

## **Disability History Association Podcast**

Interview with Jen Hale

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**Caroline Lieffers:** Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. Today it's my pleasure to be talking with Jen Hale, who's the archivist at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, which is located near Boston. Jen, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Jen Hale:** Thank you for having me.

**Caroline:** So, I'd like to start by just asking a simple question, which is how did you come to work at the archives at the Perkins School for the Blind?

**Jen:** Well, my first semester of graduate school, I met the Perkins archivist at an internship fair and was completely captivated by the photographs and artifacts she had on display. At the time, I was transitioning from a career in web and graphic design, and I really remember being drawn to beautiful tactile handmade typography on display. So, I applied for and luckily got the internship at Perkins. And by the next semester I had a part time job in both the Hayes Research Library and the archives and that was in 2014. And I have been here ever since.

**Caroline:** Wonderful. You've already got me intrigued talking about typography and whatnot, but we'll get to that later. Can you tell me just a little bit about the history of the school, particularly for people who may not know much about blind history in the US?

**Jen:** So, the New England Asylum for the Blind, as Perkins was originally called, was established in 1829, becoming the first school dedicated to students who are blind in the United States. So, from the beginning, the mission was to provide education, literacy, and job skills to its students. In 1837, Perkins student Laura Bridgman became the first person with deafblindness to be formally educated. And then, fifty years later Perkins alumna Anne Sullivan used some of the same methods to teach Helen Keller, who also attended Perkins. So Perkins is home to the first kindergarten for the blind, which opened in 1887. It's home to the first lending library of tactile books. Perkins also created the first formal training initiative in the United States for teachers of students who are blind and deafblind. But beyond education at the school, Perkins has just a very long history of advocacy and programming that extends nationally and internationally.

**Caroline:** I imagine in 190 years, education and systems of pedagogy at the school have changed quite a bit. Can you tell me a little bit about just, sort of, change over time?

**Jen:** Yes. So, today's mission to help children and young adults who are blind or visually impaired realize their full potential is very closely aligned with Perkins founding director Samuel Gridley Howe's vision, but the curriculum has adjusted to changing social or educational values, to changing student populations -- like the causes of blindness have shifted dramatically over the years. Our curriculum has always focused really on creating literate, self-reliant students who are prepared to hold jobs and live with independence. So, a Perkins education includes content and

skills that go beyond traditional academics. But our expanded core curriculum, which wasn't formally defined until 1996, is something that we've been teaching its concepts since the beginning. And these are really, again, focusing on living skills, vocational training, and social engagement. So, the main - those main missions and goals have really stayed the same.

**Caroline:** When I was cruising around on your website in preparation for this interview, I noticed there was a lot of emphasis, interestingly, on physical education. I even found some photos of some early phys ed classes and some sports teams at Perkins. So is there a particular significance to physical education at Perkins?

**Jen:** Yes, Perkins pioneered the first physical education program for students who are blind in the United States. And when the first students began classes in 1832, they were in poor health. And so, this is during an era when it's common for somebody with a condition of blindness to be treated as an invalid, essentially having everything done for them, and not being physically active out of fear of injury. So, to address this, Howe added exercise and physical activity to the curriculum, and the results were immediate and they were very positive. There is an early annual report where Howe writes about bruises and scrapes and cuts having a positive effect, and that even at the worst it's better than the effects of what he calls "the rust of inaction," which I love and need to remind myself as I sit at my desk all day. **[Caroline laughs]** But notably, Howe is addressing parents and friends outside the institution making the case for better health and independence through physical activity. So, a focus on physical activities continues today. Our adapted PE teachers work with students approaching graduation to identify activities that they can pursue independently after graduation. So, in our deafblind program last year, the students explored golf, rock climbing, and boxing.

**Caroline:** That's really neat. I'm really curious about to what extent Perkins was a model for other schools around the country. Did other blind schools kind of look at what Perkins was doing and try to emulate it?

