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Genesis of a Community: The American Deaf Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Harry G. Lang

Editor's Introduction

Most histories of the American deaf community start with the immediate events leading to the founding of the American School for the Deaf in 1817, but deaf biographer and historian Harry Lang goes farther back into history. In this essay, Lang identifies deaf children, deaf adults, and deaf couples in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and he uses textual evidence to evaluate their lives and their communication methods. He concludes that sign communication was recognized long before Laurent Clerc introduced French Sign Language to the United States, and his evidence suggests that many deaf people lived fully and autonomously in colonial America. Lang also argues, however, that other deaf colonists suffered from oppression because of their deafness.

The learned . . . are not unapprized, that for two hundred years past there have appeared . . . Deaf . . . persons more or less instructed; which was then regarded as a species of miracle; but the rest of mankind did not imagine that this attempt had ever been made, and much less that it had been made with success.

Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée¹

In *American Colonies*, Allan Taylor wrote that “the traditional story of American uplift excludes too many people.”² He described a narrow cast

that showcased male English colonists in the East and seldom satisfactorily covered the interplay of colonial and native people or the regional explorations and “human places” of other cultures, even those of other Europeans. Though Taylor did not say so, the “human place” of deaf people in the American colonies and post-Revolutionary War period is also relatively unexplored. This paper attempts to begin to fill that gap, to enhance our understanding of both the complex attitudes played out in the lives of deaf people and their methods of self-empowerment during America’s formative years.

Seeds versus Roots

The biography of a community, as with biographies of people, should include tracing its life to the seeds of its existence. In the case of an individual, we usually study parental heritage. In the case of a community, we search for the seeds from which key elements or characteristics have evolved. For the deaf community in America, this heritage includes the seeds of American Sign Language and the creation of a new definition of normality within a group that typically has been segregated and mistreated because of its differences.³ From this new identity grow sociological, economic, and distinctly cultural features.

Other writers have recognized that the “roots” of the American deaf community took hold in the nineteenth century. Harlan Lane and his colleagues have described three New England deaf communities at Henniker, New Hampshire; Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts; and Sandy River, Maine, from which they examined genetic patterning, language, and marriage practices.⁴ The subsequent founding of residential schools and the gradual empowerment of deaf people as they took increasing control over their own destiny in the nineteenth century have resulted in not only a deaf community today but also a rich cultural tradition. The American Deaf culture we now experience is the flowering plant that has grown from the seeds and roots of past generations.

In contrast with roots, seeds, in their gestational state, manifest fewer obvious outward signs of life. Their germination may be influenced by both internal and external factors, and subsequent growth may be affected by cultivation and tolerance. It is in such isolated episodes of cultivation and tolerance that we find the earliest evidence of germinating seeds, or the genesis, of the American deaf community. Isolated clusters of deaf people, particularly deaf marriages and deaf families, were the seeds of small communities in themselves.

A second indication of genesis may be the cultivation and tolerance of visual and gestural communication in a world dominated by spoken communication. As this paper will show, since the early 1600s there have been numerous reports of sign language varieties, gestures, and even tactile communication (for deaf-blind persons) in the American colonies.

Third, genesis may be evidenced by examples of deaf people experiencing life in varied contexts, sometimes seemingly oppressed, other times apparently enjoying a full life despite their differences from the majority. Deaf people owned land, married, conducted business, and joined religious organizations during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The search for the deaf experience in the American colonies provides substantial evidence of the genesis of the deaf community.

The Seventeenth Century

From the earliest documented times in American history, there were reports of deafness among the indigenous Indians. In 1618, the Jesuits in America wrote to church officials inquiring whether a “deaf-mute Indian” could be admitted to the church.⁵ In seeking clarification of the church’s stance on the ability of a deaf person to learn and to demonstrate acceptance of the word of God, the pioneer Jesuits must have believed there was such potential. Two decades later, Roger Williams, a church leader and founder of the colony of Rhode Island, noted that among the Wampanoag Native children, “some are born deaf and so dumb.”⁶

Faith in the spiritual capability of deaf persons is also found in the story of Andrew Brown, who had embarked for America in 1636. Brown was involved in a reformation movement in Larne, county Antrim, Ireland. Having attended the monthly meetings led by George Dunbar, a minister of the Irish Presbyterian church at the parish of Larne, the “deaf and dumb” man had been administered communion. According to an American writing in the nineteenth century, it was a “singular, and almost solitary, case of a mute professing spiritual religion, previous to the recent successful efforts of giving them instruction” in Spain.⁷ Brown was described as “deeply affected, and had given satisfactory evidence, by signs connected with a godly life, of having been truly converted.”⁸ On September 9, 1636, Brown set sail on the 150-ton vessel *Eagle Wing* with 140 emigrants seeking freedom to practice their Protestant faith. The *Eagle Wing* weathered terrible storms near Lough Ryan and after almost foundering off Newfoundland with a master joist broken by fierce wind, the ship returned to Ulster, never having landed in New England.⁹

Although Brown did not land in New England, the story of an educated, signing, deaf man attempting to emigrate to the colonies in the early 1600s suggests that other deaf people did successfully emigrate from various countries at this time. Both deaf and hearing emigrants may also have carried deafness genetically from their homelands. Historian Nora Groce has speculated that the occurrence of hereditary deafness among many people who lived on Martha's Vineyard can be traced to about 200 inhabitants of the Weald in the English county of Kent, who followed Jonathan Lothrop, another minister, on the *Hercules* and *Griffin* in 1634. The first known deaf man on the Vineyard was born on Cape Cod in 1657 and moved to the island in 1692. Family records from the seventeenth century reveal that, in other colonies, there were various cases of children also born deaf.¹⁰

Attitudes toward deafness and other physical disabilities varied in the colonies. Historian Margret Winzer has written that people with deafness, blindness, and physical disabilities were generally viewed by the colonists as the "natural concerns of the family, the local community, or the church rather than the state."¹¹ In 1641, Massachusetts adopted a code of laws protecting people who should be "exempted by any naturall or personall impediment, as by want of yeares, greatness of age, defect of minde, fayling of sences, or impotencie of Lymbes."¹² By the mid-seventeenth century, the generally mixed views about people who likely had mental disabilities were evident in the fact that those who might become a burden were expelled from some towns, even with public whippings, whereas in other areas there was public support. In 1676, for example, the Pennsylvania colony provided for the assistance of a mentally disabled individual.¹³

