**Helen Adams Keller 1880 – 1968**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller>





**Helen Adams Keller** ([June 27](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_27), [1880](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1880) – [June 1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_1), [1968](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968)) was an [American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States) [author](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Author), [activist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activist) and lecturer. She was the first [deafblind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deafblindness) person to graduate from college.

The story of how Keller's teacher, [Anne Sullivan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Sullivan), broke through the isolation imposed by a near complete lack of language, allowing the girl to blossom as she learned to communicate, has become known worldwide through the dramatic depictions of the play [*The Miracle Worker*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Miracle_Worker).

What is less well known is how Keller's life developed after she completed her education. A prolific author, she was well traveled, and was outspoken in her [opposition to war](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiwar). She campaigned for [women's suffrage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage), [workers' rights](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Workers%27_rights) and [socialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialism), as well as many other progressive causes.

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**Early childhood and illness**

Helen Keller was born at an estate called [Ivy Green](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivy_Green)[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-0) in [Tuscumbia, Alabama](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuscumbia%2C_Alabama), on [June 27](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_27), [1880](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1880), to Captain Arthur H. Keller, a former officer of the [Confederate Army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confederate_Army), and Kate Adams Keller, a cousin of [Robert E. Lee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_E._Lee) and daughter of Charles W. Adams, a former Confederate general.[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-1) The Keller family originates from [Germany](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Germany), and at least one source claims her father was of Swiss descent.[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-2) She was not born blind and deaf; it was not until nineteen months of age that she came down with an illness described by doctors as "an acute congestion of the stomach and the brain", which could have possibly been [scarlet fever](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarlet_fever) or [meningitis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meningitis). The illness did not last for a particularly long time, but it left her deaf and blind. At that time her only communication partner was Martha Washington, the six-year-old daughter of the family cook, who was able to create a [sign language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sign_language) with her; by age seven, she had over 60 [home signs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Home_sign) to communicate with her family.

In his [doctoral](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctorate) dissertation, "Deaf-blind Children (psychological development in a process of education)" (1971, Moscow Defectology Institute), [Soviet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet) blind-deaf psychologist Meshcheryakov asserted that Washington's friendship and teaching was crucial for Keller's later developments.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-3)



Helen Keller and her teacher [Anne Sullivan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Sullivan).



Helen Keller, age 8, with her tutor Anne Sullivan while vacationing on Cape Cod, July 1888 (photo discovered in 2008)

In 1886, her mother, inspired by an account in [Charles Dickens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens)' [*American Notes*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Notes) of the successful education of another deafblind child, [Laura Bridgman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laura_Bridgman), dispatched young Helen, accompanied by her father, to seek out Dr. J. Julian Chisolm, an eye, ear, nose and throat specialist in [Baltimore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltimore%2C_Maryland), for advice.[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-4) He, subsequently, put them in touch with [Alexander Graham Bell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Graham_Bell), who was working with deaf children at the time. Bell advised the couple to contact the [Perkins Institute for the Blind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perkins_Institute_for_the_Blind), the school where Bridgman had been educated, which was then located in [South Boston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Boston%2C_Boston%2C_Massachusetts). The school delegated teacher and former student [Anne Sullivan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Sullivan), herself visually impaired and then only 20 years old, to become Keller's instructor.  
It was the beginning of a 49-year-long relationship, eventually evolving into [governess](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governess) and [companion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady%27s_companion).

Sullivan got permission from Keller's father to isolate the girl from the rest of the family in a little house in their garden. Her first task was to instill discipline in the spoiled girl. Keller's big breakthrough in communication came one day when she realized that the motions her teacher was making on her palm, while running cool water over her hand, symbolized the idea of "water"; she then nearly exhausted Sullivan demanding the names of all the other familiar objects in her world (including her prized doll). In 1890, ten-year-old Helen Keller was introduced to the story of [Ragnhild Kåta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ragnhild_K%C3%A5ta), a deafblind [Norwegian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norway) girl who had learned to speak. Kåta's success inspired Keller to want to learn to speak as well. Sullivan taught her charge to speak using the [Tadoma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tadoma) method of touching the lips and throat of others as they speak, combined with [fingerspelling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fingerspelling) letters on the palm of the child's hand. Later Keller learned [Braille](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Braille), and used it to read not only [English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_language) but also [French](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_language), [German](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_language), [Greek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_language), and [Latin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin).