**Jen:** So, we actually emulated ourselves after the school in Paris, the Royal Institution for Blind Youth, and then kind of adjusted it to suit, I guess, our needs and goals. And then during the first years where Howe was getting Perkins started, he was actually going out with students to other states to get schools started there. So, in Kentucky, they also used the same books that we used. So, there was really a lot of collaboration and advocacy. So, between the schools, there was a need it. It became like he was able to show that students who are blind had intelligence and were capable and that this was a good thing, an important thing to do. And he was able to show that in, in Massachusetts and then in other states. And that helped kind of get the expansion of schools across the nation.

**Caroline:** Absolutely. Oh that's so, so interesting and really important for anybody who's interested in blind history to think about, sort of, Perkins as being in this larger web of blind education. So, that's wonderful. Thanks for answering that. I'm wondering if you have any favorite stories from the school's history that you would like to share with people.

**Jen:** There are so many stories. One favorite that comes up every now and then is this urban legend about the Perkins Pond, which was originally named Dead Horse Pond. And the pond existed before the current campus opened in 1912. But when and how it got its name we haven't quite figured out yet, but it did not take long for legends about its bottomless depth to develop, and stories about the demise of this

horse to kind of spread. The stories I have heard involve a horse falling through the ice. Another version includes a carriage that actually went down with the horse. And a very Boston version has it that the horse was owned by Paul Revere, who in fact did live in Watertown for a year after sneaking out of Boston once the battle of Lexington and Concord was over. But a few years ago, I found an undated letter in the archives from a student written to Perkins director Edward E. Allen, and he was director from 1907 to 1931. And the letter starts with mentioning that Director Allen has told the Perkins students in the chapel that there is no horse in the pond. So, I don't know if kids were scared to go in or on the pond, or the staff felt like the story was causing disruptions. But the director of the school felt the need to address the student body about this alleged dead horse at the bottom of this little pond.

But in the letter, the student goes on to state that after hearing this from the director, he has been waiting a very long time to prove otherwise and that while he was skating along the edges one Saturday night, he stumbled and he fell over a small hole from which he pulled a horseshoe. And he finishes the letter saying that he cannot be convinced that there is no horse in the pond because he has the shoe in his room and it is large, thus proving that the horse was too heavy and fell in. So, I love that letter and there's so much passion in it.

**Caroline:** Oh my goodness. The mystery lives on, right? [laughs]

**Jen:** Yes! Is the horse down there? Does it haunt the pond?

**Caroline:** I love these stories, and obviously encourage everyone to check out your website because there, there are many on there – yeah, thank you very much for that. I understand - I mean, you mentioned this a little bit at the very beginning when you were talking about typography -- it seems like Perkins also pioneered some interesting technologies to help with blind education. So, can you tell me a little bit about some of those?

**Jen:** Yeah, innovation has been at the heart of Perkins since the beginning. The first really important innovation would have to be the development of Boston Line Type. Because so few books for the blind were available, founding director Howe devised his own system of embossed or raised text, and he hired Stephen Preston Ruggles to make a printing press for it. So, Boston Line Type is a Roman alphabet that is very angular and all lowercase, so, an O looks and feels like a diamond. It's very sharp, and it's designed to be easier to read, to be compact and thus more cost-effective to print than systems that existed in Europe at the time. And Boston Line Type was the primary system of reading for the blind used in the United States until about 1916 when Braille became the standard system, but there were many competing systems before then.

The other really big innovation would be the Perkins Brailler. The first brailler was invented in 1892, but braillers were costly to make, they needed regular repairs, and they were really noisy. So, David Abraham, who worked in the Perkins industrial arts department, was asked to design a better brailler by the Perkins director at the time, Gabriel Farrell. This is in the 1930s. And in 1951, the first Perkins Brailler went out onto the market. By 1969, over 50,000 machines were in use in 75 countries around the world. So it was a huge success. And in fact the Perkins Brailler is still manufactured today with only minimal changes to its original design, and it's still used around the world.

**Caroline:** Sounds like a great technology. Very durable.

**Jen:** Very durable. And Perkins Solutions, they have a display where they have attached things that have been wedged or fallen into brailers that have been repaired. So it could be gum, it could be marbles. It's all kinds of things and it's just one of my favorite things to think about is that, that sort of wall of honor of things that jammed up the Perkins Brailier. But it really, it's an incredible testament to the design of that machine that it's still, still used today.

