Gallaudet celebrates ‘150 years strong’

University for deaf marks signing of its founding charter by Lincoln

By Nick Anderson

Momentous events preoccupied President Abraham Lincoln on April 8, 1864. That day, the Senate approved the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, to end slavery, on a vote of 38 to 6. The Civil War’s third year was nearing a close, and its bloody fourth was about to begin.

Lincoln found a moment that day to sign a bill of interest to a Senate committee on the District of Columbia and educators in the nation’s capital. It authorized the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind to award degrees “in the liberal arts and sciences ... as are usually granted and conferred in Colleges.”

Exactly 150 years later, Shane Dundas marveled Tuesday at what Lincoln’s signature meant to people everywhere who are deaf and hard of hearing: the founding of what would become known as Gallaudet University.

“To me, that’s the birth, the birth of prosperity for deaf people,” Dundas said. A graduate student in deaf studies at the 1,651-student university in Northeast Washington, Dundas said Gallaudet has opened opportunities for generations because diplomas are essential for so many professions.

Without the chance to get college degrees, Dundas said, “Where would deaf people be?”

Tuesday was Charter Day for Gallaudet, a moment to mark the sesquicentennial of its founding and to open a museum exhibition on its history.

In Chapel Hall, a majestic space framed by stained-glass windows, an exhibit of art and photographs highlights key figures in the Gallaudet story. There was Amos Kendall, a 19th-century lobbyist, postmaster general and benefactor who donated land for the school. The modern name of the Gallaudet campus is Kendall Green.

There was Edward Miner Gallaudet, the first president, who helped persuade Congress to approve the bill to authorize conferal of degrees and then led the school until 1910. The exhibit notes that when alumni pressed for the school to be renamed Gallaudet College, the founding president wanted it to be known that the new name of the college honored his father, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a pioneer in deaf education, rather than himself.

Meredith Peruzzi, the museum curator and a Gallaudet graduate, points to another intriguing figure in the exhibit, Hume Le Prince Battiste, captain of the 1911 football team and one of Gallaudet’s first American Indian students. Peruzzi said research shows that Battiste was forced out of school when it was discovered that he had a liaison with a daughter of Gallaudet’s second president, Percival Hall.

“The two of them were secretly dating,” she said. But Battiste was allowed to return and graduated in 1913.

The exhibit also devotes extensive attention to the Deaf President Now movement in March 1988, in which a massive student uprising protested a decision by trustees to hire a president who was not deaf. The revolt essentially shut down the campus. It didn’t end until trustees reversed a course and hired Gallaudet’s first deaf president, I. King Jordan.

The incumbent, T. Alan Hurwitz, is Gallaudet’s third deaf president. Hurwitz said Gallaudet, which operates as a private institution, has had a special relationship with the federal government ever since its birth. U.S. President James A. Garfield, a strong early advocate for the college, spoke at its May 1881 commencement, according to Gallaudet historians, shortly before he was assassinated. President Bill Clinton spoke at the 1994 commencement.

By tradition, Gallaudet diplomas carry the signatures of U.S. presidents. (In recent decades, the assumption has been that the signatures are automated.) In addition, Congress supports the university through an annual appropriation of more than $100 million.

“Congress sees this as a great investment,” Hurwitz said. “It’s not charity.”

Hurwitz said the university is promoting undergraduate tracks that prepare students for advanced education in medicine, law, business and architecture. He noted that one graduate was recently accepted to medical school at the University of Virginia. Gallaudet, Hurwitz said, is proud to be the flagship of deaf higher education around the world. “We are 150 years strong here,” he said.

When Lincoln signed the bill to authorize a little-known institution to grant degrees for the deaf, it probably would have been difficult to imagine what higher education for the deaf would become a century and a half later. But Hurwitz contended that the 16th president did have a vision of equal rights for various groups — “whether it was people who were slaves or people with disabilities.”

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