

# How the Past Informs the Present: Intersections of Deaf History with Deaf Studies

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HISTORIANS LOOK TO THE PAST TO UNDERSTAND PEOPLE AND SOCIETY. Historian William H. McNeill, in a reflection paper for the American Historical Association, wrote: “Historical knowledge is no more and no less than carefully and critically constructed collective memory. As such it can both make us wiser in our public choices and more richly human in our private lives.”<sup>1</sup> Human behavior is not static and historians track change over time to help understand how people act and think. What factors lead to change? How did things change? What is the result of this change? Perhaps there was an effort to resist change. What does this tell us about a group’s persistence?

One value of studying history is a reaffirmation of one’s identity. The lessons we can learn from an individual or group effort’s to mobilize against an injustice or standing for one’s rights can teach us about values, courage, and morality. Citizenship is one of the most oft cited examples for studying history, especially at educational institutions. Even those who seek to become naturalized citizens of this country needs to demonstrate some historical knowledge in order to demonstrate they can be good citizens. Historians have the skills to identify and locate primary sources. How, for example, can we study war if we are living in peaceful times?<sup>2</sup> Historians can use primary sources to help provide interpretations.

The exploration of Deaf people as a cultural community began, in its earliest form, by drawing upon two discrete fields of study: linguistics and history. The work done by scholars at the Gallaudet Linguistics Laboratory and the Salk Institute were instrumental not only for their studies that validated

ASL as a language but also for providing a space for language research for Deaf people who went on to become ASL teachers and Ph.D. students. This cohort would later emerge in faculty positions when ASL and Deaf Studies became institutionalized in academic institutions around the country.<sup>3</sup>

The influence of history was different. History provided students and scholars with a narrative for their actions. As Harlan Lane put it in an interview on Deaf Mosaic shortly after his seminal work, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* was published in 1981, a common mark of oppression is that “there is no history of the minority.”<sup>4</sup> Lane and others’ work, notably Jack Gannon’s 1981 *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* and Nora Groce’s 1985 *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha’s Vineyard*, gave Deaf Americans an understanding of themselves as part of a historically-based culture. The stories of Laurent Clerc, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, and George Veditz emerged in the early years of Deaf Studies and it became *de rigueur* for the enterprising ASL teacher or Deaf Studies scholar to acknowledge these ‘Founding Fathers’ of Deaf America.

With any community or culture, stories are shared and passed down through generations. These stories contain historical background and can be stretched over the years spawning certain myths. Historians studying Deaf people can also look to the myths — what deaf people believed to be true and why. Deaf people, like other groups, hold on to these myths to help explain more clearly and succinctly why events occurred and provide justification for current ideologies. Explaining historical events in concrete terms is not always possible since historical events have layers of complexities. Peeling away these layers can help explain why events occurred. Rather than sorting out the nuances of history, people often look for simpler explanations for historical episodes. This, in turn, leads to the creation and perpetuation of myths to help explain why things occurred in Deaf history.

A central story among Deaf Americans is outsized role the 1880 International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan is believed to have played in the rise and spread of the oral method in Deaf education. This event, popularly known as the “Milan Congress” or the “1880 Milan Congress”, was also said to galvanize Deaf Americans into forming the United States’ National Association of the Deaf (NAD), so as to better combat the oral method. There are three myths which spring from this story. First, that Milan perceived as a threat from the start and the NAD was founded as a result. Second, was that oralism is said, in popular accounts, to have begun after 1880. And finally, that nineteenth century Deaf people were universally opposed to speech instruction.

Historians argue over the causes of certain events. This search for the antecedents of historical events is called *causality*, and a bane of histori-

ans is the mistaken ascription of or over-simplification of causality. Did the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand ignite the First World War? Was the Civil War about freeing the slaves or preserving the Union? These questions are deliberate oversimplifications: historical events occur due to a complex range of social, economic and cultural factors. The myth that the NAD was founded due to Milan is widespread, even working its way into a PBS website on Deaf History.<sup>5</sup> But this myth fails the most basic test of causality: that an event occurs because of a preceding event. The National Association of the Deaf was founded at its first Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, which ran from August 25 to August 27, 1880. The Milan Congress took place September 6 to 11, 1880.<sup>6</sup>

Attributing the founding of the NAD to Milan is not only wrong, it also oversimplifies Deaf American life to a battle against oralism. Deaf Americans assembled for a variety of reasons, as noted in preamble to the organization's constitution, as adapted at its Third Convention in 1889. Deaf Americans assembled for "mutual assistance" and with the aim of "bettering their condition in society at large" as well as for the more prosaic reason of "the enjoyment of social pleasure" resulting from bringing together Deaf people in one location. American Deaf people organized the NAD to serve as a community institution, not solely, or even simply, to combat oralism.