**Caroline:** Absolutely. This machine was *used*. Like people stuck things in it and they still just trudged on.

**Jen:** Yeah, it's a very important part of your life. And I think when you find toys and gum wrappers and all that, you know it's, it's living with you it's a big part of your life.

**Caroline:** That's a nice way of thinking about it. Yeah. You mentioned this a little bit in one of the answers to your earlier question, but obviously Perkins is still in operation. I was wondering if you can tell me a little bit about sort of, what, what is Perkins today?

**Jen:** Yes. So, Perkins is much more than a school. Perkins School for the Blind is a multifaceted, international, non-profit, non-governmental organization whose many programs work together with the goal of improving the lives of individuals with blindness and low vision, helping them to realize their full potential. To do this, so, Perkins has five distinct business lines working together right now. So, there's the Perkins School for the Blind, which serves approximately 200 students on campus, and then operates as the headquarters for our community services programs, which includes supports in the public school system.

There's Perkins International, which is working to improve the lives of the four and a half million children around the world who don't have access to education due to blindness. And this is done through local, on-the-ground partnerships. There's Perkins Solutions, which provides assistive technology products including Perkins Brailers, as well as consulting services to people, organizations, and governments around the world. And then, there's Perkins e-learning which is an online portal designed to provide resources and support to anyone, anywhere in the field of blindness education. And this includes professional development as well as resources for teachers, for parents.

And finally, we have the Perkins Library. So, the Perkins library circulates more than 500,000 items in Braille, audio, electronic, and large print formats to about 28,000 patrons in the US, and the library has served patrons since 1835. And so, it's one of the oldest accessibility services in the country.

**Caroline:** Is Perkins today still headquartered on the original site of the school that was built, you know, almost 200 years ago, or has it moved around a little bit?

**Jen:** No, it started out in the house of the former, the first director's father. And then it went to a mansion, Thomas Handasyd Perkins's mansion. And when they outgrew that he allowed them to sell the mansion to buy a hotel. And this is all in Boston. And the hotel was in South Boston. And we now have, we're Perkins School for the Blind because of that generosity. And in 1912, we moved to Watertown, our location today. And this school was designed specifically for students with blindness or visual impairments. So, it's a beautiful large campus. There's trees. There's many buildings. And I'm sure it's a lot easier than navigating a hotel in, you know, in South Boston.

**Caroline:** Given that you are an archivist, can you tell me a little bit more about the research library and also the archive? Can people come visit?

**Jen:** Sure. Yes and no on the visits. The Hayes Research Library, which is separate from the Perkins Library, houses one of the largest and most comprehensive collections on the nonmedical aspects of blindness and deafblindness that is open to the public. And it includes like this amazing collection of magazine articles that have been saved up for almost 200 years, so you can really get a sense of how blindness is depicted in popular culture. It also serves, you know, the Perkins community, researchers, professionals, parents, but it's home to the Perkins Archives. And so, while the archives are not open to the public, the Research Library hosts research visits where archival material can be accessed, and the research librarian also fields most research questions which the archives helps with. But you do have to have an appointment to visit. We are still located in the middle of a bustling school.

**Caroline:** Absolutely, that makes a lot of sense. Can you tell me a little bit about some of your favorite items that are in the archives?

**Jen:** Well, I love *The Procedure for Writing Words, Music, and Plainsong in Dots* by Louis Braille, and it's published in – it was published in 1829. It's a very rare book and it is a French embossed book where Louis Braille proposes Braille as a system of reading for the blind, and it's gorgeously embossed with these large, thick, ornately decorated letters. And it's pretty powerful to see that ornate text alongside these very simple dots. And I think it beautifully highlights the design advantages of Braille. And it's also a wonderful artifact to kind of illustrate the necessity of inclusion in design that is addressing disability. So, prior to the adoption of Braille at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was this long battle of competing systems. And I think it's very telling that Braille, which is probably the most championed by people who were blind, was designed by somebody who was blind.

