Samuel Gridley Howe Biography

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Biography

Samuel Gridley Howe (1801-1876), American physician and reformer, was a pioneer in educating the blind and a militant abolitionist.

Samuel Gridley Howe was born in Boston on Nov. 10, 1801. After studying at Brown, he received his medical degree from Harvard in 1824. He then set out for Greece to participate in the War for Independence against the Turks. He gave valorous service there, both as a soldier and surgeon, and stayed for 6 years, distributing American relief shipments and assisting Greek efforts to repair and improve the nation.

On a brief trip back to America, Howe published *Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution* (1828). When he returned home again in 1831, he was hired by the state of Massachusetts to start a school for the blind. By 1832 he had opened a school in his home with six pupils. He got financial help from private philanthropists as well as from states surrounding Massachusetts.

By April 1833 Howe had established in Boston the New England Institution for the Education of the Blind. He taught that the blind should be treated with confidence rather than pity. He developed new and simpler devices for instructing blind children and innovated in finding inexpensive ways to print in raised letters. Howe himself authored textbooks on grammar, spelling, and geography. His annual reports on the work of the institution influenced other states to follow his example. His success with Laura Bridgeman, who was both blind and deaf, helped prove that persons with such challenges were not mentally inferior.

Howe joined many other reform movements. He advocated better public schools, better treatment of the insane, and reforms in the prisons. He was chairman of a group of Bostonians who opposed the Fugitive Slave Law by arming themselves to protect African American fugitives. He ran unsuccessfully for Congress as an antislavery candidate and was among those zealous New Englanders who worked to keep Kansas from permitting slavery and supported John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859. During the Civil War and Reconstruction he served on national commissions and various agencies concerned with the conduct of the war and aid to freed slaves.

In 1843 Howe had married Julia Ward, who, during the Civil War, wrote the words for "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Howe died on Jan. 9, 1876.