American Sign Language, *Philly Style*

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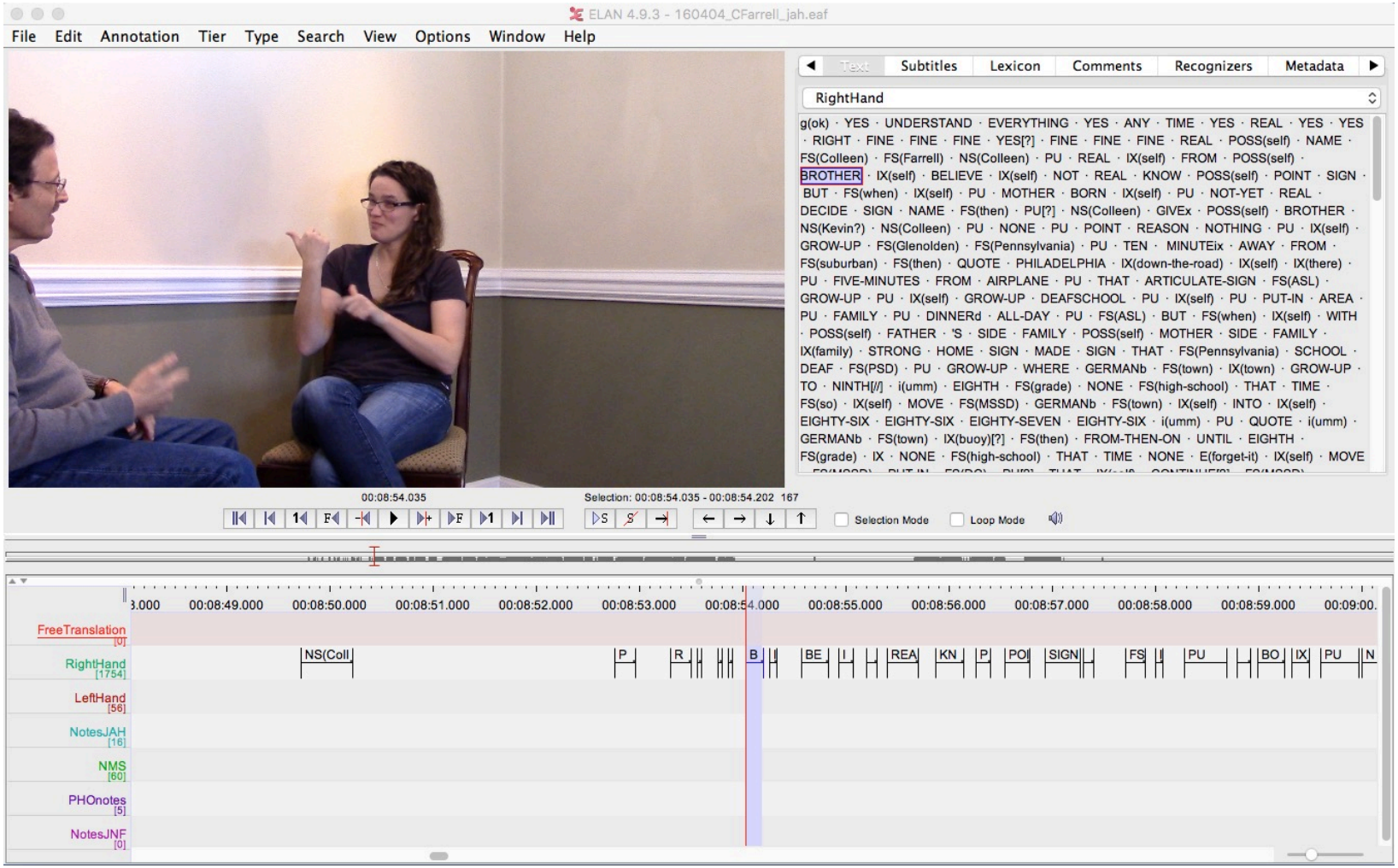
How do you sign *birthday* in ASL?

How do you sign *birthday* in Philly?

Are Philly signs “strange”?

