

**Laura Dewey Bridgman**  
1829-1889

**Laura's early life**

Laura Dewey Bridgman was born in Hanover, New Hampshire, on December 21, 1829. Daniel and Harmony Bridgman were hardworking New England farmers, and the pretty infant with bright blue eyes was their third child. Laura was tiny and feeble, prone to periodic "fits" or seizures. Her parents feared she would not survive.

However, at the age of 20 months, Laura unexpectedly became strong and healthy. In her mental and physical development she rapidly regained all the ground she had lost during her months of illness. Laura was lively, intelligent, and a precocious talker, already beginning to speak in short sentences.

When Laura was 24 months old, she and her two older sisters were suddenly stricken with scarlet fever. Both of her sisters died, and Laura was so desperately ill that it seemed she would die as well. After a week, she seemed better, but then the inflammation spread to her eyes and ears, and the fever burned for many weeks. When it finally passed, Laura had lost her sight, hearing, sense of smell, and nearly all of her sense of taste. Her eyes were so sensitive to light that she had to be kept in a darkened room for five months. She was unable to walk for a year, and unable to sit up all day for another year.

Remarkably, at the age of four, Laura recovered her strength. Her world was changed forever, but her intelligence and eager curiosity were undiminished. Touch was the single sense left to her, and she tried to make sense of her surroundings by exploring every object and surface in the house.

Laura developed a rudimentary sign language. She created gestures for food and other basic needs, and a name sign for each family member. However, communication between Laura and her family was very limited. Pushing and pulling told her that she was to go or to come. Approval was communicated by a gentle pat on the head, and disapproval by a pat on the back.

She was extremely affectionate with family members, especially her mother. Laura clung to Mrs. Bridgman as she did her work and was especially interested in her hands and arms. Because she loved to imitate what her mother did, Laura was quite helpful with the unending household chores of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century farm, even learning to sew and knit.

An important friend in Laura's early life was the Bridgman's hired man, Asa Tenney, who sometimes lived with the family. Tenney was a warmhearted and gentle man who had a mental impairment that made his speech and writing almost unintelligible. However, he seemed to have an intuitive understanding of how Laura experienced her environment, and he communicated with her much more effectively than anyone in her

family. He was patient with her insatiable boundless curiosity and her occasional fits of temper. Roaming the farm together for hours and communicating with signs, Tenney taught Laura a great deal about the natural world. He was her first and oldest friend, and she remembered him with fondness and gratitude throughout her life.

As Laura grew older, her family found that her behavior was becoming more difficult and exhausting. She frequently had temper tantrums, and by the time she was seven she could be controlled only by being physically overpowered. Laura's father, who communicated his displeasure by stamping on the floor, was the only family member she would obey.

### **Perkins School for the Blind**

Perkins School for the Blind, the first in the United States, accepted its first students in 1832. At that time it was commonly believed that blind people could not be educated, nor hope to become independent adults. This notion was easily disproved by the school's eager pupils and its brilliant first director, Samuel Gridley Howe. Perkins students studied a full academic curriculum that included vigorous physical education and vocational training in music, piano tuning, domestic skills, and other pursuits.

In 1837, Samuel Gridley Howe was ready for new challenges. Deafblind people were considered hopelessly unreachable and uneducable, and Howe was determined to challenge this belief. When he heard about Laura, he was eager to teach her, and traveled to Hanover, New Hampshire to meet her. Her family, busy with running the farm and overwhelmed by Laura's increasing behavior problems, was easily convinced that Laura's best chance lay in being educated at the Boston school.

Laura arrived at Perkins in October of 1837, eleven weeks before her eighth birthday. The Bridgmans accompanied her to her new home, then returned immediately to Hanover. Being torn suddenly from her home and family was very frightening and disorienting, and Howe gave Laura about two weeks to become acquainted with her new surroundings and the people there.

In the meantime, he debated with himself about how to teach Laura. He considered two approaches: building on the rudimentary natural sign language that she had already created; or teaching her English. The former would require a sign for every individual thing, while the latter would require that she learn letters. To Howe's mind, teaching Laura how to sign would have been easier, but he rejected that route because he decided the result would be "very ineffectual." He believed teaching her the abstract and complex correlation between letters, words, objects, and concepts would be more difficult, but that it would enable her to express anything. This is the course he opted for.

Howe began by choosing familiar everyday objects, such as knives, forks, and keys. He pasted name labels made of raised letters upon each object and presented them to Laura. This seemed to pique her interest, and she felt the labels and objects very carefully. She quickly realized that the labels on the objects differed from one another as much as the objects did.

