

# **A Deaf Utopia:**

Crossing the Vineyard Sound from Chilmark, Massachusetts to Hartford, Connecticut

Nina Butler  
Education 212  
Midterm Paper  
10/19/09

“We never referred to them as ‘deaf and dumb’, rather ‘deaf and mute’, because they certainly weren’t dumb.” – Eric Cottle 1994<sup>1</sup>

The goal of deaf education in America is to help the deaf integrate into mainstream society. For nearly 300 years, a unique community on Martha’s Vineyard offered an early example of how that was achieved. Eric Cottle is one of the last of the living Vineyarders to have ties to the Chilmark Deaf Community of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His great, great grandmother and grandfather were deaf and it was on the deaf utopia of Martha’s Vineyard that they built their lives. Many deaf families shared the same story, causing the Vineyard to become a significant phenomenon in the history of the deaf community and deaf culture in America.

Martha’s Vineyard is a small island off of the south coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts and for nearly 300 years from the early eighteenth century to the mid twentieth century it was home to an usually high percentage of deaf Americans. Deafness first came to Martha’s Vineyard with the Puritans from Weald, a region in the British county of Kent. One of the first Puritan groups to make the journey to the New World in the early seventeenth century was the congregation of Reverend John Lothrop. Three of the families that came over with Lothrop carried the deaf gene; the Lamberts, the Tiltens and the Skiffes. Jonathan Lambert was the first documented deaf person on the Island in 1714. Remarkably, the entire history of deafness on Martha’s Vineyard can be traced to one of these three families.

The reason the deaf gene spread so rapidly after the arrival of John Lothrop’s troupe was through generations of inbreeding. According to Yankee kinship rules, half-siblings could not marry, and an uncle could not marry a niece nor could an aunt marry

---

<sup>1</sup> Eric Cottle in Chilmark Deaf Community Documentary, (1994).

her nephew. Any other extended relationships, however, were fair game.<sup>2</sup> By the late eighteenth century, of those who married, over 96 percent of marriages were between relatives, usually first cousins.

In Nora Groce's book *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language* she estimates that by the late 1800's, 1 in 155 people on Martha's Vineyard were born deaf. This is almost 20 times the national average during this time. By far the most deafly populated area on Martha's Vineyard was the town of Chilmark. Here 1 in 25 residents were deaf, and 1 in 4 in the Chilmark village of Squibnocket. There was also a higher percentage (65 percent) of mixed marriages between deaf and hearing spouses on Martha's Vineyard compared to the national average of 20 percent for this time.<sup>3</sup>

Since such a large population of Martha's Vineyard was deaf, there needed to be a way to bridge the gap. Both hearing residents as well as deaf ones from the early eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, commonly used Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) to communicate with one another. This allowed deaf residents to smoothly integrate into society, and suddenly deafness was no longer a barrier to participation in public life, as it was on the main land. Residents had signs for everything. "Everyone in Chilmark was identified by a sign for that was an easier and quicker way than spelling out the person's name."<sup>4</sup> For instance, Gail Huntington's daughter Emily had a small scar on her left cheek that resembled a dimple, so her signed name would be a mix between the sign for child and the sign for dimple. This particular

---

<sup>2</sup> Meredith Peruzzi. "Deafness on Martha's Vineyard," Associated Content, <[http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/78779/deafness\\_on\\_marthas\\_vineyard.html?cat=12](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/78779/deafness_on_marthas_vineyard.html?cat=12)>. (2 November 2006) 2.

<sup>3</sup> Nora Ellen Groce. "'They Were Just Like Everyone Else'," Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language, (1985) 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gail Huntington. "Chilmark's Deaf: Valued Citizens," Dukes County Intelligencer, (February 1981) 102.

combination of signs was specific to only Emily Huntington's name and no one else's. This theory also extended to the names of places, such as the nearby whaling city of New Bedford, which was signed by pointing to the North, signing a whale and then holding your nose.

Everyone in the community would communicate in sign language, both deaf and hearing. It was typical for a hearing Vineyarder to be bilingual in both English and Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, and hearing children born to hearing parents usually learned signs bit by bit until they became fluent later in life. As one reporter from an issue of the 1895 *Boston Sunday Herald* explained, "The spoken language and the sign language [is] so mingled in the conversation that you pass from one to the other, or use both at once, almost unconsciously."<sup>5</sup> Hearing people sometimes signed even when there were no deaf people present because it was a discrete way to communicate things when silence was expected. Children often signed behind a schoolteacher's back, adults signed to one another during church sermons and farmers signed across their fields, where yelling to communicate was inefficient. Sometimes the deaf were even envied, because even though the hearing could understand Martha's Vineyard Sign Language to some extent, they didn't understand all of the nuances of the inside jokes the deaf signed to one another.

