



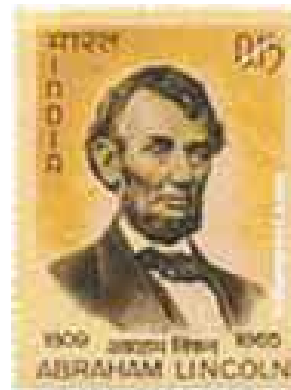
Louis Braille's home.

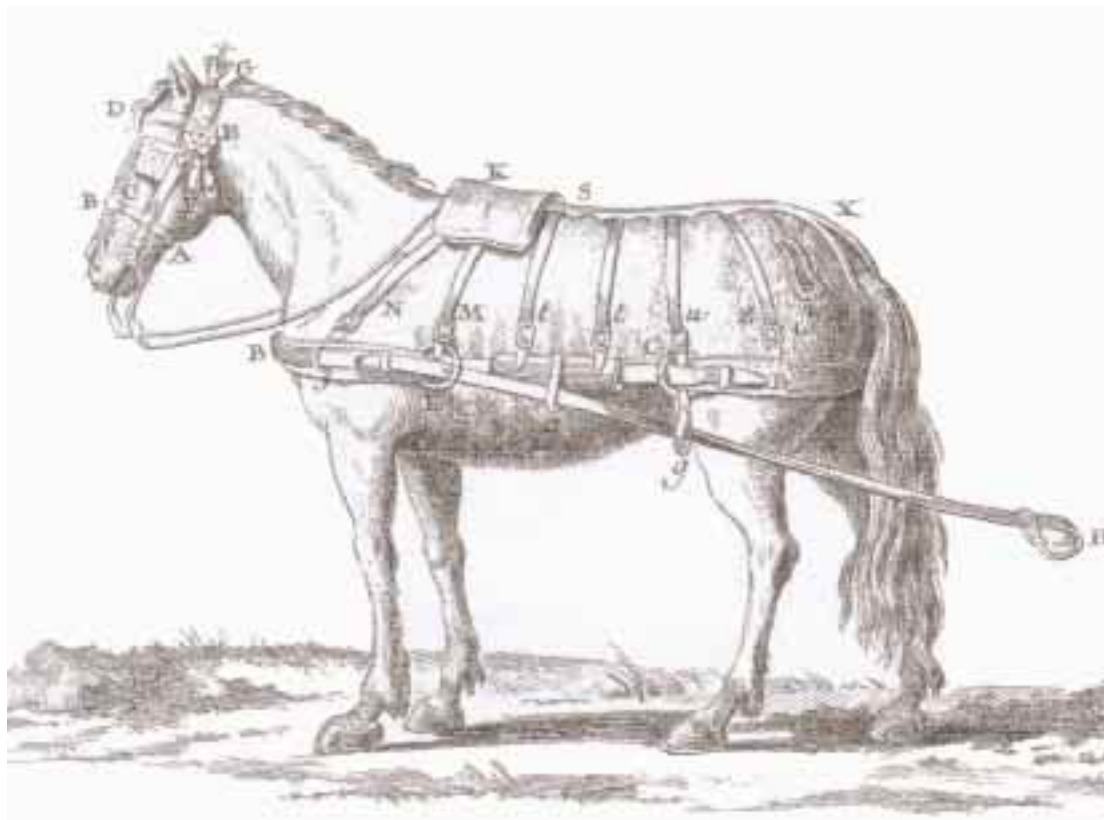
“He was blessed with affectionate parents, and I feel sure he responded to their love as a plant does to sunshine.”

Helen Keller

HOME

In the first few weeks of 1809, three baby boys were born who changed the course of history: Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth President of the United States; Charles Darwin, British father of the theory of evolution; and Louis Braille, the French inventor of a means of literacy for blind people worldwide. Unlike Lincoln and Darwin, Braille’s genius is little known outside his native land, except among those who have been touched by his gift of literacy.





Louis Braille's father made the equipment that harnessed and controlled the strength of a horse. Not merely practical, his highly decorative harnesses were also works of beauty. As a boy, Louis Braille helped his father make the colored fringes for the harnesses.

A FAVORITE SON

Louis Braille was born in the little town of Coupvray, 25 miles east of Paris, on January 4, 1809. He was the last child of Simon-René Braille and his wife of 17 years, Monique (née Baron). They already had three children: Monique-Catherine-Joséphine, born 1793; Louis-Simon, born 1795; and Marie-Céline, born 1797. Louis was the youngest by twelve years.