The Puritans' theological beliefs shaped thinking about disability in seventeenth-century New England. In 1679, for example, Philip Nelson of Rowley, Massachusetts, already having "difficulties" in the church, was questioned by a council of ministers for "pretending to cure a deaf and dumb boy in imitation of our Savior by saying [Ephphatha]." This was a risky endeavor at this time due to the belief in witchcraft. The deaf person, Isaac Kilbourne, was brought before the church officials. "He was interrogated, but 'there he stood . . . like a deaf and dumb boy as he was.' They could not make him hear, nor could he speak."¹⁴

The fact that the Puritans viewed affliction as God's chastisement for sin did not completely prevent people with "afflictions" from functioning in society or participating in Church rites and ceremonies. Cotton Mather, the son of the zealous Puritan clergyman Increase Mather, was himself a strong clerical figure among early New England Puritans. He was also a

stutterer who associated his speech impediment with the sins of pride and anger. But many Puritans also understood affliction as "God's rod descended in loving concern." Mather saw his own stuttering as something that would guide him to greater holiness, "yea, to make me more happy than other men."¹⁵

The complexity of attitudes toward deafness in the Massachusetts commonwealth became evident in 1684 when deaf Isaac Kilbourne was permitted to marry Mary Newbury of Cambridge, Massachusetts. In 1685, church records report the baptism of their child, "Deaf lad's [Kilbourne's] daughter Elizabeth." Thus, in a span of only a few years, Isaac Kilbourne appears to have become an accepted member of the church.¹⁶

A marriage between two deaf people occurred in Weymouth, Massachusetts, even earlier. Matthew Pratt, who was born in Plymouth Colony in 1629 and had been deaf since about the age of twelve, was taught to read and write, and he spoke "scarce intelligibly" and very seldom. In 1661, he married Sarah Hunt, a woman who had been deaf since the age of three, who also did not use speech. They had seven children and owned twenty acres of farmland in east Weymouth as well as eighteen acres on the west side of "Mill River."¹⁷ Cotton Mather mentioned that Sarah "spoke with signs" and that her children learned to speak "sooner with eyes and hands than by their lips." Evidence that an attempt was made to educate Sarah is found in the report that she was not raised a Christian but was later converted with the help of Matthew and several relatives, "who were able to communicate with her easily."¹⁸

Other deaf people also owned land in the colonies.¹⁹ Among them was Jonathan Lambert, who, in 1694, bought from the Indian Sachem Josias Wampatucke a tract of land on Martha's Vineyard bordering on Great James pond, and "ever since that date the name of Lambert's Cove has been a memorial of his residence in that region."²⁰ In 1695, Lambert was dispatched to Quebec to bring back prisoners. A contemporary, Samuel Sewell, somewhat humorously referred to him during his visit in 1714 to the Vineyard: "We were ready to be offended that an Englishman . . . in the company spake not a word to us . . . it seems he is deaf and dumb."²¹

Strangely, Jonathan Lambert's life was described as "uneventful as he was a deaf mute, and the records give but little to indicate any public activities."²² Yet Lambert was master of the brigantine *Tyral*, a slave ship. He had been given a share in Narragansett township for his military service under Sir William Phips in an expedition to Quebec in 1690. The fact that he owned land, raised a family, interacted with visitors to the Vineyard, and was involved in transporting prisoners reveals a man whose life was as eventful as that of many hearing people of his time.

Two of Lambert's children were also deaf, the first known cases of congenital deafness on Martha's Vineyard.²³ The influx to the New World of emigrants carrying a gene for deafness from the Weald in Kent to Scituate, near Plymouth and Cape Cod Bay, has been one of the better documented phenomena of the deaf experience in the American colonies. Many of these emigrants moved to Martha's Vineyard, and over time, a sign language developed on the island, used by both deaf and hearing islanders. As in the colonies, deaf people on Martha's Vineyard married and raised families. But on this island, they also held public office and conducted business in sign language at town meetings.²⁴

Numerous stories of those who became deaf in old age also reveal an acceptance of disability in the American colonies during the seventeenth century. Richard Williams, born circa 1606, was descended from a family in Glamorganshire, Wales. In about 1636, he established himself as a tanner in Plymouth Colony. In 1666, he was one of the selectmen and, for many years, a deacon of the church. A friend recalled that "when blind and deaf from age, he was accustomed to attend public worship, saying, 'that although he could neither see nor hear, yet it was consoling to his feelings to know that he was present while the people of God were at their worship.'"²⁵ He died in 1692.

In contrast, that same year, a deaf woman was executed. Rebecca Nurse, a wife and mother to eight children, was a devout churchgoer, but at the height of the Salem hysteria, she was accused of witchcraft. Nurse's own arguments included mention of her deafness: "And I being something hard of hearing, and full of grief, none informing me how the Court took up my words, and therefore had not opportunity to declare what I intended."²⁶ However, although the inability to hear was one "affliction" associated with the bewitched, Nurse's deafness had little to do with the witchcraft allegations, according to historian Mary Beth Norton:

Goody Nurse's conviction constitutes one of the most persuasive pieces of evidence that the Massachusetts authorities in general believed unhesitatingly in the truth of the witchcraft allegations. These men . . . were by midsummer heavily invested in the belief that Satan lay behind the troubles then besetting their colony. . . . Unable to defeat Satan in the forests and garrisons of the northeastern frontier, they could nevertheless attempt to do so in the Salem courtroom.²⁷

The governor attempted to give her a reprieve, but this effort was voided by the church. Rebecca Nurse was hung at the age of 70, on July 19, 1692.