As noted earlier, oralism took roots in the United States long before 1880. The earliest attempt to found a deaf school in the United States was based on the premise of speech training modeled after the Braidwood Academy in Scotland. The Bolling family, who lived in Virginia during the eighteenth century, sent their children abroad (during the Revolutionary War) to the Braidwood Academy in Scotland. They were not alone — Charles Green was a Deaf American sent to the Braidwood Academy to be educated, and his father was concerned with speech instruction, a concern reinforced by the headmaster of the time.<sup>8</sup> The next generation of Bollings sought and retained the grandson of Thomas Braidwood and educated deaf children at his Virginia manor called Cobbs, focusing on speech instruction.

While this effort was shortlived, John Braidwood had a litany of personal problems including poor financial management and alcoholism.<sup>9</sup> During the early nineteenth century, a group of prominent citizens from Hartford, Connecticut mobilized to found the first permanent school for Deaf children. Founded in 1817, it is known today as American School for the Deaf. Under the guidance of Laurent Clerc, this school used sign language as the language of instruction, a practice which came to be known as the manual method. Over the next three decades, deaf schools sprang across the land using this method. Oralism was discussed as a potential pedagogical approach in schools in the South during antebellum America but was

rejected in favor of manualism. However, the Kentucky School for the Deaf started oral classes in 1843.<sup>10</sup> The Virginia school commenced articulation classes in the 1850s, some thirty years before the Milan Congress occurred.<sup>11</sup> Oralism soon found its place in the North with the establishment of the New York Institution for the Improved Instruction of Deaf Mutes (later renamed Lexington School for the Deaf) in 1867. Clarke School for the Deaf was founded the same year as Lexington and quickly became the premier school in oralism.<sup>12</sup> Clarke Principal Caroline Yale and others positioned the school as the bastion of oralism. Although oralism appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century, it had little influence until the late 1860s, following the Civil War.

Nineteenth century Deaf Americans did mobilize to prevent the spread of pure oralism in schools. But it is important to note the distinctions these leaders made between *pure oralism* and speech instruction, commonly called articulation training. Among the elite male leaders of the NAD and editors of Deaf periodicals there was broad support for training in articulation. Indeed, the *Deaf Mute Journal's* first comment on the Milan resolutions, made an aside in an editorial on speech instruction, concluded by saying the "articulation method" was "making itself recognized as a valuable aid in giving to others an almost equal footing with those whose senses are perfect."<sup>14</sup>

The hierarchal division of society into an upper class of those with perfect senses is jarring for twenty-first century eyes but offers another insight: we cannot judge the past by the present. Even as this editorial supported the idea of articulation classes, its author noted the opinion of educators that the articulation method was less useful for instruction in general knowledge. Speech training was seen as a useful skill, but not to the exclusion of signing instruction. What *did* galvanize the American Deaf community was the sustained campaign against the use of sign language, represented as pure oralism. Adherents of the pure oral method sought to prohibit use of sign language by Deaf children inside and outside the classroom, aiming to raise a generation of deaf children who would not sign.<sup>15</sup> Many of Deaf history's most stirring quotes in support of sign language and against oralism comes from the Deaf community fears of extremists banning the use of sign language, not from fears of speech instruction. The debate was not over speech, nor merely oralism, but more that of pure oralism and the restricted use of sign language.

In the years following the Milan Congress, the United States was changing. Waves of immigrants descended on the nation's shores, chiefly from southern and eastern Europe. Between 1880 and 1920, some 24,000,000 immigrants had entered the United States in search of better lives, political

and religious stability. Although these immigrants settled in various parts of the country, millions settled in New York City. In New York City, these groups established ethnic neighborhoods where people shared a common language and culture including distinct newspapers in German and Italian. As these immigrants claimed jobs once held by native Americans for even lower wages, they faced backlash and hostility through nativism.<sup>16</sup> Nativists, generally of Anglo-Saxon Protestant background, reacted in various ways including violence. Anti-catholic sentiments were on full force in New York and Boston.<sup>17</sup> These immigrants quickly learned that to secure jobs they would have to know some English.

To be an American was to learn English. A push for a homogenous society occurred on the national level. This extended to Native Americans as well. Native American children were forced from reservations into schools which emphasized Americanization. Pupils at these schools were taught English, Christianity, and even how to use a proper wardrobe.<sup>18</sup> In the eyes of oralists, signing was akin to a foreign language. Oralism became an attractive option for educators seeking to “assimilate” deaf children into American society. As a result, many residential schools offered oral classes, deaf teachers were fired or removed from their positions and replaced with hearing women.<sup>19</sup> Deaf adults were pushed out of schools and generations of deaf children grew up without adult Deaf role models among their teachers. Oralism, then, provided an opportunity to recast these Deaf Americans as Americans by speaking, interacting with members of society at large, and thus leave sign language — and by extension — a sign-language using Deaf community behind.