**Formal education**

In 1888, Keller attended the [Royal Institute For the Blind](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Royal_Institute_For_the_Blind&action=edit&redlink=1). In 1894, Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan moved to [New York City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City) to attend the [Wright-Humason School for the Deaf](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wright-Humason_School_for_the_Deaf) and [Horace Mann School for the Deaf](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Mann_School_for_the_Deaf). In 1896, they returned to Massachusetts and Helen entered [The Cambridge School for Young Ladies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cambridge_School_of_Weston) before gaining admittance, in 1900, to [Radcliffe College](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radcliffe_College). Her admirer [Mark Twain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain) had introduced her to [Standard Oil](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standard_Oil) magnate [Henry Huttleton Rogers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_H._Rogers), who, with his wife, paid for her education. In 1904, at the age of 24, Keller graduated from Radcliffe [*magna cum laude*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magna_cum_laude), becoming the first *deafblind* person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

**Companions**

Anne Sullivan stayed as a companion to Helen Keller long after she taught her. Anne married John Macy in 1905, and her health started failing around 1914. Polly Thompson was hired to keep house. She was a young woman from Scotland who didn't have experience with deaf or blind people. She progressed to working as a secretary as well, and eventually became a constant companion to Helen.[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-6)

After Anne died in 1936, Helen and Polly moved to Connecticut. They travelled worldwide raising funding for the blind. Polly had a stroke in 1957 from which she never fully recovered, and died in 1960.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

Winnie Corbally was Helen's companion for the rest of her life.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

**Political activities**

Keller went on to become a world-famous speaker and author. She is remembered as an advocate for people with disabilities amid numerous other causes. She was a [suffragist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suffrage), a [pacifist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacifism), a [Wilson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woodrow_Wilson) opposer, a radical socialist, and a [birth control](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birth_control) supporter. In 1915, she founded [Helen Keller International](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller_International), a [non-profit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-profit) organization for preventing blindness. In 1920, she helped to found the [American Civil Liberties Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Civil_Liberties_Union) (ACLU). Keller and Sullivan traveled to over 39 countries, making several trips to [Japan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan) and becoming a favorite of the [Japanese people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_people). Keller met every [US President](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/US_President) from [Grover Cleveland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grover_Cleveland) to [Lyndon B. Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyndon_B._Johnson) and was friends with many famous figures, including [Alexander Graham Bell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Graham_Bell), [Charlie Chaplin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Chaplin) and [Mark Twain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain).

Keller was a member of the [Socialist Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Party_of_America) and actively campaigned and wrote in support of the [working classes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Working_class) from 1909 to 1921. She supported Socialist Party candidate [Eugene V. Debs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_V._Debs) in each of his campaigns for the presidency.

Newspaper columnists who had praised her courage and intelligence before she expressed her socialist views now called attention to her disabilities. The editor of the [*Brooklyn Eagle*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brooklyn_Eagle) wrote that her "mistakes sprung out of the manifest limitations of her development." Keller responded to that editor, referring to having met him before he knew of her political views:

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| **“** | At that time the compliments he paid me were so generous that I blush to remember them. But now that I have come out for socialism he reminds me and the public that I am blind and deaf and especially liable to error. I must have shrunk in intelligence during the years since I met him...Oh, ridiculous Brooklyn *Eagle*! Socially blind and deaf, it defends an intolerable system, a system that is the cause of much of the physical blindness and deafness which we are trying to prevent.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-7) | **”** |

Keller joined the [Industrial Workers of the World](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Workers_of_the_World) (known as the IWW or the Wobblies) in 1912,[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-loewen-8) saying that parliamentary socialism was "sinking in the political bog." She wrote for the IWW between 1916 and 1918. In *Why I Became an IWW*,[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-9) Keller explained that her motivation for activism came in part from her concern about blindness and other disabilities:

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| **“** | I was appointed on a commission to investigate the conditions of the blind. For the first time I, who had thought blindness a misfortune beyond human control, found that too much of it was traceable to wrong industrial conditions, often caused by the selfishness and greed of employers. And the social evil contributed its share. I found that poverty drove women to a life of shame that ended in blindness. | **”** |

The last sentence refers to [prostitution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prostitution) and [syphilis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syphilis), the latter a leading cause of blindness.