The Eighteenth Century

Since the early 1730s, when monthly news periodicals such as *Gentleman's Magazine* and *London Magazine* made their debut, readers in England followed the events in the colonies, studying maps of the French and Indian War, enjoying the musings of Benjamin Franklin, and examining a variety of items of interest, including reports on the education of deaf children. In 1747, *Gentleman's Magazine* reported on the work of Jacobo Pereire in teaching young children, deaf from birth, to speak articulately.²⁸ In 1750, another report summarized how, after two years of instruction, a twenty-one-year-old man, deaf from birth, was presented to the king of France, "giving answers very properly and distinctly, he also pronounced several lines from a book, which he had not before seen. His master discourses with him by a manual alphabet, almost as expeditious as speech; but this is not uncommon."²⁹

Educated American colonists kept in touch with Europe through these magazines as well as through the *American Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, which boldly reprinted much of the content of its British counterparts. American periodicals also included tidbits about deafness and deaf people. In 1740, for example, in his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Benjamin Franklin included the grim report that "[w]e hear from Macanja in Bucks County [Pennsylvania], that last Week two Brothers, the youngest about 10 Years of Age, and the eldest about 18, both of them deaf and dumb, went out into the Woods together, where the eldest cut the Throat of the youngest."³⁰

Other records provide evidence that deaf people headed families, conducted businesses, and participated in religious activity. James Anderson's hearing son, James Anderson, Jr., was summoned in November 1768 for "not supporting his children in a Christianlike manner."³¹ In the records of the Scotch-Irish settlement west of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia, known as Augusta, the father is noted familiarly as "Deaf James." In Virginia about 1784, the Reverend Lee, a Methodist itinerant preacher, recorded his observations after one visit to a family, describing the religious potential of the deaf head of the household and making reference to his signs:

. . . preached at John Randall's, who is deaf and dumb, yet can pronounce the name of his wife and the name of his brother; but I could not learn that he ever uttered any other words. He is esteemed a pious man, and by signs will give a good experience of his conviction, conversion, and progress in the service of the Lord, and of his pleasing hope of Heaven when he leaves the world.³²

Sign language is also mentioned in the family records of Andrew Moore, whose descendents included two deaf brothers in Pennsylvania, Joseph and Jacob Moore, and a deaf relative, Jeremiah Moore. All three deaf men led productive lives. Jacob Moore, the first of Andrew Moore's deaf descendents, was born in Lancaster County in 1781 and was described as an "ingenious mechanic, a man of strong will and indomitable energy."³³ He married Hannah (Sharpless) Neal, a widow, and learned the trade of cabinet making. More details are available about Jacob's deaf brother, Joseph:

[Joseph Moore] dreamed where to go and find a wife, and going by his dream, found the place and the young woman [Jane Smith] he had seen in the vision; which resulted in a suitable companionship for life. Their children all had their hearing and speech, and in his anxious desire to know if they could hear he would sometimes make a loud noise, and then intently watch if they would notice it. He kept bees, and at one time had some stolen, and early next morning went to one of the neighbors, tapped one of the thieves on the shoulder, and by signs charged him and some others with the theft; which proved to be correct, and all of whom Joseph pointed out.³⁴

Joseph Moore moved to Cecil County, Maryland, where he owned a farm and sawmill and was a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers). He attended services whereby he would "gaze intently at the minister, as if he gathered something of what was delivered. Various instances might be mentioned of his finding out circumstances, and of his pointing upward, intimating that he had great faith and confidence in the way of truth and right."³⁵

Jeremiah Moore, born in 1775, married Phebe Jones of Columbia, Pennsylvania. Passmore writes that "Jeremiah being a deaf mute, could not be married by [The Society of Friends], so they were married by a magistrate."³⁶ Jeremiah entered millwrighting as an occupation and kept his own account book, which has been described this way: "It was a model of ingenuity; when he had difficulty spelling a word, as for instance 'Plow,' he would make the drawing or representation of it."³⁷

The description of the deaf members of the Moore family reveals that deafness was not necessarily an impediment to a full and rewarding life, even before the educational opportunities of the nineteenth century were available. Here were three deaf men, all married and holding respectable occupations as well as taking care of their own business dealings. Most likely, Joseph's wife was also deaf (his "suitable companion"), particularly because he felt compelled to test their children's hearing through

making loud noises. Moreover, the family account that Joseph was “apt in making himself understood by signs, and in understanding others in the same way,” indicates that the use of signs was accepted by his neighbors and that they had learned some to communicate with him.³⁸ There are no details available on the sign language the Moores used, but such records not only of signing but also of marriages and business being conducted with signing neighbors show the beginnings of community in areas other than Martha’s Vineyard.

More information about the use of both sign language and gestures in the seventeenth and eighteenth century American colonies may become available through further research, as is suggested by a study of American Indians and sign language:

That we find no positive evidence [in contemporary historical chronicles] of the existence and use of gesture speech does not necessarily show that there was none, as is shown by the following notable examples. Circumstances forced Lewis and Clarke in their exploration of the then unknown West to spend the winter of 1804–5 with the Mandans, Gros Ventres, and Arickarees in their village on the Missouri, only a short distance below the present site of their camp at Fort Berthold. During the winter the Cheyennes and Sioux visited this village, and there can be no doubt that gesture speech was daily and hourly used by the members of these tribes as it is to-day when they meet, but no mention is made of the fact, and not until these explorers met the Shoshones near the headwaters of the Missouri do we find any note made of signs being used. If these explorers who entered so minutely into the characteristics of the Indians in their writings failed to make a record of this language, I do not think it very surprising that earlier investigators should have, under less favorable auspices, also neglected it.³⁹

In addition to this work by William Philo Clark in 1884, detailed accounts and analyses of the use of sign language among Native Americans have been published by other researchers, including Garrick Mallery, who compared the signs of North American Indians with those of deaf people in his 1881 book, *Sign Language Among North American Indians*,⁴⁰ and, more recently, in 2006, Jeffrey E. Davis examined the linguistics of Indian signs.⁴¹

In fact, the gestures and signs used by deaf people in the various American colonies and the French signs brought to America by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc likely merged with the various existing sign language varieties, especially those brought to the school by the first students. In 1835, Frederick A. P. Barnard referred to such a

melting pot in describing his early teaching experience at the American School for the Deaf:

Each pupil brings with him, on his arrival, the signs of reduction which he has been accustomed to employ among his friends. But he readily lays aside his own signs for those of the community.⁴²

Evidence of some exposure to various forms of fingerspelling among the colonists may also be found. In 1776, the *Pennsylvania Magazine* published a manual alphabet referred to as “Dumb Speech” as a means of carrying on a secret conversation. “This invention,” the anonymous correspondent explained, “consisteth of a natural alphabet composed on the human hand, and may be learned in the space of an hour, and executed with so much readiness, when often practiced, that you may be able to express our sentiments sooner this way, than the most skilfull artist can write his words at length with pen and ink.”⁴³ The two-handed alphabet illustrated in this publication (and shown here in figure 1) originated in England.

