Samuel Gridley Howe was born on November 10th, 1801, to a prominent Boston family. His grandfather, Edward Compton Howe, was one of several “Indians” responsible for the destruction of English tea during the Boston Tea Party, explaining, perhaps, where Howe received the revolutionary spirit.  

Graduating from Brown University, and later Harvard Medical School, Howe decided to leave for Greece in 1824, emulating his hero, Lord Byron. Howe was not simply a surgeon and soldier in the Greek army but was also instrumental in gathering finances and supplies. As he himself noted in an 1828 letter to a fellow Bostonian Philhellene, “I most sincerely wish that it in were in my power to go round the country and…preach a kind of Crusade…but as circumstances forbid it, I must content myself with doing what I can.” During a trip to America, Howe raised $60,000 for famine and other refugee relief efforts.  

Beyond material needs, Howe also rescued Greek orphans, bringing them to the United States for better opportunities. After the Revolution, Howe used his medical knowledge and philanthropy to create the Perkins Institute for the Blind, a first of its kind in the United States. Laura Bridgman, a deaf-blind young woman who learned to read and write, before going on to teach at Perkins herself, brought Howe and the Institute great fame, and it was the writing of none other than Charles Dickens which informed one Catherine Keller of Howe’s work with Bridgman.  

What many do not know however, is the more direct connection between Helen Keller and revolutionary Hellas. Howe’s philhellenism did not decrease with age, and in his sixties, he traveled to then still-occupied Crete to distribute funds for their struggle against the Turks. In Epirus, he met a young law student and journalist named Michael Anagnostopoulos and was impressed enough to hire the young man as his assistant. In America, the newly named Michael Anagnos was given a position as a Greek and Latin teacher at Perkins, before he fell in love and married Howe’s daughter, Julia. Now a part of the family, Howe made Anagnos his successor at Perkins, and it was Michael Anagnos, the Greek refugee, who suggested to Catherine Keller that another student-turned-teacher, Anne Sullivan, could help her blind-deaf daughter, Helen, learn to communicate.  

From imitating the Romantic exploits of his Byronic hero, to helping teach those whom society chose not to see, Samuel Gridley Howe serves as an example of how Americans can truly live out the ideals of justice and equality that Greece has demonstrated, both in ancient times, and in its own quest for modern freedom.

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1 Edward Compton Howe  
2 The Letters and Journals of Samuel Gridley Howe  
4 Michael Anagnos, “who made the sightless see”