When people moved to the Vineyard, especially to the town of Chilmark, they had to learn MVSL in order to get by in the community. Deafness was so common that some hearing residents actually thought it was a contagious disease because it was spreading so rapidly in the community. Since everyone in town knew MVSL, deafness

---

<sup>5</sup> News Reporter *Boston Sunday Herald*, (1895) in Nora Ellen Groce. "The Island Adaptation to Deafness," *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, (1985) 53.

was never considered to be a handicap. As initially quoted, Eric Cottle stressed in a 1994 interview that deaf residents “were never referred to as ‘deaf and dumb’, rather ‘deaf and mute’, because they certainly weren’t dumb.” This particular quote seemed to be the foundation of all local’s attitudes. Deaf people were never thought of as a group or as "the deaf," but were always considered valuable individuals.

During this time many deaf people on the main land had to learn a trade only to make very little money, which furthered ostracized them from American society. It is significant that on the Vineyard the deaf were of the same socio-economic standing as the hearing. In fact, Nathaniel Mann, a deaf citizen of Chilmark was the wealthiest man in his day. Most deaf people on the Vineyard were at least middle class, opposite of the American perceived deaf stigma. However, in the late nineteenth century, tourism became a mainstay on the Vineyard and new people began to settle, greatly changing the economy and community. This new settlement of people brought with them a very different attitude towards deaf people than the values long evident on the Island. Not all off-Islanders were condescending to the deaf, but many viewed deafness as something one should be ashamed of and this greatly disturbed the island’s social patterns.

Before the influx of new people, deaf and hearing children were educated in a one-room schoolhouse with children of all ages and one teacher. Very little is known about their education other than the assumption that the teacher in the Menemsha School in Chilmark must have been versed in Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language given that it was a societal necessity. The flood of new people on the Vineyard forced the deaf children to attend a specialized school off Island to create a better opportunity for them to succeed in this rapidly changing Vineyard society. The remaining members of the deaf

community began marrying these off-Islanders, further expanding the gene pool and reducing the number of deaf births. The hearing Islanders also had more of a selection of marriage with these new groups settling. These changes in marriage patterns among both the hearing and the deaf along with these other new elements led to the demise of this once deaf utopia. At the turn of the century, there were 15 deaf people left on the Island and by 1925 there were only four.<sup>6</sup> The last deaf person born into the deaf society on Martha's Vineyard was Katie West. She died in 1952 and by the 1970's, the original Martha's Vineyard Sign Language had died out.

While the deaf community was dwindling back home on the Island, deaf students were flourishing in the first school for the deaf. Formerly called the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, the American School for the Deaf (ASD) opened its doors on April 15, 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut. All deaf Vineyard students but one were sent to Hartford as a group and continued to use their native Martha's Vineyard Sign Language. Eventually MVSL became absorbed in the teachers French Sign Language and the two contributed to the creation of the current, universal American Sign Language. It is estimated that only 25 to 35 percent of deaf Americans were literate in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> However, nearly 100 percent of deaf Islanders were literate in the nineteenth century in part to ASD. During this time Massachusetts paid for ten years of schooling for children, so after ten years of free schooling at ASD, those deaf students that chose to return back to the Island were more literate than their hearing counterparts because of the excellent education they had received.

---

<sup>6</sup> Meredith Peruzzi. "Deafness on Martha's Vineyard," Associated Content, <[http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/78779/deafness\\_on\\_marthas\\_vineyard.html?cat=12](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/78779/deafness_on_marthas_vineyard.html?cat=12)>. (2 November 2006) 7.

<sup>7</sup> Nora Ellen Groce. "Growing Up Deaf on the Vineyard," Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language. (1985) 78.

In the early nineteenth century, Frenchman Thomas Gallaudet observed his neighbor Dr. Mason Cogswell's deaf daughter Alice trying to communicate with her hearing siblings in their back yard. This heart wrenching scene motivated Gallaudet to create the American School for the Deaf, a place where children like Alice could be afforded the opportunity to attend school. Since there had never been a school for the deaf in America before, Gallaudet traveled to Europe to study their methods of teaching the deaf to bring back to America and open his own school. Gallaudet, Dr. Cogswell, and ten other prominent citizens of Hartford founded ASD in 1817. The founding of ASD was a crucial milestone in the way society related to people with disabilities. The concept of self-reliance and the belief that religious salvation was possible through deep understanding of the Bible became the hope of the founders.