Isolated Attempts at Tutoring in the Eighteenth Century

Because scarce records are available, we can only surmise how many deaf children received some individual tutoring. Nahum Brown, for instance, a deaf descendent of the first Englishman to settle in Concord, Massachusetts, was only four years old when the Declaration of Independence was signed, and there is no record of how he was taught. At seventeen, he moved to Henniker, New Hampshire, with his family, and he became a successful farmer. He had a 100-acre tract of land given to him by his father. He married a hearing woman, who interpreted in sign language for him during business transactions. They had two deaf children, and many of their descendents were deaf.⁴⁴

Probably the first documented attempt at tutoring a deaf child in the American colonies before the Revolutionary War is found in the diary of John Harrower, an indentured servant at the Belvedere plantation on the Rappahannock River in Virginia. Harrower had notable success with his individual instruction of John Edge, the fourteen-year-old deaf son of a neighboring planter, Samuel Edge. On June 21, 1774, Harrower wrote in his diary that “This day M^r. Samuel Edge Planter came to me and begged me to take a son of his to school who was both deaf and dum, and I consented to try what I cou’d with him.”⁴⁵

The Belvedere plantation had been built for Colonel William Daingerfield, and Harrower was the in-house tutor to the Daingerfield

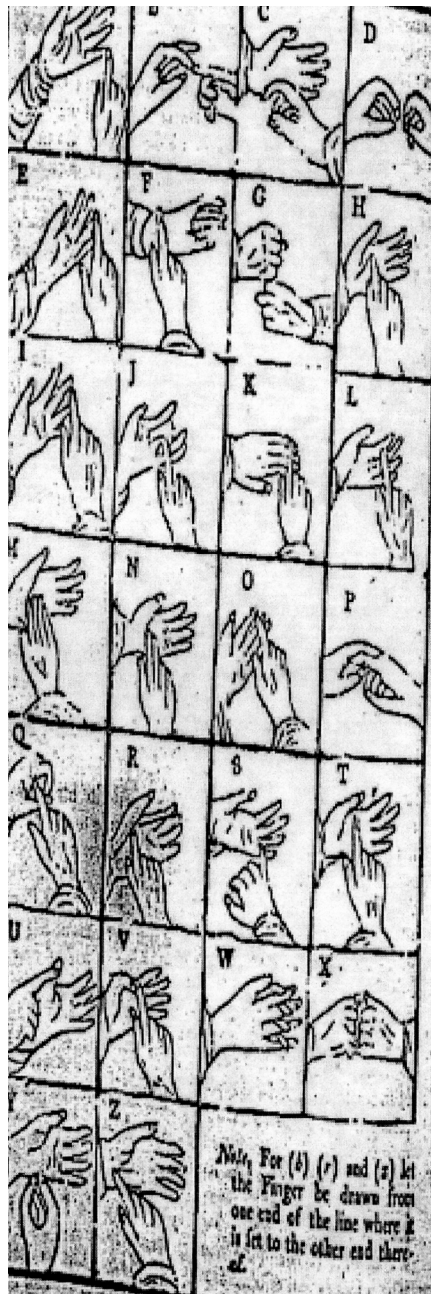


Figure 1. Two-handed manual alphabet published in *The Pennsylvania Magazine*, 1776.

children. It is not known whether Harrower, who had lived in Shetland, Scotland, and left Lerwick in 1774 for America, was familiar with the work of Thomas Braidwood in Edinburgh or with the father of Charles Shirreff, who had approached Braidwood in 1760 about educating his own deaf son. Both Harrower and Shirreff were merchants in nearby towns. In 1771, two years before Harrower left Scotland, Colonel Thomas Bolling of Virginia had sent his deaf son John to the Braidwood school in Edinburgh. Regardless of the possible reasons for Harrower's confidence in John Edge's ability to learn, he appears to have made progress with the deaf adolescent. There are several other entries in his diary, but the most relevant one occurs on December 6, 1774, when he wrote the following:

I have as yet only ten scollars One of which is both Deaff and Dumb and his Father pays me ten shilling per Quarter for him he has now five [months] with [me] and I have brought him tolerably well and understands it so far, that he can write mostly for anything he wants and understands the value of every figure and can work single addition a little.⁴⁶

Harrower's instruction of John Edge ended, apparently as a result of his father's failure to pay for the tutoring. The last entry was in December, indicating that approximately five months of lessons took place.

One influential parent who sought support for his deaf child in late eighteenth-century America was James Rumsey, one of the inventors of the steamboat. Rumsey bitterly fought Robert Fulton, John Fitch, Oliver Evans, and others over patent rights. On May 15, 1788, before leaving for a patent battle in England, he wrote an emotional letter to his brother-in-law Charles, asking that his deaf son, also named James, be kept

with the doctor if possible, or some other school. I shall endeavor to have him some clothing got against winter, and if nothing else can be done, send him to Joseph Barnes. I have a train for him to finish his studies, but it will be expensive, and therefore must be the last shift except [if] my circumstances change. . . . Charles, take [care] of my child and all the little business I left with you. I can make no promises, but I think I shall not go to Europe for nothing.⁴⁷

