

This Day in History... June 27, 1880

Birth of Helen Keller

Helen Adams Keller was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama.

Keller was born with the ability to see and hear but lost both senses when she was 19 months old to an unknown illness. Modern doctors believe it was likely meningitis, or possibly influenza or scarlet fever. Over time she developed her own system of about 60 home signs. She could also identify people walking to a room by the vibrations in their footsteps.

When Keller was six, her mother read about the successful teaching of a deaf and blind woman in Charles Dickens's *American Notes*. Her mother then consulted a doctor who led her to Alexander Graham Bell, who was working with deaf children at the time. Bell referred them to the Perkins Institute for the Blind, where they were introduced to 20-year-old Anne Sullivan. Sullivan was also visually impaired and agreed to become Keller's teacher, marking the start of a 49-year-long friendship.



Stamp issued on Keller's 100th birthday.



American Sign Language issue

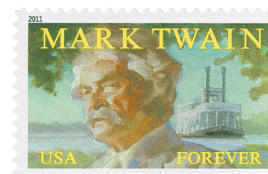
Sullivan officially began teaching Keller in March 1887. She taught her to communicate by spelling out words in her hand. Keller initially had trouble with the lessons, but Sullivan had a major breakthrough when she ran water on one of Keller's hands while making the sign for it on the other. Keller soon wanted to know the names of everything else in her world.

With Sullivan's teaching, Keller was able to attend a school for the deaf before being admitted to Radcliffe College. When she was 24, Keller graduated, making her the first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. She learned to speak so she could deliver lectures, and found she could understand people by "reading" their lips with her hands.

Keller became famous around the world as an advocate for people with disabilities. She visited 25 different countries delivering motivational speeches. She was also a suffragette, pacifist, and socialist. In 1915, she founded the Helen Keller International, an organization that researches vision, health, and nutrition. She also helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Additionally, Keller was an accomplished writer, publishing 12 books and several articles. Her birthday was proclaimed Helen Keller Day in 1960.

After suffering a series of strokes in 1961, Keller spent her final years at home but also worked to raise funds for the American Foundation for the Blind. In 1964, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Keller died on June 1, 1968.

Mark Twain had admired both Keller and Sullivan. While he was unable to personally provide financial help, he convinced his friend, industrialist Henry Huttleston Rogers to help pay for Keller's tuition to Radcliffe College. He's credited with first referring to Anne Sullivan as the "miracle worker." Decades later, William Gibson wrote a play based on Helen Keller's autobiography titled *The Miracle Worker*. The play was later adapted to film, three times.



Mark Twain once said "Helen is a miracle, and Miss Sullivan is the miracle worker."

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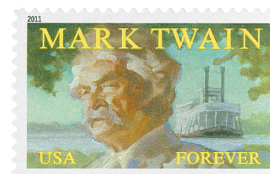
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