The school training of deaf-mutes lays the foundation for church work among them, as they leave the fostering care of their teachers and take their places in the battle of life. Much has been accomplished to enable them to bear their great deprivation cheerfully and bravely, and to cultivate the hope of finally reaching the glorious abodes in which they will be freed from all human imperfections.<sup>8</sup>

Imparting literacy, religious salvation and the skills needed to earn a living were the main goals of ASD. Achieving those goals required clarity in communication of the material being taught, which is why the school was purposely taught through signing from the start. Schools prior to ASD tried to teach deaf students as they would any other student and completely disregarded the fact that these students were deaf and couldn't hear the teacher's lessons. This method didn't work, because as Nora Groce argues in her book, integration is most successful when it acknowledges rather than denies the differences among us. The American School for the Deaf promoted this acceptance of deaf culture consciously in their mission:

---

<sup>8</sup> Edward Allen Fay. "The Church Mission to Deaf Mutes," Histories of American schools for the deaf, 1817-1893, Volume 3, (1893) 5.

The American School for the Deaf was a Congregationalist school in its early years, which was consistent with the civil government of Connecticut at the time the school was established. An important feature of manual communication as a teaching language is that it allows deaf people to be teachers. Many alumni did go on to become teachers and principals at schools for the deaf throughout the United States, which spread sign language throughout the country. A deaf culture developed during this period, with periodicals, organizations, social relations and all the other features to be expected of a minority culture dispersed through the general population. So rapid and positive was the spread of this language and culture that the period is today referred to as a golden age.<sup>9</sup>

Taken directly from their website, one can easily see that the American School for the Deaf still prides itself on the products of its institution. Dating back to Aristotle, deaf people had been deemed “defective” because it was believed that if you could not hear, you could not learn. The American School for the Deaf challenged this notion and proved that deaf people weren’t as brutish and animal-like as once thought. Deaf people were never expected to be a part of the greater American community, but ASD made sure to give its students vocational education for them to function in society.

Manual training, now beginning to be considered an essential part of school training for all children, is doubly so for deaf-mutes. For their future welfare it is not only necessary that they should form habits of industry, but that every boy should learn how to care for and use tools, and acquire at least the rudiments of a trade, that he may be able to compete successfully with those favored with hearing.<sup>10</sup>

This statement made by Edward Allen Fay in 1893 is an excellent indicator of the responsiveness to American culture this school had. Very early in the history of the American School for the Deaf, this need for manual training was recognized, and beginning in 1822, manual training became a requisite part of the education of students. Boys received manual training in cabinet making, shoemaking and tailoring just to name a few. Girls also learned useful trades like sewing and housework. These skills allowed deaf students to be productive members of American society after graduating. Whether

---

<sup>9</sup> “History of Deaf Education in America,” American School for the Deaf, <<http://www.asd1817.org/>>. (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Edward Allen Fay (1893) in Tricia A. Leakey. “Vocational Education in the Deaf American and African-American Communities,” Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship, (1999) 79.

they chose to get a job after graduating, or return home to the family farm, students gained invaluable insights into their particular trade from ASD, which gave them social mobility in the world outside of school.

To better understand more fully the opportunities given to the students at the American School for the Deaf, here is a list made in 1886 by former students detailing the specific trade enrollments during their years at ASD.

MEN 1 Artist, ? 3 Bakers,? 1 Basket-maker,? 1 Belt-maker,? 1 Blacksmith ? 1 Boatman, ? 1 Boat-builder,? 1 Book-agent,? 2 Book-binders,? 1 Brakeman,? 1 Brass-molder,? 1 Brass-worker,? 1 Bricklayer,? 5 Burnishers, ? 2 Chair-makers,? 1 Cigar-maker,? 1 Clerk in drug store,? 1 Clerk in post-office, ? 1 Casket-maker,? 1 Casket-trimmer, 1 Draughtsman,? 1 Dyer,? 3 Editors,? 70 Farmers,? 1 Fireman,? 3 Fishermen,? 1 Foreman in warehouse,? 1 Foundryman,? 3 Furniture-makers,? 1 Furniture-polisher,? 1 Glass-cutter,? 1 Glue-maker,? 2 Hatters,? 1 Hostler,? 1 Ice-dealer,? 1 Janitor,? 1 Clerk in Treasury Department,? 3 Clergymen, ordained,? 1 Cooper., 6 Clockmakers,? 1 Clock-case maker,? 1 Copyist,? 2 Cutters in shoe-shop,? 12 Cabinet-makers,? 1 Capitalist (this man has made his fortune, is a director and the largest stockholder of a flourishing insurance company), 1 Car-maker,? 17 Carpenters,? 2 Carriage-makers,? 1 Carriage-painter, ? 2 Cartridge makers,? 1 Oysterman,? 1 Pail-maker,? 8 Painters,? 1 Paper-ruler (by machine), ? 1 Patent-lawyer,? 1 Pattern-maker,? 2 Peddlers,? 1 Picture-frame maker,? 3 Piano-case makers, ? 1 Plough-maker,? 1 Pocket-book maker, 5 Printers,? 1 Quarryman,? 1 Rubber-stamp maker, ? 1 Rule-maker,? 5 Sash and blind makers,? 2 Saw-milltenders,? 1 Shoe dealer, ? 20 Shoemakers,? 1 Jeweler,? 3 Joiners,? 7 Laborers,? 1 Lamp-trimmer,? 1 Last-maker,? 3 Lock-makers,? 2 Masons, ? 4 Machinists,? 20 Mechanics,? 1 Merchant,? 21 Mill operatives,? 1 Mill-wright,? 1 Monument sculptor,? 3 Nail-makers,? 1 Organ-case maker,? 27 Shoe factory operatives,? 1 Shuttle-maker,? 1 Spool-turner,? 1 Stair-builder,? 2 Stone-cutters,? 1 Silver-metal scourer,? 8 Tanners, ? 15 Teachers, ? 2 Tinsmiths,? 1 Tool-maker,? 2 Upholsterers,? 1 Varnisher,? 1 Wagon-maker,? 1 Watch-maker,? 4 Wire-drawers,? 6 Wood-carvers, ? 2 Wool-sorters.

