method Laura could "talk" with others. In less than a year, Laura was using this skill to ask questions about everything to everyone who would listen. It seemed to Howe and her other teachers that Laura's curiosity was endless. The little girl, who had been isolated and deprived of information, now could not get enough!

Laura was a wonderful student and a great success for Dr. Howe. He wrote about her in reports that were widely distributed in the United States and in Europe. At the time, Perkins had "Observation Days" when the curious public was invited to come and see the school and its students. At a time

when there was no television or movies, these “Observation Days” were held so that people could see for themselves that blind children could be successful. Building support for Perkins through this kind of publicity was important for the future success of the school. It helped people change their misconceptions about blind people. By the time Laura was twelve years old, she was the most popular attraction of the “Observation Days”, and thousands of people had come to see her.

In 1842, Charles Dickens, a famous British author, came to see Laura. She was twelve years old. Dickens was so impressed with Laura that he wrote a whole chapter about her in his book, American Notes. This helped to make Laura even more famous. It was also through this book that Helen Keller’s mother learned about Perkins and that the school might be able to help her young daughter.

Soon enough, however, Laura’s fame would fade. Dr. Howe married in 1843 and began to travel extensively. He was absent from Laura’s life for long periods of time. During that time, Laura had other teachers, but she stopped being the most important and favored student. She also became a teenager and lost her youthful charm. The sweet, young Laura who had been the hit of the “Observation Days” became a gangly adolescent who was sometimes moody. Although she continued to excel as a student, she was no longer a phenomenon.

When her formal education ended, Laura returned to Hanover, New Hampshire to rejoin her family. However, few of her family members knew finger spelling, and they could not communicate with her. After a time, Laura became very lonely and bored and she returned to Perkins. Although she would visit her family, the school would be her home for the rest of her life.

Laura worked at the school doing housekeeping, sewing, knitting and needle work. She taught these skills to many of the students, including Anne Sullivan. Anne Sullivan learned to finger spell from Laura. Later Anne would use this skill to teach her famous student, Helen Keller.

Laura Bridgman was a strict teacher. She demanded excellence from herself and her students. She also had a dry wit and good sense of humor. Through

her extraordinary sense of touch, she could recognize people and their moods and character.

Laura Bridgman died in 1889 at the age of fifty-nine. By the turn of the century, few people remembered her. In her lifetime, though, Laura Bridgman was said to be one of the most recognized women in the world. When reports about Helen Keller first surfaced, she was referred to as “the second Laura Bridgman.” It is generally acknowledged that without Laura Bridgman there would have been no Helen Keller. Anne Sullivan studied and copied the teaching methods that Dr. Howe used with Laura. Laura Bridgman’s success proved that it was possible to teach a child who was both deaf and blind.

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