Rumsey died in London, England, in December 1792, leaving his wife and children penniless, but his deaf son apparently did receive some tutoring as a young boy. He was considered "talented, ingenious, ready and dextrous at various mechanical employments" but nevertheless struggled in adulthood to earn but a "scanty subsistence by daily labor."⁴⁸ Years

after the inventor's death, the United States Senate and House of Representatives passed a resolution to present to the deaf son of James Rumsey a gold medal, "commemorative of his father's services and high agency in giving to the world the benefits of the steamboat."⁴⁹ But the attorney for Rumsey's heirs prevented the resolution from passing in the Senate. Edward Rumsey, a cousin of the deaf man and congressman from Kentucky, was also not satisfied with this tribute. He stood in front of the House of Representatives and pleaded for additional support:

When I have reflected that the only son of this man was toiling for his daily bread, smitten by his God, and neglected by his country—when I have contemplated that and this spectacle, the steamboat and the unfortunate son of its inventor, feelings, emotions, reflections, have crowded upon me of a character which, as a patriot, a philanthropist, and a Christian, I acknowledge it was improper and sinful to entertain. To the support of that stricken one, I have thought his country, abounding in resources . . . might contribute something more substantial than a medal, with extraordinary stretch of liberality.⁵⁰

Rumsey's will provided boarding and clothing for his deaf son for about six years. At the age of 21, he would receive one of four equal shares of his father's estate.

Deaf Experiences during the Revolutionary War

In the late eighteenth century when the Revolutionary War began, encounters between Indians and colonists could be violent and tragic. Several reports of these incidents involve deaf people. In 1777, the grandparents of frontiersman Davy Crockett were killed by Indians in their cabin in the territory that became Tennessee. Two of their sons were at home that day. Joseph suffered a broken arm from a rifle bullet, but his brother, "Deaf and Dumb Jimmy," was kidnapped by the Indians and rescued twenty years later by his older brothers. We are left to wonder whether Jimmy communicated in signs with his captors during the two decades he spent with them. The manner in which he communicated with his family, too, is not known. On his return, he sought unsuccessfully to show his brothers the gold and silver mines he had been taken to blindfolded while a captive.⁵¹

Similarly, in Salisbury, Vermont, Joshua Graves, who was exempted from military duty because of his deafness, was living in a log house he had built with his son when a clash with Indians occurred. Graves and his son had cleared and planted a few acres of land, the first clearing for

agricultural purposes in Salisbury, but in June 1777, he and one of his sons were captured by a party of about 250 Indians. They were taken to Lake Champlain and then by a British vessel to Montreal. The Indians demanded a bounty for the father and son, but the British officers released them because they were not considered "rebel heads." The Indians had captured them while they were engaged "in quiet and peaceable prosecution of their labors as farmers." The prisoners were allowed to find their own way back to their families and finally arrived home after an absence of three weeks. After the Revolutionary War, Graves built the first framed barn in Salisbury. Four of his sons served in the militia in defense of the frontier area north of Rutland.⁵²

Deafness from artillery and disease were common during the Revolutionary War. Jonathan Gillett, who was held prisoner in New York by the British in 1776, mentioned observing deafened soldiers:

After giving you a small sketch of myself and troubles, I will endeavor to faintly lead you into the poor situation the soldiers are in, especially those taken at Long Island when I was. In fact, their cases are deplorable, and they are real objects of pity. They are still confined, and in houses where there is no fire, poor mortals, with little or no clothes, perishing with hunger. . . . Some almost lose their voices, and some their hearing.⁵³

Deaf civilians during the American Revolution were also victims, as in the case of Fountain Smith, born in Norwalk, Fairfield County, Connecticut, in 1725. Smith was a deaf cooper married to Hannah Wassan. The British kidnapped him in front of his house on Raymond Street and took him to prison. He died in a British prisoner of war camp on Long Island in 1779.⁵⁴

Formal Education of Deaf Children of American Colonists

Among deaf colonial children, those of influential parents were the first to receive formal private instruction. These privileged children included John, Thomas, and Mary Bolling, the children of Major Thomas Bolling, a descendent of Pocahontas; Charles Green, born in Boston in 1771, the son of Francis Green, a businessman; John Brewster, Jr., born in Hampton, Connecticut, in 1766, the son of a physician; and William Mercer, born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1765, whose father had fought in the Kittanning Expedition and was a close friend of George Washington.

One option for Americans with means was the Braidwood Academy in Edinburgh, Scotland. In 1771, Thomas Bolling of Virginia enrolled his ten-

year-old son John in the Braidwood Academy. One report stated that "Mr. John Bolling was deaf and dumb, he was extremely sensible he understood Geography, Arithmetic, Globe—he has a good sense and fine Education from Scotland."⁵⁵ Thomas and Mary followed their brother in 1775 and attained similar satisfactory educations. Charles Green likewise attended the Braidwood Academy for six years. After only two years, his father reported that he had acquired a "very perceptible" improvement "in the construction of language, and in writing; he had made a good beginning in arithmetic. . . . I found him capable of not only comparing ideas, and drawing inferences, but expressing his sentiments with judgment."⁵⁶

Other deaf children received private education in the colonies or in the early republic. William Mercer's education, for example, focused on painting, for which he showed great talent. His father, General Hugh Mercer, was stabbed by British bayonets in the Battle of Princeton while assisting George Washington on January 3, 1777. He died on January 12. His brother-in-law, George Weedon, became the Mercer family's guardian, taking responsibility for financial affairs and schooling of the children, including William, whom he sent to study under the distinguished Philadelphia artist Charles Willson Peale in 1783. Peale and his wife considered William an "adopted son" and pledged lifelong love and devotion to him.⁵⁷ The American deaf community considers Mercer one of the first known congenitally deaf individuals in the United States to become a distinguished artist. Unfortunately, with the exception of the painting of the Battle of Princeton and an oval miniature on ivory of Edmund Pendleton of Virginia, now held by the Virginia Historical Society of Richmond, Mercer's other works have been lost.⁵⁸

Like Mercer, John Brewster, Jr., received private tutoring in painting, but many more of his works have been located over the years. Joseph Steward, a friend of Brewster's father, taught the deaf boy, who later established himself as a freelance artist in Massachusetts and Maine. On December 13, 1790, the Reverend James Cogswell of Scotland Parish, Windham, wrote, "Doctr Brewster's Son, a Deaf & Dumb young man came in . . . the Evening, he is very Ingenious, has a Genius for painting & can write well, & converse by signs so that he may be understood in many Things, he lodged here."⁵⁹