“As a RIT student, during one of my classes had a substitute interpreter... **My first question** [after class] **was where in Philadelphia area are you from? The look on the interpreter's face was priceless** - combination of "awe, shock, did I divulge too much info" **I was able to glean that from just one sign choice that the interpreter used during the class - SLOW…**”

The Philadelphia Signs Project



How is Philly ASL different?

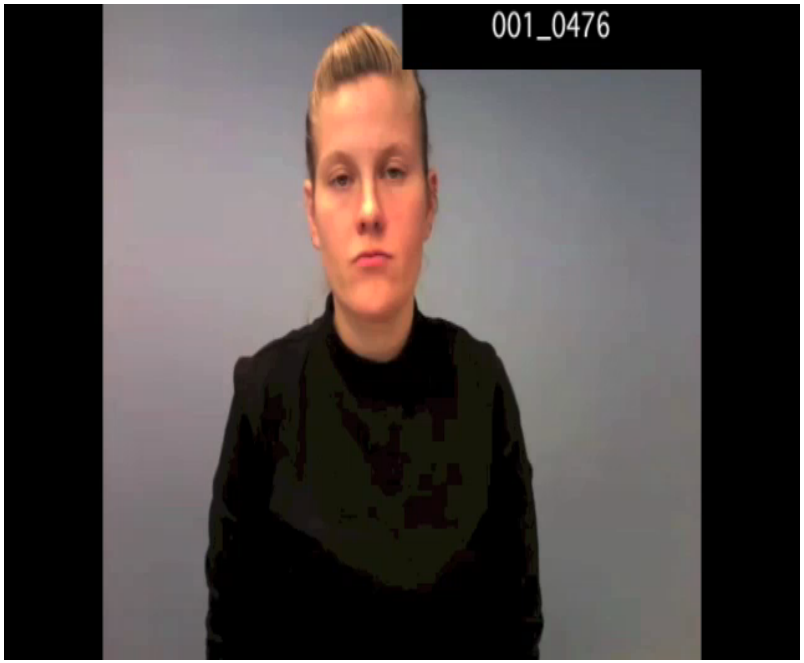
Lexical differences between Philly and other regions:

TRUCK

SQUIRREL

BUT is there more??

How is Philly ASL different?



Phonological parts of BIRTHDAY:

Handshape: Open-8
Location(s): Chin, upper torso
Palm Orientation: inward
Movement: straight and down
Non-Manuals: N/A

Are Philly signs “pronounced” differently?
Are they put together into sentences in different ways?

**Video Courtesy of ASL SignBank*

How is Philly ASL different?

How is Philly ASL different?

Why is Philly ASL different?

All languages

- change gradually but constantly
- for both linguistic and social reasons

We learn about linguistic reasons for change by observing recurring types of change

Linguistic aspects of change

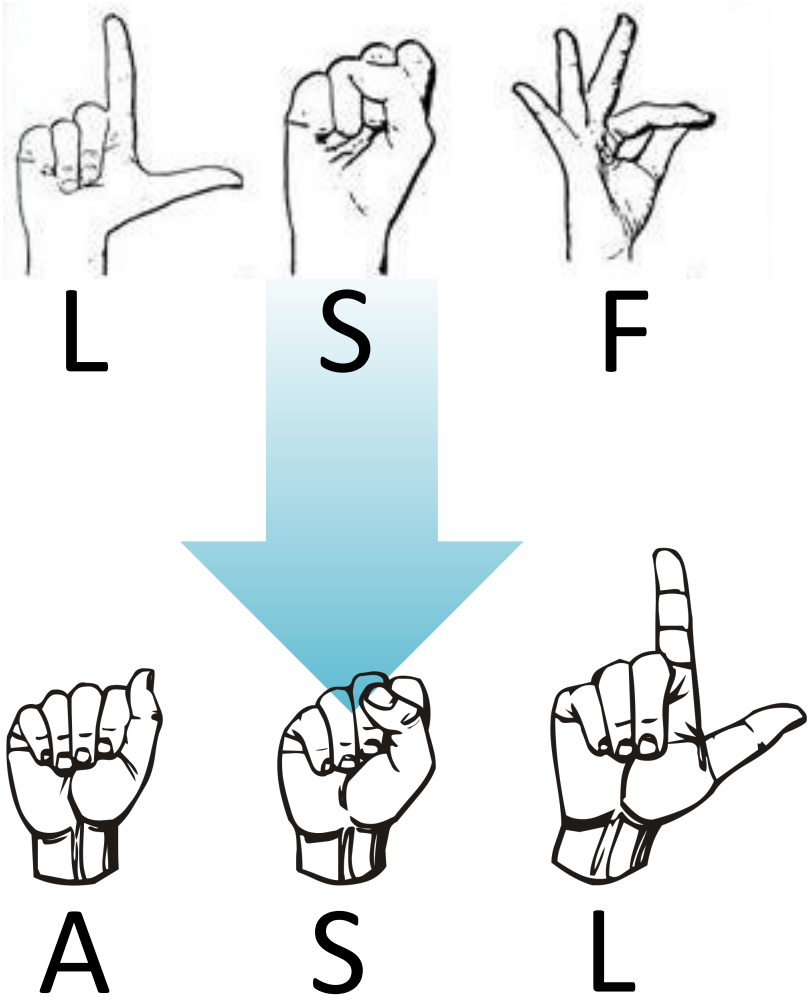
- **Tendency toward symmetry**
  - Two-handed signs move toward having the **same** handshapes
    - LAST/FINAL
- **Handedness changes:**
  - ***On the face*** signs tend to go from two-handed to one-handed
    - CAT, COW
  - ***Off the face*** signs tend to go from one-handed to two-handed
    - ANGRY, DIE