Keller and her friend [Mark Twain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain) were both radicals whose political views have been forgotten or glossed over in their popular perception.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-loewen-8)

**Writings**

One of Keller's earliest pieces of writing, at the age of eleven, was "[The Frost King](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Frost_King)" (1891). There were allegations that this story had been [plagiarized](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagiarized) from *The Frost Fairies* by Margaret Canby. An investigation into the matter revealed that Keller may have suffered from [cryptomnesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cryptomnesia), having once had Canby's story read to her, only to forget about it, although the memory had remained hidden in her subconscious.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

At the age of 23, Keller published her autobiography, [The Story of My Life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Story_of_My_Life_%28biography%29) (1903), with help from Sullivan and Sullivan's husband, John Macy. It includes letters that Keller wrote and the story of her life up to age 21, and was written during her time in college.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

Helen wrote "The World I Live In" in 1908 giving readers an insight into how she felt about the world.[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-10) "Out of the Dark", a series of essays on Socialism, was published in 1913.

Her spiritual autobiography, *My Religion*, was published in 1927 and re-issued as [*Light in my Darkness*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Light_in_my_Darkness). It advocates the teachings of [Emanuel Swedenborg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emanuel_Swedenborg), the controversial [mystic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism) who claimed to have witnessed the [Last Judgment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_Judgment) and [second coming](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_coming) of [Jesus Christ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_Christ), and the movement named after him, [Swedenborgianism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swedenborgianism).

In total Keller wrote 12 books and numerous articles.

**Akita dog**

When Keller visited [Akita Prefecture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akita_Prefecture) in [Japan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan) in July 1937, she inquired about [Hachikō](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hachik%C5%8D), the famed [Akita](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akita_Inu) dog that had died in 1935. She told a Japanese person that she would like to have an Akita dog; one was given to her within a month, with the name of [Kamikaze](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamikaze_%28typhoon%29)-go. When he died of [canine distemper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canine_distemper), his older brother, Kenzan-go, was presented to her as an official gift from the Japanese government in July 1939. Keller is credited with having introduced the Akita to the United States through these two dogs. By 1938 a [breed standard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breed_standard) had been established and [dog shows](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog_show) had been held, but such activities stopped after [World War II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II) began. Keller wrote in the *Akita Journal*:

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| **“** | If ever there was an angel in fur, it was Kamikaze. I know I shall never feel quite the same tenderness for any other pet. The Akita dog has all the qualities that appeal to me — he is gentle, companionable and trusty. | **”** |

[[12]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-11)[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-12)

**Later life**

Keller suffered a series of strokes in 1961 and spent the last years of her life at her home.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

On [September 14](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_14), [1964](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1964), [President](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President) [Lyndon B. Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyndon_B._Johnson) awarded Helen Keller the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presidential_Medal_of_Freedom), one of the United States' highest two civilian honors.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-13) In 1965 she was elected to the Women's Hall of Fame at the New York World's Fair.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

Keller devoted much of her later life to raise funds for the [American Foundation for the Blind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Foundation_for_the_Blind). She died in her sleep on [June 1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_1), [1968](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968), passing away 26 days before her 88th birthday, at her home in Arcan Ridge near [Westport, Connecticut](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westport%2C_Connecticut). A service was held in her honor at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC and her ashes were placed there next to her constant companions, Anne Sullivan and Polly Thompson.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-rnib-5)

**Posthumous honors**

Keller's life has been interpreted many times. She appeared in a [silent film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_film), [*Deliverance*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deliverance_%281919_movie%29) (1919), which told her story in a melodramatic, allegorical style.[[17]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-16)

[*The Miracle Worker*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Miracle_Worker) is a [cycle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature_cycle) of dramatic works ultimately derived from her autobiography, [*The Story of My Life*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Story_of_My_Life_%28biography%29). The various dramas each describe the relationship between Keller and Sullivan, depicting how the teacher led her from a state of almost [feral wildness](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feral_children) into education, activism, and intellectual celebrity. The common title of the cycle echoes [Mark Twain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain)'s description of Sullivan as a "miracle worker".

Its first realization was the 1957 [*Playhouse 90*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Playhouse_90) [teleplay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Screenplay) of that title by [William Gibson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Gibson_%28playwright%29). He adapted it for a [Broadway production in 1959](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Miracle_Worker_%28play%29) and an Oscar-winning [feature film in 1962](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Miracle_Worker_%281962_film%29). It was remade for television in 1979 and 2000.

She was also the subject of the documentaries [*Helen Keller in Her Story*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller_in_Her_Story), narrated by [Katharine Cornell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katharine_Cornell), and *The Story of Helen Keller*, part of the Famous Americans series produced by [Hearst Entertainment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hearst_Corporation).

In 1984, Helen Keller's life story was made into a [TV movie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TV_movie) called [*The Miracle Continues*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Miracle_Continues).[[18]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-17) This semi-sequel to *The Miracle Worker* recounts her college years and her early adult life. None of the early movies hint at the [social activism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_activism) that would become the hallmark of Keller's later life, although [The Walt Disney Company](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Walt_Disney_Company) version produced in 2000 states in the credits that she became an activist for [social equality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_equality).