Brewster produced folk art for decades. Before the turn of the century, he painted a large portrait of his father and stepmother and a pair of portraits of Mr. and Mrs. James Eldredge of Brooklyn, Connecticut. His technique included portraying couples on separate canvasses and with highly decorative backgrounds. He lived for some time in the luxurious Prince

mansion in Maine, where he painted James Prince and three of Prince's children. Among his full-length portraits were three of his half-sisters, completed in Hampton, Connecticut, about 1800.⁶⁰

The Role of Scientific Societies

The interest expressed by American scholars, most notably members of scientific societies, in the education of deaf children was significant in laying the foundation on which Gallaudet and Clerc built formal education for deaf children in the United States. In Europe, members of the French Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of London had a longstanding interest in the education of deaf children. John Wallis, Robert Boyle, William Holder, Kenelm Digby, Georges Buffon, Charles Marie de La Condamine, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were a few of the scientists and philosophers who explored the potential of deaf children to learn.⁶¹

Occasionally, deaf scientists distinguished themselves in their associations with these early societies. For example, John Goodricke, who had been a pupil at the Braidwood Academy in the 1770s, received the Copley Medal from the Royal Society for his work in astronomy. He was elected a fellow in 1786. Charles Bonnet, who was tutored privately in the 1740s in Switzerland, became one of the first scientists to study parthenogenesis. He, too, was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London and was a corresponding member of the French Academy of Sciences. Saboureux de Fontenay, deaf since birth, published a memoir on meteorology, and Guillaume Amontons, deaf since his youth, followed in Kepler's footsteps in the study of barometric pressure and laid the foundation for Fahrenheit's work with the thermometric scale. An active member of the French Academy of Sciences, Amontons was one of the first profoundly deaf persons in history to author a book, *Observations and Physical Experiences on the Construction of a New Clepsydra, on Barometers, Thermometers and Hygrometers*, which was published in 1695.

Before the turn of the century, there were numerous interactions between American scholars and their counterparts in Europe in relation to the issue of educating deaf children. In 1781, Richard Bagley, the Health Officer of the Port of New York, carried a letter to Samuel Mitchill, the New York surgeon general, from Francis Green, who had been visiting the Braidwood Academy every day for six weeks.

"During this time I had the ineffable pleasure of marking the daily progress of improvement in my boy, and in the other pupils. . . . By the means of this interesting art . . . a certain portion of the human species is rescued from uselessness, ignorance and lamentable inferior-

ity and rendered capable of every useful accomplishment, every degree of erudition, and pleasure of social conversation and enjoyment."⁶²

Two years later, Francis Green published *Vox Oculis Subjecta* ("Voice Made Subject to the Eyes"), a work that received complimentary recognition in the *Boston Magazine* in 1784 and 1785. Despite the death by drowning of his deaf son Charles in 1787, Green frequently visited the school for the deaf in Paris. He also helped to establish a school for deaf children in London in 1792. At the turn of the century, living in Medford, Massachusetts, he published numerous translations of the writings of Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée, the founder of the Paris school, under the nom de plume "Philocophus." These writings appeared in columns of the *New England Palladium*. Green's dedicated efforts laid the foundation for subsequent work by Samuel Mitchill and others in establishing a school in New York. Many years later, Alexander Graham Bell wrote that Francis Green "was the first to collate the literature of this art; the earliest American writer upon the subject; the first to urge the education of the deaf in this country; the pioneer-promoter of free schools for the deaf—both in England and America; the first parent of a deaf child to plead for the education of all deaf children."⁶³

Benjamin Franklin and John Quincy Adams were among the Americans who were aware of the pioneering educators in Europe during the eighteenth century. According to Francis Green, Franklin was an observer of the "celebrated Mr. Braidwood of Edinburgh."⁶⁴ In 1784, Adams sent a letter to William Cranch of Cambridge, Massachusetts, describing "one of the greatest curiosities that Paris affords,—the school of Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée."⁶⁵ Adams explained that Épée taught deaf pupils "not only to converse with each other by signs, but to read and write, and comprehend the most abstracted metaphysical ideas."⁶⁶

In 1793, The American Philosophical Society published in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* William Thornton's treatise on elements of teaching speech and language to deaf children in the United States. His essay, which earned him a Magellanic Gold Medal, was titled "On the Mode of Teaching the Deaf, or Surd, and consequently Dumb, to speak."⁶⁷ Thornton was an inventor and architect as well as director of the patent office. He was involved in many social causes, and he had probably observed the work of the followers of the Braidwoods and l'Épée during his own studies in Edinburgh and Paris. His perceptions on deaf education were provocative, covering topics such as the phonological basis for reading; the importance of vocabulary building; and methods of communicating with deaf people, including speech, fingerspelling, and

signs. On this last topic, Thornton wrote that “a deaf person not perfectly skilled in reading words from the lips, or who should ask anything in the dark would be able to procure common information by putting various questions, and by telling the person that, as he is deaf, he requests answers by signs, which he will direct him to change according to circumstances.”⁶⁸

Conclusion

Literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reveals that deaf life in the American colonies was varied and, for some individuals, fulfilling. Although the evidence does not provide detailed information about a core congregation of deaf people during that time, we have evidence of deaf individuals who achieved spiritual authority, religious participation, and legal rights. We see the planting of educational seeds, which came to fruition in the lives of early artists and in some deaf people who owned land and managed their own business interactions associated with trades. We also see the darker, disturbing elements at work in deaf people’s lives, as surely as they appear in mainstream history. At least a few deaf people were involved in superstitious acts, intolerance, the slave trade, and the disenfranchisement of native people. Deaf people cannot and should not be consigned to sainthood or victimhood in the colonial era or during any other period.

