Instruction: Using the handout below, please answer the questions to the best of your ability.

The “Father” of the Deaf

1. Who is this renowned “Father of the Deaf”?

2. Describe in your own words the “legend” of de l’Epee’s meeting the two Deaf girls.

3. In what year was the first Deaf school (in the world) established?

4. What was the school in Paris, France called?

5. Who was the first Deaf teacher of the Deaf?


7. Who took over the Institution when de l’Epee died?

8. How are de l’Epee and Gallaudet similar?

9. How has religion played a role in the beginnings of Deaf education?
The “Father” of the Deaf  
Charles Michel de l’Epee

The Deaf story of the abbe Charles Michel de l’Epee (a French priest), and how he founded Deaf education, has been told and retold countless times in America as well as in many other lands. For example, the “legend” as told at the Deaf club in Marseilles, France, appears here:

The abbe de l’Epee had been walking for a long time through a dark night. He wanted to stop and rest overnight, but he could not find a place to stay, until at a distance he saw a house with a light. He stopped at the house and knocked at the door, but no one answered. He saw that the door was open, so he entered the house and found two young women seated by the fire sewing. He spoke to them, but they still did not respond. He walked closer and spoke to them again, but they failed again to respond. The abbe was perplexed, but seated himself beside them. They looked up at him and did not speak. At that point, their mother entered the room. Did the abbe not know that her daughters couldn’t hear? He did not, but now he understood why they had not responded. As he contemplated the young women, the abbe realized his vocation.

The Deaf honor the memory of the abbe Charles Michel de l’Epee, by referring to him at the “Father of the Deaf.” It was the abbe that first had the inclination to establish some system of education and instruction for the Deaf. In 1755, he established the first school for the deaf in the world in Paris, France. The two young Deaf women were among the first to be taught in his school. The school created educated leaders among the Deaf, instilling pride in themselves and their language. Jean Massieu was the first Deaf teacher of the Deaf, and was tutored in the Institution for the Deaf-Mutes in Paris, France. Laurent Clerc, a pupil of Jean Massieu, eventually would find himself in America, helping to establish the first Deaf school in the Americas.

In 1776, the abbe de l’Epee published *Instruction of Deaf and Dumb by Means of Methodical Signs*. Upon his death, the abbe l’Epee was succeeded by the abbe Sicard as director of the Institution for the Deaf-Mutes in Paris. Sicard continued de l’Epee’s work and produced more
books of his own, one of which found its way into the hands of Dr. Mason Cogswell of Hartford, Connecticut. Dr. Mason Cogswell had a Deaf daughter, Alice Cogswell.

One day, in Hartford, Alice Cogswell was observed by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, an American clergyman in a Protestant religion. Gallaudet noticed how Alice didn’t interact and play like the other hearing children did and wondered if Alice could ever “learn.”

The story (indeed, the “legend”) of how Thomas Gallaudet met the little Deaf girl, Alice Cogswell, and was led to found the first school for the Deaf in the United States, is important to American Deaf history. It is striking to notice the parallels. Both de l’Epee and Gallaudet are humble hearing people, both are seeking a calling in life, and both are quite ignorant of the Deaf-World and its unfair exclusion from education. Both have an epiphany, thanks to young Deaf women. They must acquire the signed language, symbolically enter the Deaf-World that far, and then they are in a position to help Deaf people get access to education and, most important, to one another.

The abbe Charles Michel de l’Epee felt it was his mission to ensure that the Deaf can be “saved” in the heavens. But how to “save” the Deaf if they are uneducated in the language of the Bible? Religion has played an interesting role in the beginnings of Deaf education.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was a clergyman, as were so many other founders of Deaf education, beginning with the abbe de l’Epee. Like de l’Epee, Gallaudet gave the “saving of souls” as a central purpose of Deaf education. Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc raised money for the first charitable institution [for the Deaf] in the United States, the Connecticut Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, by appealing to the religious beliefs of New England Protestants. The school that they established [1817], like virtually all others to come after it, included rigorous religious instruction.

The abbe Charles Michel de l’Epee is honored in his rightful place in history as the first to successfully pursue the idea that the Deaf could learn. Later, the Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was instrumental in bringing this idea to America and helping to found the first Deaf school in America in 1817.

[Based, in part, on A Journey into the Deaf-World, 52-54, 154, 175]