The [Hindi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindi) [Bollywood](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bollywood) movie [*Black*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_%282005%29) (2005) was largely based on Keller's story, from her childhood to her graduation. A [documentary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_film) called *Shining Soul: Helen Keller's Spiritual Life and Legacy* was produced by the [Swedenborg Foundation](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Swedenborg_Foundation&action=edit&redlink=1) in the same year. The film focuses on the role played by [Emanuel Swedenborg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emanuel_Swedenborg)'s spiritual theology in her life and how it inspired Keller's triumph over her triple disabilities of blindness, deafness and a severe speech impediment.

On [March 6](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_6), [2008](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008), the [New England Historic Genealogical Society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_England_Historic_Genealogical_Society) announced that a staff member had discovered a rare 1888 photograph showing Helen and Anne, which, although previously published, had escaped widespread attention.[[19]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-independent_picture-18) Depicting Helen holding one of her many dolls, it is believed to be the earliest surviving photograph of Anne.[[20]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-post_chronicle2-19)[[21]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_note-20)

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14. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-13) [Presidential Medal of Freedom, Helen Keller](http://www.medaloffreedom.com/HelenKeller.htm)
15. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-14) [A likeness of Helen Keller is featured on Alabama's quarter](http://www.usmint.gov/mint_programs/50sq_program/states/index.cfm?flash=yes&state=AL)
16. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-15) [Helen Keller Hospital website](http://www.helenkeller.com)
17. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-16) [Deliverance (1919)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0010061/). Retrieved on [June 15](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_15), [2006](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006).
18. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-17) [Helen Keller: The Miracle Continues (1984) (TV)](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087401/). Retrieved on [June 15](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/June_15), [2006](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006).
19. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-independent_picture_18-0) The Independent. [Picture of Helen Keller as a child revealed after 120 years](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/picture-of-helen-keller-as-a-child-revealed-after-120-years-792781.html).
20. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-post_chronicle2_19-0) Post Chronicle ([2008](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008)-[03-06](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_6)). [Helen Keller Photo: Rare Photo With Doll Uncovered 120 Years Later](http://www.postchronicle.com/news/original/article_212134448.shtml). Retrieved on [2008](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008)-[03-06](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_6).
21. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller#cite_ref-20) [Newly Discovered Photograph Features Never Before Seen Image Of Young Helen Keller](http://www.newenglandancestors.org/hkeller_release_feb08v2.pdf), New England Genealogical Society, retrieved [March 6](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_6), [2008](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008)

**External links**

### Works by Keller

* [Works by Helen Keller](http://www.gutenberg.org/author/Helen+Keller) at [Project Gutenberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Gutenberg)
* [*The Story of My Life by Helen Keller*](http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2397), available at [Project Gutenberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Gutenberg).
* [*The Story of My Life* with introduction to the text](http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/keller/life/life.html)
* Keller, Helen [1908] (2004). The World I Live In, NYRB Classics 2004, New York: NYRB Classics. [ISBN 978-1590170670](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:BookSources/9781590170670).
* Keller, Helen [1927] (2000). Light in my Darkness, 2nd Edition, Chrysalis Books. [ISBN 978-0877853985](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:BookSources/9780877853985).

### Politics

* [Marxists Internet Archive](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxists_Internet_Archive): [Helen Keller Reference Archive](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/index.htm).
* ["How I Became A Socialist"](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/12_11_03.htm), by Helen Keller, 1912-11-03
* ["Rethinking the Problematic Icon"](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/Crow/Rethinking-icon.pdf) Contrasts the iconic image of Keller as disabled saint with her real life in social and political activism.

### IMDB

* [*Deliverance (1919)*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0010061/) at the [Internet Movie Database](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Movie_Database)
* [*"Playhouse 90" The Miracle Worker (1957)*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0675644/) at the [Internet Movie Database](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Movie_Database)
* [*The Miracle Worker (1962)*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056241/) at the [Internet Movie Database](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Movie_Database)
* [*The Miracle Worker (1979) TV*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079562/) at the [Internet Movie Database](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Movie_Database)
* [*Helen Keller: The Miracle Continues (1984) (TV)*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087401/) at the [Internet Movie Database](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Movie_Database)
* [*The Miracle Worker (2000) TV*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0246786/) at the [Internet Movie Database](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Movie_Database)
* [*Helen Keller*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0956149/) at the [Internet Movie Database](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Movie_Database) - Animated biography of Helen Keller on DVD