The next step was to give Laura detached labels with the same words embossed on them. She noticed that the words on the labels matched the words on the objects, and demonstrated this by setting the "key" label upon the key, the "spoon" label upon the spoon, and so on. However, in Howe's words, "the only intellectual exercise was that of

imitation and memory. She recollected that the label *book* was placed upon a book, and she repeated the process, first from imitation, next from memory, with no other motive than the love of approbation, and apparently without the intellectual perception of any relation between the things.”

After working in this manner for a while, Howe cut up the labels so each letter was separate. He used them to spell the now-familiar words, then jumbled them up. Laura was able to rearrange the letters so that they would once again spell the words. According to Howe, it was at this point that Laura grasped the concept of language and communication. “Hitherto, the process had been mechanical.... The poor child had sat in mute amazement, and patiently imitated everything her teacher did; but now the truth began to flash upon her, her intellect began to work, she perceived that here was a way by which she could herself make up a sign of anything that was in her own mind, and show it to another mind, and at once her countenance lighted up.... I could almost fix upon the moment when this truth dawned upon her mind, and spread its light to her countenance....”

Howe had spent several weeks working with Laura to bring her to this point, and he spent several more exercising her new understanding and expanding her vocabulary. Then Laura was taught the manual alphabet, which she learned rapidly and easily. This was an important step because she could now communicate independently, unencumbered by the spelling board and metal cutouts of the alphabet. Eventually she learned to fingerspell so rapidly that only those familiar with the manual alphabet could follow the motions of her fingers. Later in her studies, she became a bit rebellious about having to do her writing and grammar exercises with the cut-out letters, because it was so much slower than fingerspelling.

Remarkably, Laura progressed from a seven-year-old child with no concept of abstract language to an enthusiastic finger-speller in the first three months of her tutelage. From the moment Laura understood that objects have names, she eagerly demanded to be taught the name of everything she encountered. During the next year of her education, her teachers focused on satisfying those demands.

### **Laura’s temperament and behavior**

Coming to Perkins School for the Blind widened the world for Laura, socially as well as intellectually. She had always been enclosed within the small circle of her family, who were necessarily preoccupied with farm work and its unrelenting demands. Now Laura was suddenly surrounded by many people. She had a sociable disposition, and she flourished in her new environment. Howe wrote of her, “When Laura is walking through a passage-way, with her hands spread before her, she knows instantly every one she meets, and passes them with a sign of recognition; but if it be a girl of her own age, and especially if one of her favorites, there is instantly a bright smile of recognition, an intertwining of arms, a grasping of hands, and a swift telegraphing upon the tiny fingers, whose rapid evolutions convey the thoughts and feelings from the outposts of one mind to those of the other. There are questions and answers, exchanges of joy or sorrow; there are kissings and partings....”

Laura developed a vocal sound for each of her friends and acquaintances. When she encountered a group of her friends, she embraced each one, at the same time uttering the

unique sound that she had assigned to that individual. These name sounds were consistent, and her friends and acquaintances easily recognized their own and others’.

Human interaction and sociability were extremely important to Laura, but when she was on her own, the liveliness of her mind kept her well occupied. Howe observed, “when left alone, she seems very happy if she has her knitting or sewing, and will busy herself for hours; if she has no occupation, she evidently amuses herself by imaginary dialogues, or recalling past impressions; she counts with her fingers, or spells out names of things which she has recently learned, in the manual alphabet.... In this lonely self-communion she reasons, reflects, and argues....”

Laura had a playful sense of humor and a merry laugh. Howe described how Laura “...sometimes purposely spells a word wrong with the left hand, looks roguish for a moment, and laughs, and then with the right hand strikes the left, as if to correct it.” One of her teachers described her laughingly using her nose to take the place of her thumb in fingerspelling. Even when elderly, she liked to twirl donuts on her fingers.

Laura loved pretty clothes, ribbons and bonnets. When she was introduced to a female guest, she minutely examined every detail of the visitor’s dress and accessories. Even as a child, she was always neatly and appropriately dressed, and never allowed her garments to be soiled or disarrayed. She sewed her own clothing with exquisite workmanship, and displayed a keen sense of taste and fashion.

Throughout her life, Laura was plagued by her temper. She was often nervous, impatient, and irritable. She was particularly intolerant of slow fingerspellers. She had raging tantrums, and occasionally she struck other pupils whom she disliked. Sometimes Laura rudely shoved people, including her teachers, if she didn’t wish to speak to them. When angry or displeased she sometimes pinched and bit.

