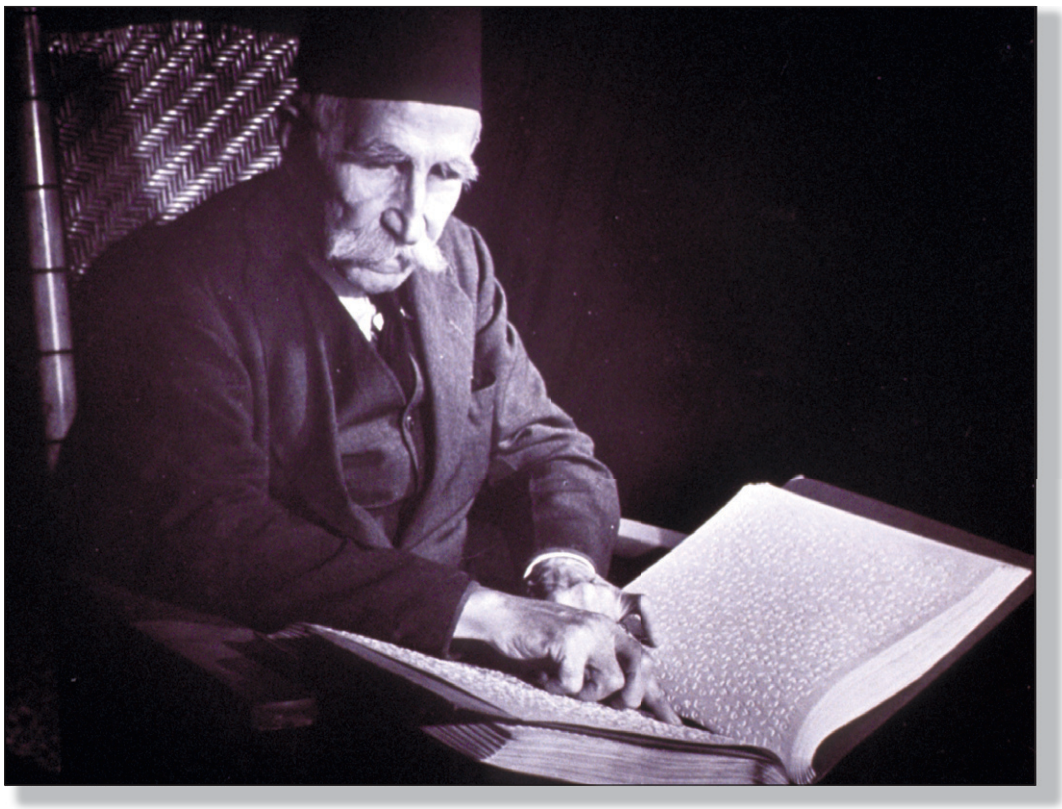
The Invention of Braille

Ginny A. Roth, MLS, and Elizabeth Fee, PhD

LOUIS BRAILLE (1809–1852) was born in Coupvray, a town in north central France, on January 4, 1809. At the age of three, he accidentally blinded himself in one eye with a stitching awl taken from his father's leather workshop. His other eye went blind because of sympathetic ophthalmia, an inflammation of both eyes following trauma to one.[1]

When he was 15, he invented a universal system for reading and writing to be used by people who are blind or visually impaired that now bears his name. He published the first Braille book, *Method of Writing Words, Music, and Plain Songs by Means of Dots, for Use by the Blind and Arranged for Them*, in 1829, at age 20.[2] A talented musician, he also developed a Braille musical codification.

As an adult, Braille became the first blind apprentice teacher at the New School for the Blind in Paris, France. There, he taught algebra, grammar, music, and geography. He later became the first blind full professor at the school. Braille saved enough money from his teaching position to buy himself a piano so he could practice whenever he wished. Despite his small salary, he also made many personal gifts and loans to his students to help them purchase warm clothing and other necessities. Braille developed tuberculosis in his mid-20s, and for the rest of his life had periods of health interspersed with times of pain and illness. When in good health, he maintained a heavy teaching load and held several jobs playing the organ.



A blind man reading a Braille book in 1938 at the New York Association of the Blind. *Source*. Image courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.

Braille is read by passing one's fingertips over characters made up of an arrangement of one to six embossed points. The relative positions of these points represent different alphanumeric characters. Braille can be written with a Braillewriter (similar to a typewriter) or by using a pointed stylus to punch dots through paper using an instrument called a Braille slate, which has rows of small cells in it as a guide.[3] Braille has since been adapted to almost every known language and is an essential tool for blind people everywhere. ■

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Contributions

Ginny A. Roth wrote the first draft, and Elizabeth Fee assisted with the editing.

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