### Other

* [American Foundation for the Blind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Foundation_for_the_Blind)'s [Helen Keller collection](http://www.afb.org/helenkeller.asp)
* [Helen Keller Kids Museum Online](http://www.afb.org/braillebug/hkmuseum.asp)
* [The Helen Keller Services for the blind](http://www.helenkeller.org/)
* [1925 interview](http://ww3.startribune.com/blogs/oldnews/archives/203) in the Minneapolis Daily Star
* [obituary](http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0627.html#top) in the [*New York Times*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Times)

## The life of Helen Keller

**Summary:** About the life of Helen Keller, the deafblind woman who became a role model for millions of people

* [Helen falls ill](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P8_883)
* [Anne Sullivan](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P23_2979)
* [Helen meets Anne](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P31_3846)
* [The Frost King](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P57_7689)
* [Helen enters Radcliffe College](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P69_9224)
* [Helen tours the World](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P81_10782)
* [The Miracle Worker](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P113_15146)
* [Helen retires from public life](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P119_15628)
* [Helen’s legacy](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P127_16427)
* [Further reading](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P143_17997)
* [Photos of Helen Keller](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P147_18117)
* [RNIB – helping you live with sight loss](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp#P151_18273)

<http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_keller.hcsp>

Helen Adams Keller was born on 27 June 1880 in Tuscumbia, a small rural town in Northwest Alabama, USA. The daughter of Captain Arthur Henley Keller and Kate Adams Keller she was born with full sight and hearing.

Kate Keller was a tall, statuesque blond with blue eyes. She was some twenty years younger than her husband Captain Keller, a loyal southerner who had proudly served in the Confederate Army during the American Civil War.

The house they lived in was a simple, white, clapboard house built in 1820 by Helen’s grandparents. At the time of Helen’s birth the family were far from wealthy with Captain Keller earning a living as both a cotton plantation owner and the editor of a weekly local newspaper, the “North Alabamian”. Helen’s mother, as well as working on the plantation, would save money by making her own butter, lard, bacon and ham.

### Helen falls ill

But Helen’s life was to change dramatically. In February 1882, when Helen was nineteen months old, she fell ill. To this day the nature of her ailment remains a mystery. The doctors of the time called it “brain fever”, whilst modern day doctors think it may have been scarlet fever or meningitis.

Whatever the illness, Helen was, for many days, expected to die. When, eventually, the fever subsided, Helen’s family rejoiced believing their daughter to be well again.

However, Helen’s mother soon noticed how her daughter was failing to respond when the dinner bell was rang or when she passed her hand in front of her daughter’s eyes.

It thus became apparent that Helen’s illness had left her both blind and deaf.

The following few years proved very hard for Helen and her family. Helen became a very difficult child, smashing dishes and lamps and terrorising the whole household with her screaming and temper tantrums. Relatives regarded her as a monster and thought she should be put into an institution.

By the time Helen was six her family had become desperate. Looking after Helen was proving too much for them. Kate Keller had read in Charles Dickens’ book “American Notes” of the fantastic work that had been done with another deaf and blind child, Laura Bridgman, and travelled to a specialist doctor in Baltimore for advice. They were given confirmation that Helen would never see or hear again but were told not to give up hope, the doctor believed Helen could be taught and he advised them to visit a local expert on the problems of deaf children. This expert was Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, Bell was now concentrating on what he considered his true vocation, the teaching of deaf children.

Alexander Graham Bell suggested that the Kellers write to Michael Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind, and request that he try and find a teacher for Helen. Michael Anagnos considered Helen’s case and immediately recommended a former pupil of the institution, that woman was Anne Sullivan.

### Anne Sullivan

Anne Sullivan had lost the majority of her sight at the age of five. By the age of ten, her mother had died and her father deserted her. She and her brother Jimmie were sent to the poorhouse in February 1876.

Anne’s brother died in the poorhouse. It was October 1880 before Anne finally left and went to commence her education at the Perkins Institution. One summer during her time at the institute, Anne had two operations on her eyes, which led to her regaining enough sight to be able to read normal print for short periods of time.

Anne graduated from Perkins in 1886 and began to search for work. Finding work was terribly difficult for Anne, due to her poor eyesight, and when she received the offer from Michael Anagnos to work as the teacher of Helen Keller, a deaf-blind mute, although she had no experience in this area, she accepted willingly.