Why is Philly ASL different?

Linguistic reasons for change are universal

Look to social context and historical factors for possible causes of divergence in Philadelphia ASL

A brief history of ASL



HOW?

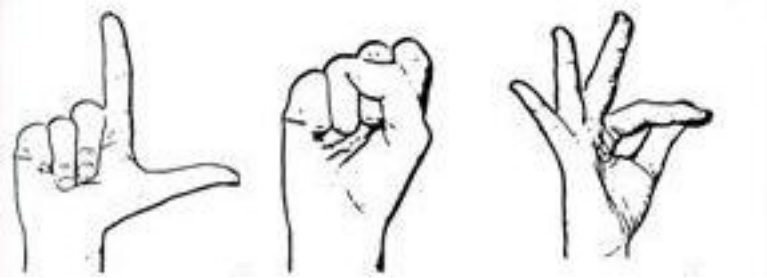
A brief history of ASL

Thomas Gallaudet and Alice Cogswell

Gallaudet University Archives

Laurent Clerc (1817)

A brief history of ASL



L S F

\+ Signs from Martha's Vineyard community

\+ "Home" signs

\+ Time

=

A S L

A brief history of ASL

Graduates of the Connecticut Asylum (American School for the Deaf

Abigail Dillingham

1821-1825

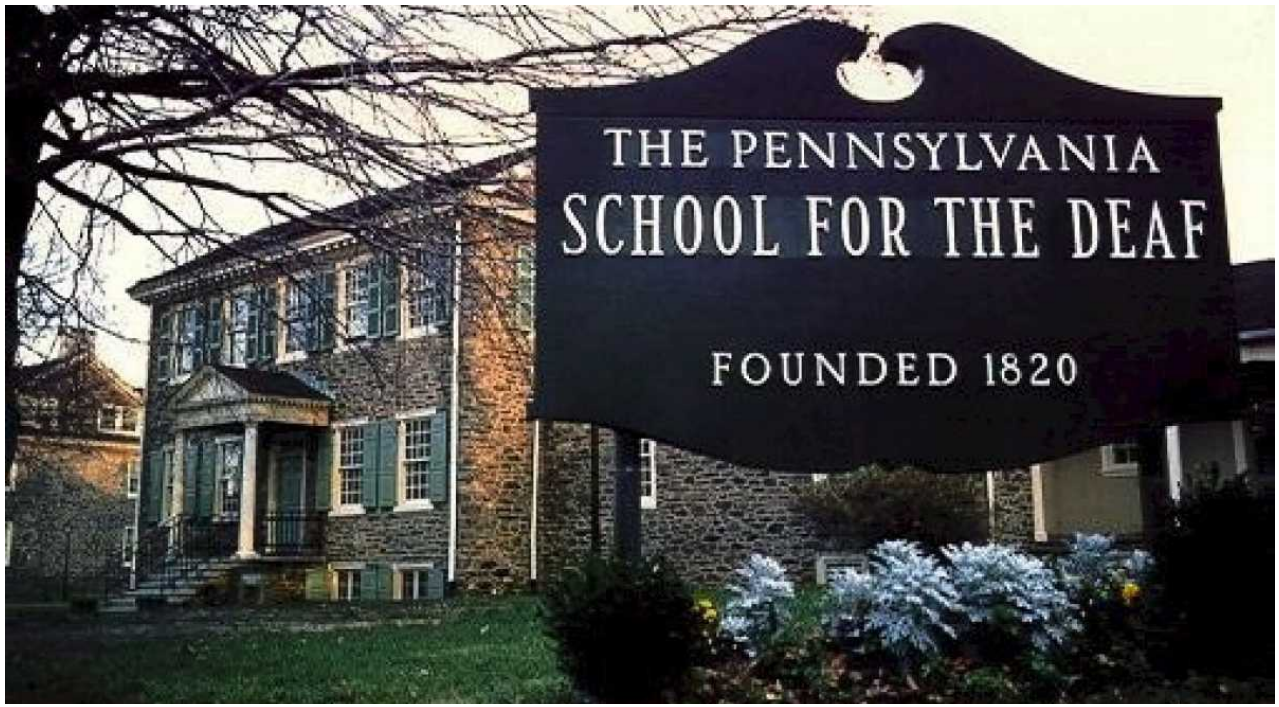
Others went as far as Washington State and New Orleans

William Willard

1829-1841

1841, first principal of school

ASL comes to Philly



- Connecticut Asylum graduate Abigail Dillingham teaches from 1821-1825
- Laurent Clerc is principal 1821-1822

Social factors influencing Philadelphia ASL

Connecticut school

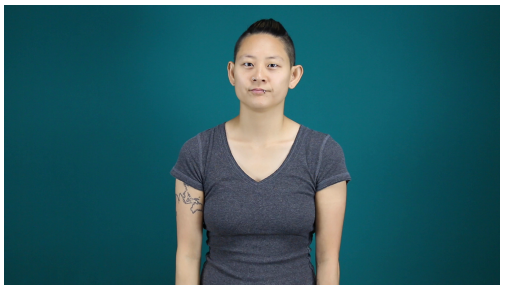
A S L

ca. 1821

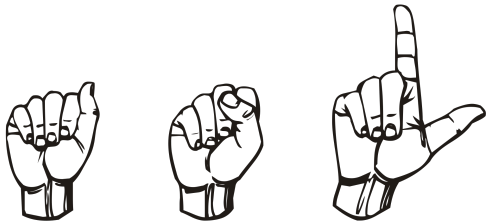
\+ Abigail Dillingham, deaf teacher from Connecticut school

\+ Direct contact with Laurent Clerc as head of school

\+ Philadelphia Deaf tend to stay put and are insular

= 

Philadelphia



A S L

**Video Courtesy of ASL SignBank*

Philadelphia ASL is disappearing

Pressure toward leveling – merging with more commonly used signs

- Closure of residential program at PSD
- Movement toward mainstreaming

Significantly less exposure to native Philadelphian sign models

- National and global exposure to other signers due to technology and travel

Philadelphia ASL is disappearing

- Many Deaf Philadelphians are aware of—and sometimes use—both forms
  - —Younger signers prefer pan-regional variety
- Dual awareness can lead to mixing and possibly creating new forms

Co-existence (and blending) of variants

Variants of WOMAN and blending of two variants of WOMAN

Co-existence (and blending) of variants

- Shows awareness of both variants and the pressures to assimilate (“old” vs. “new” signs).

Future plans

- Continue to collect and annotate videos
- Make the data accessible for public use and community benefit
  - Deaf schools
    - Deaf Studies: Deaf historical, linguistic, cultural information
  - Linguistics research
  - Interpreter education

Note: We are still filming so the casual ones will be replaced by more professional ones eventually. We will continue to update this. Stay tuned!

Our website: https://web.sas.upenn.edu/philly-signs/

Thank you!!

Special thanks to all our participants for sharing their signing and stories for public benefit

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Our interpreters

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