We also have Helen Keller's earliest handwritten letters, which are favorites. Helen writes about strawberries, and family, and sticks of candy. And her first letter was written at about age seven and it's pretty wonderful to get a peek into her own thoughts and narrative. Only about a year after Anne Sullivan began teaching her. But to that end, we also have a letter from the 1940s written by Polly Thompson, who was Helen's companion after Anne Sullivan died. And in it, she names Helen's old bootlegger, Jack Aaron. And I've heard two separate stories about Helen hiding liquor bottles under her skirts during Prohibition, likely confident that no one is going to search Helen Keller for, for contraband. And that doesn't prove the stories, but I love the materials that highlight Helen as the rebellious, live life to its fullest kind of person that she was throughout much of her life. Those are some, those are some of my favorites.

**Caroline:** Yeah, I can imagine it must be a joy to be surrounded by that history all day. For people who can't make it into the archives in person, is there anything that we can explore online?

**Jen:** Yes, there is. We have a great deal of our collections online. We have photograph and photographed collections available on our Flickr site, as well as some manuscripts and correspondence that have been transcribed, and this includes early Keller and Sullivan correspondence. Much of our printed material lives on the Internet Archive, which includes published materials like annual reports and newsletters, but also some correspondence, clippings, and manuscript collections as well. We have oral

history and other audio recordings and films, and Perkins.org/archives provides information and resources about the archives as well as links to our digitized contents. And we have an Instagram account where we share photos, stories, and items from our collection under the handle @perkinsarchives as well.

**Caroline:** Absolutely. And as I recall pretty much every image that you use on your Instagram or your Flickr site is accompanied by a typed-up caption as well, right, for people who may...?

**Jen:** Yes, yes. So, we both on Flickr and in social media we have descriptions on images which is a really important way for making an image accessible to somebody who is visually impaired or blind. It's also a great way to learn more about the image and start noticing things, too, about it that you might have missed or didn't know about.

**Caroline:** Absolutely - accessible design is good for everybody, right?

**Jen:** Absolutely.

**Caroline:** I happened to notice -- maybe this is just my hobbies coming to the forefront -- but I happened to notice quite a lot of knitting pictures. There was even a photo that I found searching through your site of some little boys and girls in a kindergarten class who were knitting. And I got curious, was knitting a big part of children's education at the turn of the century at Perkins?

**Jen:** It was. So, while knitting and another handiwork was originally taught as a means of making a living and as a way to sort of a household, by the late nineteenth century, people began to see a benefit in manual and tactile skills. So, eventually a greater program of Sloydwork, is what it was called at the time, was added to Perkins. So knitting curriculum was seen to develop finer muscular coordination, problem solving, perseverance, and self-reliance as well as self-expression. So, it was also thought to teach cleanliness and orderliness. And boys were taught in the same manner as girls, and lessons started in kindergarten where it was noted for its ability to teach self-control.

And I've read of the games including leapfrog being used to illustrate the process of casting one stitch over the other for binding off, as well as the names of cakes and pies being used to describe different colors of yarn. There are even descriptions of students adding knitting to their outdoor play, including twigs, and found string, and other objects into their recreational knitting, cause I think there's so much a part of your curriculum, you know your, most of your career at Perkins. So as a knitter I am also intrigued and happy about the knitting.

**Caroline:** Wow, that's fascinating. So are you saying that kids would actually knit sticks and things like that into their projects and kind of create these particularly meaningful, meaningful objects for themselves?

**Jen:** Yeah I've -- there was a teacher who wrote about it in a paper and she's mentioning twigs and things found outside, but also a student who got into her father's garage and had a little metal pieces she added.

**Caroline:** I'm also particularly interested in an online exhibit that Perkins currently has available about the Halifax Explosion. So, this was of course a massive accident that happened in Halifax in 1917 when a ship full of explosives collided with another

ship in the harbor. And the estimate is it killed somewhere around 2,000 people. This is obviously an incredibly moving exhibit. I was wondering if you could explain what the connection is with Perkins.