### Helen meets Anne

On 3 March 1887 Anne arrived at the house in Tuscumbia and for the first time met Helen Keller. Anne immediately started teaching Helen to finger spell. Spelling out the word “Doll” to signify a present she had brought with her for Helen. The next word she taught Helen was “Cake”. Although Helen could repeat these finger movements she could not quite understand what they meant. And while Anne was struggling trying to help her understand, she was also struggling to try and control Helen’s continuing bad behaviour.

Anne and Helen moved into a small cottage on the land of the main house to try and get Helen to improve her behaviour. Of particular concern were Helen’s table manners. She had taken to eating with her hands and from the plates of everyone at the table.

Anne’s attempts to improve Helen’s table manners and make her brush her own hair and button her shoes led to more and more temper tantrums. Anne punished these tantrums by refusing to “talk” with Helen by spelling words on her hands.

Over the coming weeks, however, Helen’s behaviour did begin to improve as a bond grew between the two. Then, after a month of Anne’s teaching, what the people of the time called a “miracle” occurred.

Helen had until now not yet fully understood the meaning of words. When Anne led her to the water pump on 5 April 1887, all that was about to change.

As Anne pumped the water over Helen’s hand , Anne spelled out the word water in the girl’s free hand. Something about this explained the meaning of words within Helen, and Anne could immediately see in her face that she finally understood.

Helen later recounted the incident:

“We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honey-suckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten, a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me.”

Helen immediately asked Anne for the name of the pump to be spelt on her hand and then the name of the trellis. All the way back to the house Helen learned the name of everything she touched and also asked for Anne’s name. Anne spelled the name “Teacher” on Helen’s hand. Within the next few hours Helen learnt the spelling of thirty new words.

Helen’s progress from then on was astonishing. Her ability to learn was far in advance of anything that anybody had seen before in someone without sight or hearing. It wasn’t long before Anne was teaching Helen to read, firstly with raised letters and later with braille, and to write with both ordinary and braille typewriters.

Michael Anagnos was keen to promote Helen, one of the numerous articles on her that he wrote said of Helen that “she is a phenomenon”. These articles led to a wave of publicity about Helen with pictures of her reading Shakespeare or stroking her dog appearing in national newspapers.

Helen had become famous, and as well as again visiting Alexander Graham Bell, she visited President Cleveland at the White House. By 1890 she was living at the Perkins Institute and being taught by Anne. In March of that year Helen met Mary Swift Lamson who over the coming year was to try and teach Helen to speak. This was something that Helen desperately wanted and although she learned to understand what somebody else was saying by touching their lips and throat, her efforts to speak herself proved at this stage to be unsuccessful. This was later attributed to the fact that Helen’s vocal chords were not properly trained prior to her being taught to speak.

### The Frost King

On 4 November 1891 Helen sent Michael Anagnos a birthday gift of a short story she had written called “The Frost King”. Anagnos was so delighted with the story that he had soon published it in a magazine hailing its importance in literary history.

However, it was soon discovered that Helen’s story was the same as one called “The Frost Fairies” by Margaret Canby. This was ultimately to be the end of Helen and Anne’s friendship with Michael Anagnos. He felt he had been made to appear foolish by what he considered to be Helen’s deception.

There had to be an investigation and it was discovered that Helen had previously been read the story some years before and had obviously remembered it. Helen always claimed not to recall the original story and it should always be remembered that Helen was still only 11 years old, however, this incident created a rift that would never heal between Helen, Anne and Anagnos. It also created great doubt in Helen’s own mind as to whether any of her thoughts were truly her own.

In 1894 Helen and Anne met John D Wright and Dr Thomas Humason who were planning to set up a school to teach speech to the deaf in New York City. Helen and Anne were very excited by this and the assurances of the two men that Helen’s speech could be improved excited them further. Helen thus agreed to attend the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf.

Unfortunately though, Helen’s speech never really improved beyond the sounds that only Anne and others very close to her could understand.

### Helen enters Radcliffe College

Helen moved on to the Cambridge School for Young Ladies in 1896 and in the Autumn of 1900 entered Radcliffe College, becoming the first deafblind person to have ever enrolled at an institution of higher learning.

Life at Radcliffe was very difficult for Helen and Anne, and the huge amount of work involved led to deterioration in Anne’s eyesight. During their time at the College Helen began to write about her life. She would write the story both in braille and on a normal typewriter. It was at this time that Helen and Anne met with John Albert Macy who was to help edit Helen’s first book “The Story of My Life” which was published in 1903 and although it sold poorly at first it has since become a classic.