### **Laura’s education and teachers**

Samuel Gridley Howe created Laura’s educational curriculum and worked intensively with her in the early months of her stay at Perkins. After she mastered language, however, her curriculum became much like that of the other pupils, and included reading, writing, geography, arithmetic, history, grammar, algebra, geometry, physiology, philosophy, and history.

Reading and writing was the foundation of the Perkins students’ education. Although braille was in use in some parts of the world, most blind students in mid-nineteenth-century America learned to read embossed type, raised roman letters that were large enough to distinguish by touch. The version that Laura and her classmates read was Boston Line Type, developed and produced at Perkins School for the Blind.

Like all pupils at Perkins, Laura learned to write with paper and pencil, using a technique called square-hand writing. The writer placed a grooved guide made of strong cardboard underneath the sheet of paper, then used the grooves to guide the hand across the paper. The right hand drew the letter and the left forefinger covered it immediately as the pencil moved on to produce the next letter. A finger’s width separated words. The technique was called square-hand because the letters, produced within the grid formed by the grooves and the left forefinger, had a square and angular look. As soon as Laura learned

to write with pencil and paper, she became an enthusiastic, prolific, and lifelong letter writer.

Most of Laura's day-to-day instruction was provided by a succession of Perkins' teachers, young unmarried women who resided at the school. Laura was an insatiably curious and demanding student, and her relationship with her teacher was always intense and undoubtedly exhausting. During Howe's frequent absences, Laura and her teacher were often together 24 hours a day, sometimes even sleeping in the same bed. For several years, she did not return home to Hanover during school vacations, and spent the entire time living with her teacher's family.

Between the age of seven and twenty, Laura had four principal teachers at Perkins: Lydia Drew Morton, Eliza Rogers, Mary Swift Lamson and Sarah Wight Bond. The years of day-and-night companionship forged strong bonds of affection. All of Laura's former teachers remained her devoted friends throughout their lives, writing frequently, visiting often, and welcoming her to their homes.

### **Adolescence**

In the spring of 1843, when Laura was thirteen, Samuel Gridley Howe married Julia Ward. Conditions were never again quite as happy for Laura as they had been in her younger years. She adored Howe, and had been treated as his foster daughter, living in a private apartment at the school with him and his unmarried sister Jeannette. After his marriage, Howe was in Europe for a year and a half on a combined honeymoon and working trip. Laura missed him deeply and wrote frequently during his absence, beseeching him to return and let her resume living with him and his new family.

During these months, Laura's interest in religious and ethical matters, which had always been lively, became especially keen. Howe had determined that only he should instruct Laura in religion, and insisted that her teachers defer all her theological questions until he returned from his honeymoon. Although Laura barraged her teachers with questions about God, creation, and morality, they obeyed Howe's directives.

Laura's behavior during this time in her life was particularly difficult. She was frustrated by her teachers' silence on the topics most important to her. She was probably feeling abandoned by Howe and frightened about being completely displaced in his affections and household. Considering that Laura was also experiencing the changes of puberty and adolescence, it's hardly surprising that her fits of temper and defiance increased during this period.

When Howe returned to Perkins in the fall of 1844, Laura was nearly fifteen. She was a gangly teenager, no longer the appealing, eager-to-please little girl he had left behind. He was greatly disappointed to discover that Laura had been visited secretly by a group of evangelistic believers. They had given the eager girl answers to her religious questions, and she embraced them wholeheartedly. Howe had hoped that Laura, isolated from orthodox instruction, would naturally come to conceptualize and adore the Creator as an abstract spirit of benevolence and moral law. This was the deity Howe worshipped himself, and he considered Laura a living experiment who would vindicate his personal beliefs. His opportunity to isolate her from the religious beliefs of others in order to

indoctrinate her in his own had been forever lost. After this, Howe seemed to become more distant from Laura.

### **Adult life**

Laura's instruction at Perkins continued through her late teens, and she was very close to her last teacher, Sarah Wight. However, in 1850, when Laura was 20, Wight left Perkins to marry, and Laura's formal instruction ended. After years of being with a constant teacher-companion, Laura was suddenly on her own day and night, with few people to talk to. She threw herself into a work routine, knitting, sewing, and crocheting purses, exquisitely detailed lace, and handkerchiefs. She sold these items, delighting in being able to use the proceeds to give gifts to her friends and contributions to the poor.