**Jen:** So before the explosion, there was this very colorful fire that drew residents to their window, and the subsequent explosion shattered every window in the city so it sent glass into the eyes of all the people. The superintendent of the Halifax School for the Blind sent any communication that he could get out to his colleagues in the US. So, just ten days after the disaster Perkins Director Edward E. Allan called the attention the American Red Cross to the situation in Halifax, and the Red Cross ended up appointing their own committee to kind of manage and oversee their efforts there. And they named Dr. Allen chairman of this committee, which included other members from other American schools for the blind. The committee oversaw an eye clinic in Halifax that not only treated the injuries but also provided rehabilitation services and follow-up care. So it's something that wasn't necessarily standard practice at the time, and it helped to save some vision, and helped victims continue to take care of their families or earn a living. And you can read the full story about it on our Perkins exhibit online, which is, I think it's [perkins.org/history/halifax](http://perkins.org/history/halifax)

**Caroline:** Wonderful. Thank you, Jen. And I understand in addition to all these incredible online exhibits, there's also a museum at Perkins. So, can you tell me a little bit about that?

**Jen:** So the Perkins Museum is located inside the big Howe building on the Perkins campus. The museum tells the story of Perkins primarily through artifacts related to curriculum, but also really reveals the broader history of educating students with blindness or deafblindness from 1829 to today. It highlights Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller, and Laura Bridgman, who all attended Perkins, but also well-known figures with connections to Perkins such as Charles Dickens and Louisa May Alcott. Most exhibits have some artifacts on display so that visitors can experience them the way they were intended, by touch. This includes Braille writers, handwriting devices. We have books in Boston Line Type you can touch. And one of the gems of our collection, which is a tactile globe built in 1837 for Perkins students. And it is thirteen feet in circumference and was used and fondly remembered by Helen Keller. And you can visit [perkins.org/history/visit](http://perkins.org/history/visit) to schedule a tour or find out more about the tours.

**Caroline:** Could I just ask you what is the connection between Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, and Perkins?

**Jen:** So in 1842, Charles Dickens visits Perkins as part of his, you know, big American tour. And he just had so much praise for Laura Bridgman and for the school, and he wrote about it in *American Notes*. And he actually later helped fund the printing of the *Old Curiosity Shop* in Boston Line Type. So we have a bunch of those copies and we have letters from him talking about wanting to print these books, pay for the printing. And what's really beautiful is that the story is that Helen Keller's mother read *American Notes* and knew about Perkins from that book and she reached out and then eventually, yeah, Anne Sullivan went to Helen Keller. So that's, that's the Charles Dickens connection. And then, when the kindergarten was starting, there was a lot of fundraising, and Louisa May Alcott wrote a story called "The Blind Lark" and sold it to the children's magazine *St. Nicholas*, and donated the \$225 fee for the building fund. So that's our connection with Louisa May Alcott.

**Caroline:** Thank you so much for sharing those. That's great.

**Jen:** Absolutely. Our correspondence collection, which, a lot of it is online, is filled with all kinds of interesting people.

**Caroline:** Do you find that there's certain things that really resonate with kids who come to visit the exhibits?

**Jen:** So the director of tourism volunteers, who gives these tours, Kevin Hartigan, is a master storyteller, and he reports that children really love to hear about Helen Keller, Anne Sullivan, and Laura Bridgman. And what's really interesting is Laura Bridgman is mentioned most in thank you notes Kevin receives, and he thinks mostly because visitors knew nothing about this Helen Keller that existed before Helen Keller, which is Laura Bridgman. So she's this new, really fascinating, wonderful figure which we try to really get people to know better once they're here. They usually come for Helen, but we also say, here's Laura Bridgman as well. But they also love getting to touch the giant tactile globe I mentioned earlier because Helen Keller touched it, and they love getting to touch the taxidermied animals and detailed architectural models that are in the tactile museum. I think these tactile experiences seem to resonate with kids a great deal as well.

**Caroline:** Absolutely. It's not every museum that lets you actually touch the objects. Right?

**Jen:** Right! And it makes it very meaningful getting to actually experience something in that way, especially here, but I think for most things you really do get a lot out of touching, and smelling, and exploring something with your hands.