On 28 June 1904 Helen graduated from Radcliffe College, becoming the first deafblind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.

John Macy became good friends with Helen and Anne, and in May 1905 John and Anne were married. Anne’s name now changed to Anne Sullivan Macy. The three lived together in Wrentham, Massachusetts, and during this time Helen wrote “The World I Live In”, revealing for the first time her thoughts on her world. It was also during this time that John Macy introduced her to a new and revolutionary way of viewing the world. And in 1909 Helen became a member of the Socialist Party of Massachusetts.

In 1913 “Out of the Dark” was published. This was a series of essays on socialism and its impact on Helen’s public image was immense. Everyone now knew Helen’s political views.

### Helen tours the World

Helen and Anne filled the following years with lecture tours, speaking of her experiences and beliefs to enthralled crowds. Her talks were interpreted sentence by sentence by Anne Sullivan, and were followed by question and answer sessions.

Although Helen and Anne made a good living from their lectures, by 1918 the demand for Helen’s lectures had diminished and they were touring with a more light-hearted vaudeville show, which demonstrated Helen’s first understanding of the word “water”. These shows were hugely successful from the very first performance, a review of which read as follows:

“Helen Keller has conquered again, and the Monday afternoon audience at the Palace, one of the most critical and cynical in the World, was hers.”

At this time they were also offered the chance to make a film in Hollywood and they jumped at the opportunity. “Deliverance”, the story of Helen’s life, was made. Helen was, however, unhappy with the glamorous nature of the film and it unfortunately did not prove to be the financial success that they had hoped for.

The vaudeville appearances continued with Helen answering a wide range of questions on her life and her politics and Anne translating Helen’s answers for the enthralled audience. They were earning up to two thousand dollars a week, which was a considerable sum of money at the time.

In 1918 Helen, Anne and John moved to Forest Hills in New York. Helen used their new home as a base for her extensive fundraising tours for the American Foundation for the Blind. She not only collected money, but also campaigned tirelessly to alleviate the living and working conditions of blind people, who at that time were usually badly educated and living in asylums. Her endeavours were a major factor in changing these conditions.

Helen’s mother Kate died in 1921 from an unknown illness, and this left Anne as the sole constant in Helen’s life. However that same year Anne fell ill again and this was followed in 1922 by a severe bout of bronchitis which left her unable to speak above a whisper and thus unable to work with Helen on stage anymore. At this point Polly Thomson, who had started working for Helen and Anne in 1914 as a secretary, took on the role of explaining Helen to the theatre going public.

They also spent a lot of time touring the world raising money for blind people. In 1931 they met King George and Queen Mary at Buckingham Palace, who were said to be deeply impressed by Helen’s ability to understand what people said through touch.

All the while Anne’s health was getting worse, and with the news of the death of John Macy in 1932, although their marriage had broken up some years before, her spirit was finally broken. She died on 20 October 1936.

When Anne died, Helen and Polly moved to Arcan Ridge, in Westport, Connecticut, which would be Helen’s home for the rest of her life.

After World War II, Helen and Polly spent years travelling the world fundraising for the American Foundation for the Overseas Blind. They visited Japan, Australia, South America, Europe and Africa.

Whilst away during this time Helen and Polly learnt of the fire that destroyed their home at Arcan Ridge. Although the house would be rebuilt, as well as the many mementoes that Helen and Polly lost, also destroyed was the latest book that Helen had been working on about Anne Sullivan, called “Teacher”.

It was also during this time that Polly Thomson’s health began to deteriorate and whilst in Japan she had a mild stroke. Doctors advised Polly to stop the continuous touring she and Helen did, and although initially they slowed down a bit, the touring continued once Polly had recovered.

In 1953 a documentary film “The Unconquered” was made about Helen’s life, this was to win an Academy Award as the best feature length documentary .It was at the same time that Helen began work again on her book “Teacher”, some seven years after the original had been destroyed. The book was finally published in 1955.

Polly Thomson had a stroke in 1957, she was never to fully recover and died on March 21, 1960. Her ashes were deposited at the National Cathedral in Washington DC next to those of Anne Sullivan. It was the nurse who had been brought in to care for Polly in her last years, Winnie Corbally, who was to take care of Helen in her remaining years.

### The Miracle Worker

It was in 1957 that “The Miracle Worker” was first performed. A drama portraying Anne Sullivan’s first success in communicating with Helen as a child, it first appeared as a live television play in the United States.

In 1959 it was re-written as a Broadway play and opened to rave reviews. It became a smash hit and ran for almost two years. In 1962 it was made into a film and the actresses playing Anne and Helen both received Oscars for their performances.