WOMEN 1 Book-stitcher,? 2 Cartridge-makers, ? 27 Mill operatives, ? 5 Seamstresses, ? 1 Corset-maker,? 1 Dressmaker,? 2 Hair-braiders,? 1 Matron in a school for deaf-mutes, ? 2 Matrons, Assistant, in a school for deaf-mutes,? 3 Shoe factory operatives,? 1 Supervisor of girls in school for deaf-mutes,? 2 Tailoresses,? 6 Teachers.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most popular trades for students was training to be a teacher. During the early years of the American School for the Deaf, it served as a normal school for aspiring teachers to take charge of the new deaf schools springing up in the country. The

---

<sup>11</sup> American School for the Deaf Alumni (1886) in American School for the Deaf, Hartford. "The American Asylum at Hartford, for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb," Report of the Directors and Officers of the American Asylum, at Hartford 76-77, (6 May 1893) 28-30.

standard of qualifications for a teacher of deaf-mutes was extremely high. This was modeled after the teachers at ASD. Thomas Gallaudet, one of the founders of ASD, was the school's first principal and he himself had received a strong liberal arts education at Yale University. He recruited men of similar educational stature to help him create a curriculum of instruction to produce the best and the brightest deaf students. ASD has changed slightly over the years in its goals and methods, but it still remains the "Mother School" of deaf education, dedicated to the innovative development and education of its students.

Today deaf Americans have been integrated into and become very successful members of a hearing society. But in the early years early years it was only with the help of schools like the American School for the Deaf and the example of the deaf utopia of Chilmark, that deaf people were able to maintain some sense of normalcy in an otherwise difficult life. Martha's Vineyard will forever be remembered as being the only community to have ever fully integrated its deaf members into its society. It is hard to believe that there once was a time and a place where the hearing neighbors of the deaf were willing to learn their language "and almost without exception the deaf-and-dumb were valuable members of the community."<sup>12</sup>

#### Works Cited

*American School for the Deaf-Established in 1817*. Web. 12 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.asd>

---

<sup>12</sup> Gail Huntington. "Chilmark's Deaf: Valued Citizens," Dukes County Intelligencer, (February 1981) 98.

1817.org/>.

American School for the Deaf, Hartford, comp. "The American Asylum at Hartford, for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb." *Report of the Directors and Officers of the American Asylum, at Hartford* 76-77 (1891). Print.

Lockwood and Brainard Company, ed. *A Brief History of the American Asylum, at Hartford, for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb*. Hartford: Press of the Case, 1893. Print

*Chilmark Deaf Community Documentary*. Prod. Kristin Maloney. Perf. Eric Cottle, Donald Poole and Gail Huntington. 2009. DVD.

Cleve, John Vickrey Van. *Deaf History Unveiled Interpretations from the New Scholarship*. New York: Gallaudet UP, 1999. Print.

Fay, Edward A. *Histories of American schools for the deaf, 1817-1893*. Comp. Volta Bureau (U.S.). Vol. 3. Washington, D.C.: Washington, D.C. : The Volta Bureau, 1893. Print.

Groce, Nora E. *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard*. New York: Harvard UP, 1985. Print.

Huntington, Gail. "Chilmark's Deaf: Valued Citizens." *Dukes County Intelligencer* 22.3 (1981): 98-102. Print

Peruzzi, Meredith. "Deafness on Martha's Vineyard." *Associated Content* – *associatedcontent.com*. 2 Nov. 2006. Web. 7 Oct. 2009.  
<[http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/78779/deafness\\_on\\_marthas\\_vineyard.html?cat=12](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/78779/deafness_on_marthas_vineyard.html?cat=12)>.