



From the Annals of the World History

Louis Braille

-- January 4, 1809 - January 6, 1852



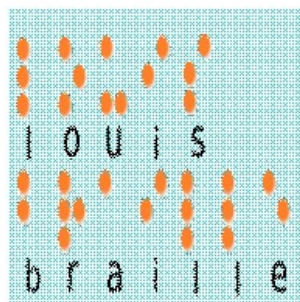
Louis Braille was the inventor of Braille, a worldwide system used by blind and visually impaired people for reading and writing. Braille is read by passing the fingers over characters made up of an arrangement of one to six embossed points. It has been adapted to almost every known language.

Louis Braille became blind at the age of 3, when he accidentally poked himself in the eye with a stitching awl, one of his father's workshop tools. The injury wasn't thought to be serious until it got infected. Braille's other eye went blind because of sympathetic ophthalmia. At the very young age of 10, Braille earned a scholarship to the National Institute for the Blind in Paris, one of the first of its kind in the world. However, the conditions in the school were not notably better. Louis was served stale bread and water, and students were sometimes abused or locked up as a form of punishment. Braille, a bright and creative student, became a talented cellist and organist in his time at the school, playing the organ for churches all over France.

At school, the children were taught basic craftsman skills and simple trades. They were also taught how to read by feeling raised letters (a system devised by the school's founder, Valentin Haüy). However, because the raised letters were made using paper pressed against copper wire, the students never learned to write. Another disadvantage was that the letters weighed a lot and whenever people published books using this system, they put together a book with multiple stories in one in order to save money. This made the books sometimes weigh over a hundred pounds. The school had just 14 books, all of which Louis had read. He liked to learn and to play music.

Development of the Braille System

In 1821, Charles Barbier, a Captain in the French Army, visited the school. Barbier shared his invention called "night writing" a code of 12 raised dots and a number of dashes that let soldiers share top-secret information on the battlefield without having to speak. The code was too difficult for Louis to understand and he later changed the number of raised dots to 6 to form what we call Braille today.



"Louis Braille" in Braille

The same year, Louis Braille began inventing his raised-dot system with his father's stitching awl, the same implement with which he had blinded himself, finishing at age 15, in 1824. His system used only six dots and corresponded to letters, whereas Barbier's used 12. The six-dot system allowed the recognition of letters with a single fingertip apprehending all the dots at once, requiring no movement or repositioning which slowed recognition in systems requiring more dots. These dots consisted of patterns in order to keep the system easy to learn. The Braille system also offered numerous benefits over Haüy's raised letter method, the most notable being the ability to both read and write an alphabet. Another very notable benefit is that because they were dots just slightly raised, there was a significant difference in make up.

Braille later extended his system to include notation for mathematics and music. The first book in Braille was published in 1829 under the title **Method of Writing Words, Music, and Plain Songs by Means of Dots, for Use by the Blind and Arranged for Them**. In 1839 Braille published details of a method he had

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developed for communication with sighted people, using patterns of dots to approximate the shape of printed symbols. Braille and his friend Pierre Foucault went on to develop a machine to speed up the somewhat cumbersome system.

Braille became a well-respected teacher at the Institute. Although he was admired and respected by his pupils, his Braille system was not taught at the Institute during his lifetime. The air at the institute was foul and he died in Paris of tuberculosis in 1852 at the age of 43; his body was disinterred in 1952 (the centenary of his death) and honored with re-interment in the Panthéon in Paris. His system was finally officially recognized in France two years after his death, in 1854. On the occasion of bi-centenary of Louis Braille, India and the United States have issued special commemorative coins of INR 100, INR 2, and USD 1. The US coin includes the denomination written in Braille and was introduced spring 2009.

"We, the blind, are as indebted to Louis Braille as mankind is to Gutenberg."

Helen Keller



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