### Helen retires from public life

In October 1961 Helen suffered the first of a series of strokes, and her public life was to draw to a close. She was to spend her remaining years being cared for at her home in Arcan Ridge.

Her last years were not however without excitement, and in 1964 Helen was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award, by President Lyndon Johnson. A year later she was elected to the Women’s Hall of Fame at the New York World’s Fair.

On June 1, 1968, at Arcan Ridge, Helen Keller died peacefully in her sleep. Helen was cremated in Bridgeport, Connecticut and a funeral service was held at the National Cathedral in Washington DC where the urn containing her ashes would later be deposited next to those of Anne Sullivan and Polly Thomson.

### Helen’s legacy

Today Helen’s final resting place is a popular tourist attraction and the bronze plaque erected to commemorate her life has the following inscription written in braille:

“Helen Keller and her beloved companion Anne Sullivan Macy are interred in the columbarium behind this chapel.”

So many people have visited the chapel, and touched the braille dots, that the plaque has already had to be replaced twice.

If Helen Keller were born today her life would undoubtedly have been completely different. Her life long dream was to be able to talk, something that she was never really able to master. Today the teaching methods exist that would have helped Helen to realise this dream. What would Helen have made of the technology available today to blind and deafblind individuals? Technology that enables blind and deafblind people, like Helen, to communicate directly, and independently, with anybody in the world.

Helen Keller may not have been directly responsible for the development of these technologies and teaching methods. But with the help of Anne Sullivan, through her writings, lectures and the way she lived her life, she has shown millions of people that disability need not be the end of the world.

In Helen’s own words:

“The public must learn that the blind man is neither genius nor a freak nor an idiot. He has a mind that can be educated, a hand which can be trained, ambitions which it is right for him to strive to realise, and it is the duty of the public to help him make the best of himself so that he can win light through work.”

### Further reading

[RNIB’s Research Library](http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/publicwebsite/public_researchlibrary.hcsp) can provide details of books and articles about Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan.

### Photos of Helen Keller

The [American Foundation for the Blind](http://www.afb.org/Section.asp?sectionid=1) has a Helen Keller Archive which contains pictures and images of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan.

### RNIB – helping you live with sight loss

The world has changed a lot since Helen's time. The internet now gives people the freedom to learn and communicate equally. From emailing, browsing, learning online, playing games, downloading music and shopping, it has opened up a new world to blind and partially sighted people.

# Helen Keller Reference Archive

"If ever there was a superwoman that woman is Helen Keller. By her indomitable will she wrought a miracle, and when one ponders over her achievements, the brain is dazzled by the possibilities of the human mind. To us Socialist Helen Keller ought to be doubly precious, for she is our Comrade – let us glory in that."  
        – Socialist Party daily, the Call, May 4, 1913

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/index.htm>

Introduction: [The Socialist Legacy of Helen Keller](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/intro.htm)

Works:

1912: [How I Became a Socialist](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/12_11_03.htm)   
1913: [A Call For Harmony](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/13_01_04.htm)   
1913: [Why Men Need Woman Suffrage](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/13_10_17.htm)   
1913: [New Vision for the Blind](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/13_10_25.htm)   
1914: [Brutal Treatment of the Unemployed in Sacramento Star](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/14_03_16.htm)   
1915: [Menace of the Militarist Program](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/15_12_19.htm)   
1916: [Strike Against War](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/16_01_05.htm)   
1916: [Why I Became an IWW](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/16_01_16.htm)   
1917: [Letter to Morris Hillquit](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/17_11_05.htm)   
1918: [What Is The IWW?](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/18_01_x01.htm)   
1918: [In Behalf of the IWW](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/18_03_x01.htm)   
1919: [To Eugene V. Debs](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/19_04_29.htm)   
1919: [End the Blockade of Soviet Russia!](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/19_11_10.htm)   
1921: [Help Soviet Russia](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1920s/21_11_19.htm)   
1929: [The Spirit of Lenin](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1920s/29_x01.htm)

Biography:

[FBI file on Helen Keller](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/bio/fbi-file.pdf)

Photo: [John Macy reads to Helen Keller while Anne Sullivan-Macy watches](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/bio/1914.jpg), circa 1914

Links:

[Awakening to Life](http://www.marxists.org/archive/meshcheryakov/awakening/index.htm), on the education of deaf-blind children in the Soviet Union, Alexander Meshcheryakov, 1974

[The Helen Keller Papers](http://www.afb.org/archives/papers/papers.html)

END