Louis was a small, listless baby, too sickly even to suck milk from his mother's breast. He was registered with the town authorities the next day and baptized three days later for fear he might die.¹ Disease struck hard in early 19th-century France, and infant mortality was high, even for the wealthy. Still, under the devoted care of his mother and family, Louis grew more robust. Mother and father were thrilled with their new baby, who came along, perhaps unexpectedly, when Simon-René was 44 and Monique 39. Simon-René proudly announced that Louis would be his "companion in old age." The doting parents called him their little "Benjamin" — a reference to the beloved son of the biblical Jacob — and he became their favorite.

FAMILY LIFE

Simon-René supported his family as a harness maker (*bourellier*), a trade first practiced by his own father some sixty years earlier. In an agrarian society, a *bourellier* was a man of some stature, well known to the farming community and frequently visited by neighboring farmers over the course of a year.² He made the leather tack — collars, straps, bridles — that allowed a farmer to tap and control the strength of a horse, the chief source of power on a farm and one of the few means of transport until well into the



*“Lavoir des Médisances”
(the Gossips’ Wash House),
dating back to the Middle Ages,
incidentally functioned as a
socially important communica-
tions center. This is where the
women socialized as they did the
laundry, exchanged gossip and
found out what was going on
around town and elsewhere.*

19th century. Simon-René was adept at his trade, earning the title of master harness maker before he was 27. “It was a point of honor with the master to deliver only work well done, to strive for perfection in the whole and in every detail.”³ Young Louis was to draw on these traits — attention to detail and a desire for perfection — to invent a means of literacy for people around the world.

Life for Monique Braille, a wife and mother in rural France at the turn of the 19th century, was arduous. Lacking today’s labor-saving amenities, Monique spent most of her waking hours taking care of the children, preparing food, cleaning, sewing, spinning, washing and mending clothes, and helping on the farm. There were chickens and a cow to attend to, and in the fall, she and the children helped to

make hay as winter fodder.⁴ Monique and Simon-René always encouraged young Louis to join in the work. Over the years, the industrious and frugal Braille family acquired an additional seven and a half acres of land, and managed their own two and a half acre vineyard, which yielded a year’s supply of wine, stored in huge casks in the cellar.

SYMPATHETIC OPHTHALMIA

Even with today's medical advances, it is unlikely that Louis's wounded eye could have been saved, but the healthy (left) eye might have been treated with corticosteroids and immunosuppressive drugs. The development of pathology in a healthy eye after the other eye has been injured was noticed as long ago as AD 1000,⁵ though no term existed for this phenomenon until 1830, when William Mackenzie, a foremost Scottish ophthalmologist of his time, devised the term "sympathetic ophthalmia."⁶ This is now thought to be an auto-immune disease in which the mechanism the body uses to repair damage goes awry and attacks healthy tissues. The seemingly drastic measure of surgically removing Louis Braille's injured eye within two weeks of injury might have prevented the development of blinding inflammation in his healthy eye.⁷



"The Accident," a drawing by André Harfort, depicts an inquisitive and energetic three-year-old boy climbing up to reach one of his father's sharp leather-working tools. This dramatic rendering is more fanciful than factual.

CALAMITY IN THE WORKSHOP

How young Louis Braille injured his eye in his father's workshop one summer day in 1812 is not clear. The most reliable account comes from Hippolyte Coltat, a former schoolmate and close friend of Louis's:

"One day, at the age of three, sitting beside his father, who was working and lovingly thinking about his little Benjamin, the boy wanted to work too, and imitate the movements he saw his father make. In one of his little hands he seized a leather strap, and in the other a serpette (a slender, curved knife rather like a small pruning hook) and there he was at work. Weakness often invites trouble; and it did: The sharp tool

veered out of control at an angle and stabbed the poor worker in the eye."⁸

Medical knowledge at that time could not save the eyesight of their Benjamin. Lily water, thought to possess healing powers, was applied by an old woman from the village, probably doing more harm than good to the injured right eye. Louis's other (left) eye became inflamed, and the sight in that eye was eventually lost, too. The right cornea became totally opaque, and the left eye partially so, with blue "striations."⁹ His eyes would have been very painful during this period; he would have cried a lot and needed much mothering. It is not known how long the process continued, but by age five, two years after the accident, Louis was completely blind.