**Caroline:** I can't agree more. I also saw that you had an exhibit that involved 3D printing.

**Jen:** So, in 2016, we were approached by David Weimer and Sari Altschuler with this idea of using 3D printing technology to create an exhibit that would highlight early embossed printing systems found in the Perkins archives. And particularly, they wanted to provoke visitors to think about how all of our senses contribute to the experience of reading and think about accessibility. So what developed was this collaboration with Northeastern and Harvard universities that kind of culminated in an online Touch This Page exhibit, which has downloadable files of the 3D printed samples of embossed text made from Perkins books. There was a two-day symposium and pop-up style exhibitions featuring these 3D printed objects at local institutions in the Boston area. So, the pop-up exhibits are currently at Harvard, New York University, and will be at the Mount Holyoke College this spring. But the online exhibit and files that you can download and print your own objects, these 3D, these Boston Line Type objects with a very basic 3D printer, can be accessed at the website which is [touchthispage.com](http://touchthispage.com).

**Caroline:** Oh wow! So basically people who have access to a 3D printer, maybe through a local library or something like that, can actually kind of create this exhibit for themselves. Is that right?

**Jen:** Yes. So all the text from the exhibit is there for you. And then if you download the file, yeah, we've had somebody from get help from a local library to print them. And you're going to have samples of Boston Line Type. There's an eclipse, an illustration of the eclipse of the moon. There's snowflakes, like magnified snowflakes. It's really kind of an interesting, special, neat way to experience those objects.



**Caroline:** Absolutely. You mentioned the pop-up exhibits that are at Harvard and NYU and there's going to be one at Mount Holyoke. Are these things that other institutions can sort of sign up to have come to them?

**Jen:** That's what it's intended to be. So, if you go to [touchthispage.com](http://touchthispage.com) and contacted David or Sari or contacted me, I could put you in touch with them. They would definitely be interested in talking to you. I don't know how much longer it's going, but the idea is to keep this, keep this going.

**Caroline:** As a follow up to everything we've been talking about in terms of universal design and that kind of thing, there's a common refrain in disability studies and disability history, among other fields that is, "Nothing about us without us." So can you tell me a little bit how your archives and museum stay connected to disability communities?

**Jen:** Well, we are very fortunate to be in an institution that both serves and is served by those communities. So here at Perkins there are several staff members who are blind or have low vision who have been very, very generous with their time, providing feedback on archives projects, activities, museum exhibits, and accessibility. Outside of Perkins, we've been speaking at alumni events about Perkins history and archives resources, and trying to engage with past students or their families. We also strive to make as much of our collection as accessible as possible, whether it is artifacts in the museum available to touch, or materials in our digital collections, we really aim to make both spaces accessible and welcoming. I think this helps draw visitors and researchers from these communities to both spaces and to engage with us. We're definitely getting more engagement and we're working on that as well through special events or projects.

**Caroline:** Good to hear. And it seems like you also have a newsletter, right? So is this something that our audience who is interested in disability history might want to subscribe to?

**Jen:** Absolutely. Our newsletter provides quarterly updates on the activities in the archives, so everything from newly processed collections or digital collections. We have new donations and news about special projects or exhibits. It also lists the latest blog post, which is another way to learn about, more about the archives and those posts cover aspects of history related to our collections, interesting people, and strange objects, as well as glimpses into, you know, the odd preservation issue or behind-the-scenes aspects of the archives that we find interesting in the archives. And you can subscribe to the newsletter by going to [perkins.org/history/subscribe](http://perkins.org/history/subscribe) .

**Caroline:** Wonderful, wonderful. Thank you so much, Jen, this has been really fascinating. Is there anything else that you wanted to mention before we close off our interview today?

**Jen:** I would. We are really excited because we are in the process of digitizing and making available and fully accessible, films produced at Perkins between 1923 and 1985. And these are films that document evolving educational techniques, changing student populations, school events, and advocacy for those affected by blindness and deafblindness during this period. They will eventually be available online with audio description, closed captioning, and a downloadable transcript. "Deafblind Circus" is the first of these films that is available on our website and it is an eight-minute film documenting students and staff of the Perkins deafblind department putting on a circus for the community in 1969. And it's as fun as it sounds.

**Caroline:** Can't wait to check that out. And also obviously encourage our audience out there to check that out. And we will also be waiting with bated breath for the rest of the films to appear. It may take a while, of course, I understand, but that's really exciting and what an incredible trove for researchers and the public. So, thank you for doing that.

**Jen:** It's been a treat for us as well.

**Caroline:** All right, well, thank you so much again, Jen, for your time. This has been wonderful.

**Jen:** Thank you.

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**Caroline:** Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!