Another current known as the eugenics movement washed over the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Eugenics, roughly translated as “good in birth,” originated in England in 1883 by Sir Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin.<sup>20</sup> The American eugenics movement took roots in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. The push for eugenics meant a push to improve America’s genetic population through the vetting of those with undesirable genetic traits including alcoholism, insanity, and the blind among other conditions. By permitting these perceived “undesirables” to marry and procreate, it was thought that these offspring would supposedly weaken America’s genetic stock.

In order to maintain America’s homogenous society, various measures were implemented including sterilization, marriage restrictions, placement in asylums among others. Although no law was passed in the United States that prohibited deaf marriage, the threat remained. Oralism was the preferred pedagogical method — and states such as Nebraska — had decrees that made oralism mandatory in its state schools.<sup>21</sup> These deaf children

would be educated orally and taught to leave the signing community behind. The intertwining of eugenics and oralism posited that deaf children become responsible American adults and contributing to the betterment of American society by marrying outside of the deaf community, forgoing community ties to deaf associations, schools, and clubs.

The United States Deaf community has seen Deaf History as a source of inspiration and justification for its current activities in support of sign language. By doing this, they are following a path well-trod by other groups, whether minorities or nations.<sup>22</sup> The valorization of the past is an important part of group narratives, from that of the “Founding Fathers” to the call to “Go West, Young Man.” But we now recognize the women played a role in the American Revolution and the western United States was populated by Native American civilizations who were decimated by these westward-bound young men. The stories we tell in our initial flush of self-conceptualization are always open for re-interpretation. Deaf Studies and historians of the deaf experience can begin to re-assess its founding stories to find complexities overlooked in the initial push towards realization of deaf people as a cultural community. Such a re-examination can look at peoples and experiences, such as the experience of intersectional identities, which have not previously been covered. Historian John Hope Franklin once said, “If the house is to be set in order, one cannot begin with the present; he must begin with the past.”<sup>23</sup> It is these re-assessments that allow us a better understanding of our past and allow us to present a more nuanced portrait of the lives of members of the nineteenth century American Deaf community.

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#### ENDNOTES

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2. Peter N. Stearns, “Why Study History.” The American Historical Association, 11 July 2008. Also see Peter N. Stearns. *Meaning over Memory: Recasting the Teaching of History and Culture*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.
3. Personal correspondence, Benjamin Bahan, April 4, 2010.
4. Deaf Mosaic. Television program. Episode 105, 1985. Viewed online August 31, 2010 at <http://videocatalog.gallaudet.edu/player.cfm?video=1481>
5. A PBS website on the documentary *Sound and Fury* claims “in the U.S., the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) is founded and gains support in reaction to the Milan resolution.” “Timeline of Deaf History,” *Sound and Fury* website at PBS.org <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/soundandfury/culture/dhpop/popup11.html> Accessed August 31, 2010.
6. Proceedings of the First National Convention of Deaf-Mutes. New York: New York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, 1880; Edward Miner Gallaudet, “The Milan Convention” *American Annals of the Deaf*, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 (January 1881), 1-16.

7. "Constitution and Bylaws," *Proceedings of the Third Convention of the National Association of the Deaf*, 1889 (New York: 1890), 40.
8. Jan Branson and Don Miller, *Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as Disabled* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002), 101-102
9. Barry A. Crouch and Brian H. Greenwald, "Hearing with the Eye: The Rise of Deaf Education in the United States." John V. Van Cleve, ed. *The Deaf History Reader* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007), 24-44.
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11. Joyner, 74-75.
12. Jack Gannon. *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (Silver Spring, Maryland: National Association of the Deaf, 1981), 12.
13. Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989), 131.
14. *Deaf Mutes Journal*, November 4, 1880, p. 2
15. Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 128-141.
16. Roger Daniels. *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).
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18. Brian W. Dippie. *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy*. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982). For an example of Indian experiences at designated schools, see K. Tsianina Lomawaima. *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of the Chillicothe Indian School*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).
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20. Daniel J. Kevles. *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), preface.
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22. The classic work on the project of nationalism is Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 1991 edition.
23. John Hope Franklin, "Rediscovering Black America: A Historical Roundup" New York Times September 8, 1968 Accessed August 31, 2010 at the New York Times website at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/08/15/specials/franklin-roundup.html>.