“Injustice in society is like a rotten timber in the foundation of a house,” was the motto and guiding principle of Samuel Gridley Howe, MD. Dr. Howe was a physician, teacher, and philanthropist who spent much of his life crusading against some of the great inequalities and prejudices of his time.

Samuel was born on November 10, 1801, into a prominent Boston family, the fourth of 9 children. His father, Joseph Neals Howe (1775-1821) was a prosperous merchant who made ropes and cordage, but ran into financial difficulty when the federal government paid him poorly for supplies he had provided to the United States Navy during the War of 1812. Samuel’s mother, Martha “Patty” Gridley (1775-1819), was the granddaughter of the first American Chief of Engineers, a colonel during the Revolutionary War named Richard Gridley. She also reportedly was “one of the most beautiful women in Boston.” Samuel’s paternal grandfather, Edward Compton Howe (1742-1821), had been a participant in the Boston Tea Party, and Samuel’s first American ancestor, Abraham Howe, had arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s.

Young Samuel studied at Boston Latin School, where he reportedly was bullied and treated cruelly. One of his daughters later stated that her father had no fond memories of the school, and he had developed a keen sense of the harm done by injustice while he was there. Howe’s father would not allow Samuel to enter Harvard University because his father disagreed with the Federalist politics of the university leaders at the time. Instead, Samuel attended Brown University, where he was an indifferent student and frequently engaged in mischief. During one prank involving the college president’s horse, Howe met Horace Mann (1796-1859), who would later become one of the best-known education reformers of the era, and the two young men began a lifelong friendship. In 1821, Howe’s father died, and after graduation from Brown, Samuel entered Harvard Medical School, graduating in 1824.

Howe idealized the Hellenophile Lord Byron, so shortly after his graduation from Harvard, he set off for Greece to participate in the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire. Although Howe likely intended to use his medical skills for battlefield surgery, he soon became involved in combat, and was such an enthusiastic and effective leader that he acquired the nickname, “the Lafayette of the Greek Revolution.” He brought numerous Greek refugee children to the United States and paid for their education, published letters in newspapers informing Americans about the conflict in Greece, raised money to support the Revolution, and in 1828 wrote an account of his experiences, *Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution*. He continued to support Greece in various ways throughout his life, and as late as 1866, when he was 64 years old, he made a trip to Crete to aid refugees during the Cretan Revolution.

After leaving Greece in 1827, Howe went to Paris, where he studied medicine briefly and became involved in the July 1830 popular uprising that led to the fall of the Bourbon monarchy. After returning to the United States in 1831, he founded the...
country’s first school for blind children, initially called “New England Asylum for the Blind”. This school was based on an institution he had observed in Paris, and was inspired by discussions with a colleague, Dr John Dix Fisher (1797-1850). In the first year of the school, students were taught by Howe at his father’s old home on Pleasant Street in Boston, but in 1833 Thomas Hadassayd Perkins (1764-1854) — a wealthy trader in Turkish opium, furs, and enslaved people — donated a mansion for the school’s use. In 1839, this mansion was sold to buy a larger building, a former hotel in South Boston, which became the permanent home of the school until 1912. In honor of Perkins’s gift, the school was renamed the Perkins School for the Blind and has also been known as the Perkins Institute. The Perkins School is now based in Watertown, Massachusetts, and continues to train teachers, educate students, and provide assistive technology and educational materials for visually impaired people.

One prominent early student of the Perkins School was Laura Bridgman from New Hampshire (1829-1899), the first Deafblind person to receive a formal education. Ms Bridgman had been left without vision or hearing and with only a faint sense of taste and smell after a bout with scarlet fever at age 2. She proved to be a good student and later taught at the Perkins School. She learned to read using a form of raised tactile type invented by Howe in 1835, called “Howe type” and later “Boston Line letter,” a popular precursor of the Braille system. English author Charles Dickens visited the Perkins School in 1842 and was so impressed by the facility that he described the experience in his book, American Notes. Later Howe founded schools for blind children in several other states.

In 1848, Howe also founded a school in Boston for education of “feeble-minded” boys with developmental delay and mental disabilities, which was later renamed the Walter E. Fernald Developmental Center (after an early director of the school). Long after Howe’s death, the school and residential facility became notorious for eugenics procedures and experiments on residents who lacked capacity to provide consent. The Walter Fernald facility finally closed when its last elderly resident moved out in 2014.

Howe was involved in political and revolutionary causes throughout his career, and served in the Massachusetts legislature, where he advocated for educational reform, including the abolishment of corporal punishment. In the 1840s, he and several friends, including Samuel Morse and James Fenimore Cooper supported a revolution in Poland that was soon crushed by Russia. Howe went to Europe to personally distribute aid and letters, and he was arrested in Berlin, where he spent a month in prison before a US diplomat in Paris negotiated his release.

In 1843, Howe married Julia Ward (1819-1910), the daughter of a successful New York banker. During their honeymoon in Europe, they met Florence Nightingale (1820-1910). Nightingale later reported Samuel Howe was the first person to encourage her to become a nurse. Samuel and Julia had 6 children. Their oldest daughter married a Greek man who succeeded Howe as director of the Perkins School, and in 1917, three of their daughters (Florence, Laura, and Maud) collectively won a Pulitzer prize for literature for a biography of their mother. Samuel and Julia’s marriage was reportedly stormy, in part because Samuel, though liberal-minded in many aspects, felt a married woman’s place was in the home, and he did not support the idea of women with children having an independent career. This did not sit well with Julia Ward Howe, who was a brilliant and ambitious woman and a strong supporter of abolitionist and suffragist causes.

Samuel Howe ran for US Congress in 1846 (unsuccessfully) on an anti-slavery platform. He co-founded an anti-slavery newspaper, which his wife Julia co-edited, and he funded John Brown’s abolitionist work, though he disagreed with Brown’s infamous attack on Harper’s Ferry in 1859. After the Harper’s Ferry attack failed, Howe briefly fled to Canada to avoid
prosecution. Howe helped buy the freedom of several escaped enslaved persons, and he served on the American Freedman’s Inquiry Committee investigating compliance with the Emancipation Proclamation. Family members later claimed that the Howe home in Boston was a stop on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, Howe served on the US Sanitary Commission, a relief agency supporting wounded and sick Union Army soldiers.

Howe later founded the State Board of Charities of Massachusetts in 1863, which was the first board of its type in the United States. In 1870, he was sent by President Grant to explore the possibility of annexing the Dominican Republic to the United States, which was ultimately unsuccessful. On January 9, 1876, Howe passed away and was buried in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Howe’s wife, Julia Ward, who ultimately became more famous than him and was the originator of Mother’s Day and author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” appeared on a United States stamp issued as part of the “Great Americans” series in 1987 (Scott #2176). In addition, the two most famous students of the Perkins School, Anne Sullivan (1866-1936) and Helen Keller (1880-1968), were honored philatelically by the United States in 1980 (Scott #1824) and have also been commemorated by several other countries, including Brazil, Spain, and Mauritius. Samuel Gridley Howe was honored philatelically by his beloved Greece in October 2021 (Scott # pending.)

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