Because Laura had no teacher to provide mental stimulation, exercise, and companionship, Howe was concerned that Laura would begin to lose ground intellectually. He decided that it would be best for Laura to return to her family's home in Hanover, New Hampshire, where she would have the support and interaction of family and domestic life.

At first, things went well for Laura at the Bridgman household. However, her busy family had little time or patience to converse with her, answer her incessant questions, and take her for walks and visits. Her health began to deteriorate, and she nearly stopped eating. Alarmed, Howe conceded that Laura should return to Perkins. He and Dorothea Dix, Laura's friend and advocate, raised an endowment to ensure that she would have a permanent home at the school. Although she remained attached to her family, Laura spent the rest of her life in residence at Perkins School for the Blind, and in her voluminous correspondence often called it her "Sunny Home."

Laura's adult life at Perkins was busy. She lived in one of the four cottages with the students, and did her share of the housework. She read a great deal, principally from the Bible. She continued to supplement her income by selling needlework pieces, often accompanied by an autograph. She corresponded with and sometimes visited her friends and family, often returning to Hanover for the entire summer. Laura contributed to Perkins School by serving as one of the teachers of needlework. Many students dreaded her instruction, however, because she was strict and uncompromising. She refused to accept shoddy work, and insisted that it be ripped out and restitched.

In 1860, when Laura was 30, her beloved younger sister Mary died. This was a cruel blow for Laura, and for several months she grieved bitterly. Eventually, however, this loss led Laura to a deep religious transformation and a powerfully sustaining faith. When she returned to Hanover that summer, Laura spent many hours conversing upon religion with her mother. She determinedly taught the manual alphabet to the local pastor's wife so that the woman could communicate with Laura and help deepen her understanding. She joined the local Baptist church that her parents belonged to, and was baptized in a nearby brook in 1863. Laura took great comfort from her faith for the rest of her life.

Laura's last years were shadowed by sorrow and loss. Dr. Howe died in January 1876, and Laura was overwhelmed by grief. Her health was so seriously affected that her friends thought she couldn't survive the summer. A further loss that year was the death of

her teacher and friend, Eliza Rogers. In October 1878, her most beloved Perkins teacher, Sarah Wight Bond, died.

As Laura grew older, her sorrows and her deep faith had a softening effect on her disposition. Her lifelong impatience and irritability were replaced with kindness and gentleness. Laura's wit and love of a good joke remained with her always. She was industrious and sociable to the end of her life. When she was 59, Laura Bridgman became ill with erysipelas, a streptococcus infection. After several weeks, she died peacefully at Perkins on May 24, 1889.

### **Laura Bridgman's legacy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Laura was the very first deafblind person ever to be taught language. Although many deafblind people since then have equaled her accomplishments, Laura's breakthrough and progress were quite sensational at the time. Samuel Gridley Howe had publicized his success in teaching her, and, although Laura was probably not fully aware of it, she was a worldwide celebrity during her childhood.

In January of 1842, the wildly popular British writer Charles Dickens visited the United States. When he arrived in Boston, he was eager to visit Perkins and meet the famous Laura Bridgman. Dickens wrote of his encounter with Laura in his book, *American Notes*, quoting extensively from Howe's description of the educational methods he used to reach her. Dickens described the twelve-year-old girl in sentimental terms, dwelling upon her innocence and physical attractiveness, and likening her to a prisoner who was liberated from a vault of isolation by her teacher. This served only to increase Laura's celebrity and popularity.

Dickens's visit and published description of Laura's education is an event that has affected history. In 1886, Helen Keller's parents read Dickens's account and for the first time realized there was hope for their deafblind daughter. The Kellers wrote to Michael Anagnos, director of Perkins School for the Blind, asking him to recommend a tutor for Helen. Anagnos chose Anne Sullivan, a recent graduate of Perkins and a close friend of the much older Laura Bridgman. Anne's intelligence, strength of character, and fluency as a fingerspeller made her an excellent choice for the girl's teacher. She educated Helen using the methods developed by Howe in his work with Laura Bridgman. The account of Helen's moment of understanding as Anne Sullivan spelled "water" into her hand is world-famous. It has been universally embraced as an illustration of the power of hope and human connection.

Throughout her life, Helen Keller was a groundbreaking advocate for the rights of people with disabilities and one of the foremost humanitarians of the twentieth century. Many of the advances in education, accessibility, and civil rights that are well established today are the direct result of her tireless activism. Pioneer though she was, Helen Keller's first steps, which ultimately led her to worldwide influence and admiration, followed firmly behind those of the little New Hampshire farm girl, Laura Bridgman.

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