Many of the achievements noted in this study of the genesis of the American deaf community were nurtured in the acknowledged presence of a visual language or languages. We can only surmise how married deaf people like the Pratts in the Massachusetts colony or deaf siblings in other families in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries communicated, but it would not be a stretch of the imagination to assume that they did so by signs. Although the ship that Andrew Brown boarded did not disembark its passengers in New England, his story indicates that signing deaf people from Europe may have emigrated to the colonies before the Vineyard families. Some early use of gestural or tactile communication is also evident, including a case of an emigrant described by John Winthrop in 1637:

There was an old woman in Ipswich, who came out of England blind and deaf, yet her son could make her understand any thing, and know any man’s name, by her sense of feeling. He could write upon her hand some letters of the name and by other such motions would inform her. The governour himself had [trial of] when he was at Ipswich.⁶⁹

In his seminal research on American Sign Language (ASL), William Stokoe questioned the assumption that Gallaudet and Clerc brought the French system of signs to the United States. His skepticism was based on the linguistic phenomenon of the “rapid flourishing of the language and the schools using the method.”⁷⁰ Later, other scholars also explained that there must have been some influence on French signs from native signs already existing in the United States.⁷¹ The present paper indicates that decades before Clerc accompanied Gallaudet to Hartford to establish the American School for the Deaf, Americans such as John Adams, Francis Green, and William Thornton had visited Epée’s school for deaf students in Paris and shared their observations with both scholars and parents back home.

In discussing the history and bases of ASL in a more general context, James Woodward wrote that “it is not unreasonable to assume that whenever there have been deaf people associating with each other, there has been sign language variety. These varieties developed through normal patterns of interaction, not through the invention of hearing people.”⁷² Woodward provides arguments for possible earlier creolization in ASL based on the analysis of sociolinguistic situations in other locales. The anecdotal accounts in the present paper provide evidence that there were indeed numerous patterns of interaction, including, but not limited to, British signs and fingerspelling (Martha’s Vineyard and in other colonial sites), signs used by various Indian tribes, tactile communication with deaf-blind people (early 1600s), and various reports of what were likely home signs. Although it is presently not known whether any of these cases had French origins, the anecdotal reports support the contention that there was likely language contact among the sign language varieties. Additional research on sign language contact and sign language varieties in America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will no doubt shed more light on the history of ASL.

The genesis of community presupposes the broad range of human experience. As the early colonists imagined free and full participation as citizens of a community, despite some notable failures, so, apparently, did their deaf neighbors. And these neighbors moved forward, albeit slowly, to express a distinct culture in the context of that new world.

Notes

1. Extracts from the *Institution des Sourds et Muets* of Abbé de l’Epée, as translated by Francis Green. Published in the *New England Palladium*, 1803, reprinted in the

American Annals of the Deaf 8 (1861): 9–10. The extracts were taken from the earlier work of the Abbé de l'Épée, writing that he did not incorporate into his first major description of his methods. As summarized in the *Annals*, the extracts appeared as a series in vol. 22 of the *New England Palladium*, a Boston newspaper.

2. Allan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001), x.

3. Kathy A. Jankowski, *Deaf Empowerment: Emergence, Struggle, and Rhetoric* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1977).

4. See Harlan Lane, Richard C. Pillard, and Mary French. "Origins of the American Deaf-World: Assimilating and Differentiating Societies and Their Relation to Genetic Patterning" *Sign Language Studies* 1 (2000): 17–44.

5. C. G. Braddock, *Notable Deaf Persons* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Alumni Press, 1975), 58.

6. Duane A. Cline, "Physical Appearances of Wampanoag Natives" in *The Pilgrims and Plymouth Colony, 1620*, <http://www.rootsweb.com/~mosmd/appearance.htm>.

7. W. H. Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical, Illustrative of the Principles of a Portion of Her Early Settlers* (New York: Robert Carter, 1846), 98.

8. Foote, *Sketches*, 104.

9. J. E. Doan, "The Eagle Wing Expedition (1636) and the Settlement of Londonderry, New Hampshire: Two Episodes in Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish History" (written in 1719), *Journal of Scotch-Irish Studies Contents* 1:1–7.

10. Nora. E. Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness at Martha's Vineyard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

11. Margret A. Winzer, *The History of Special Education: From Isolation to Integration* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1993), 85.

12. C. Eliot, ed., *American Historical Documents: 1000–1904* (New York: Collier, 1910), 71.

13. T. G. Morton, *The History of Pennsylvania Hospital 1751–1895* (Philadelphia: Times Printing House, 1897).

14. T. Gage, *The history of Rowley, anciently including Bradford, Boxford, and Georgetown, from the year 1639 to the present time* (Boston: Ferdinand Andrews, 1840), 72.

15. K. Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 34.

16. Alexander Graham Bell, "Historical Notes Concerning the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf," *Association Review* 2 (1900): 35.

17. James Savage, *A Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England, Showing Three Generations of Those Who Came before May, 1692, on the Basis of Farmer's Register* (Boston, 1860–1862). Corrected electronic version copyright Robert Kraft, July 1994, <http://puritanism.online.fr/puritanism/Savage/savage.html>.

18. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, vol. 2, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 495.

19. Examples can also be found in the eighteenth century. In 1772, for example, Luke Hart (born in 1744), a "deaf and dumb man" from Rensselaer, New York, bought property with his two hearing brothers in Dartmouth. They sold the land in 1810. *Bristol LR* 91:554.

20. Charles E. Banks, *The History of Martha's Vineyard, Dukes County, Massachusetts*, vol. 2, (Boston: George H. Dean, 1911), 53.

21. Samuel Sewell, *Diary of Samuel Sewell, 1674–1729*, vol. 2 (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 432.

22. Banks, *History of Martha's Vineyard*, 53

23. *Ibid.*

24. By the nineteenth century, in some areas of the island, deafness (from intermarriage) was occurring at an extremely higher rate compared with the national average.

25. D. H. Hurd, *History of Bristol County Massachusetts with biographical sketches of many of its pioneers and prominent men* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Co., 1883), 33.

26. Robert Calef, "More Wonders of the Invisible World, 1700," excerpted in George L. Burr, ed., *Narratives of the New England Witchcraft Cases* (New York: Scribner's, 2002), 359.

27. Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 226.

28. Anonymous, "A remarkable Account of two Children who were deaf and dumb from the Birth, being brought to speak articulately. From the Register of the Academy at Caen in Normandy," *The Gentleman's Magazine* 17 (December 1747): 610.

29. Anonymous, Extract of a Letter from Paris. *The Gentleman's Magazine* 20 (January 1750): 5.

30. Benjamin Franklin, Extract from the Gazette, 1739. *Poor Richard's Almanac*, October 18, 1740, 240–41.

31. Lyman Chalkley, *Chronicles of the Scotch-Irish Settlement in Virginia*. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1965), 52.

32. John Lednum, *A History of the Rise of Methodism in America Containing Sketches of Methodist Itinerant Preachers From 1736 to 1785* (Philadelphia: John Lednum, 1859), 397.

33. John M. Passmore, *Ancestors and Descendents of Andrew Moore, 1612–1897* (Lancaster, Penn.: Wickersham, 1897), 75.

34. *Ibid.*, 74.

35. *Ibid.*, 74.

36. *Ibid.*, 63.

37. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

38. *Ibid.*, 74.

39. William P. Clarke, *The Indian Sign Language* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982), 11.

40. Garrick Mallery, "Sign Language among North American Indians Compared with that among Other Peoples and Deaf-Mutes." First Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1879–1880 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881), 263–552. Reprinted as Garrick Mallery, *Sign Language among North American Indians*. (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2001).

41. Jeffrey E. Davis, "A Historical Linguistic Account of Sign Language among North American Indians," in Ceil Lucas, ed., *Multilingualism and Sign Languages: From the Great Plains to Australia* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2006), 3–35.

42. H. G. Lang and W. C. Stokoe, "A Treatise on Signed and Spoken Language in Early 19th Century Education in America," *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 5:204.

43. Anonymous, To the Publisher of the Pennsylvania Magazine (letter). *The Pennsylvania Magazine* 2 (1776): 73–76.

44. Harlan Lane, Richard C. Pillard, and Mary French. *Origins of the American Deaf-World*, *Sign Language Studies* 1 (2000): 17–44.

45. "The Diary of John Harrower, 1773–1776," *The American Historical Review* 6:88.

46. *Ibid.*

47. R. John Brockmann, "Feeling 'The Old' on Main Street in Warwick," Historical Society of Cecil County (Web site). <http://cchistory.org/warwick1.htm>.

48. Ella May Turner, *James Rumsey: Pioneer in Steam Navigation* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1930), 204.
49. *Ibid*, 205.
50. *Ibid*, 204.
51. James A. Shackford, *David Crockett: The Man and the Legend* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1956).
52. John M. Weeks, *History of Salisbury, Vermont* (Middlebury, Vt.: A.H. Copeland, 1860), 236.
53. "A Revolutionary Reminiscense," *Anamosa Eureka* 3 (May 20, 1859): 1. [Letter submitted by J. B. Loomis and was written by his grandfather in 1776.]
54. <http://www.three-systems.com/gen/hoyt/d0024/g0002415.html>
55. Alexander Graham Bell, "Historical Notes Concerning the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf," *Association Review* 2 (1900): 270.
56. Alexander Graham Bell, "Historical Notes Concerning the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf," *Association Review* 2 (1900): 43.
57. Harry G. Lang and Bonnie Meath-Lang, *Deaf Persons in the Arts and Sciences: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995).
58. Lang and Meath-Lang, *Deaf Persons in the Arts and Sciences*. Another early deaf artist was George Ropes (born in 1788), who became a pupil of the early American marine artist Michele Felice Corne. He was a "deaf and dumb painter" of Salem, Massachusetts. In 1804, he made a copy of an old portrait of Salem's first church, and this copy is preserved in the museum of the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester, Massachusetts. He died in January 1819.
59. "Nina Fletcher Little and John Brewster, Jr.," in J. Lipman and T. Armstrong, eds., *American Folk Painters of Three Centuries* (New York: Hudson Hill, 1980), 18. Cogswell was the grandfather of Alice Cogswell, whose deafness led Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc to found the American School for the Deaf. She was born fifteen years after this encounter with young Brewster.
60. Lang and Meath-Lang, *Deaf Persons in the Arts and Sciences*.
61. For detail, see Harry G. Lang, *Silence of the Spheres: The Deaf Experience in the History of Science* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin and Garvey Press, 1994).
62. Francis Green, "On Teaching the Deaf to Understand Language and the Dumb to Speak," *Medical Repository* 2 (1804): 73-75.
63. Alexander Graham Bell, "Historical Notes Concerning the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf," *Association Review* 2 (1900): 61-62. In 1803, Francis Green published in a Boston newspaper a request to the clergy in Massachusetts to obtain information on the number of deaf children residing in the state. It was his intention to determine whether the number warranted the establishment of a special school. In the following year, the Reverend John Stanford found several deaf children in an almshouse in New York City and began to teach them.
64. Francis Green, *Vox Oculis Subjecta*, 12.
65. John Quincy Adams to William Cranch, December 14, 1784. Reprinted in the *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* 8 (1856): 248.
66. *Ibid*.
67. The article appeared as an appendix to a work with the lengthy title "CADMUS, or a Treatise on the Elements of written language, illustrating, by a Philosophical Division of Speech, the Power of each character, thereby mutually fixing the Orthography and Orhoepy."
68. William Thornton, "On Teaching the Surd, or Deaf, and Consequently Dumb, to Speak," *Association Review* 5: 414.

69. John Winthrop, *History of New England* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1853), 281. In the same year (1637) that Winthrop reported this case, colonists in Virginia also petitioned to England for payment for the guardianship of an individual with an “intellectual disability.”

70. William Stokoe, *Sign Language Structure: An Outline of the Visual Communication of the American Deaf*, *Studies in Linguistics*, Occasional Papers 8, (Silver Spring, Md.: Linstok Press 1960), 13.

71. Susan Fischer, Influences on Word Order Change in American Sign Language. In C. N. Li (Ed.), *Word Order and Word Order Change*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1975) and James Woodward, Historical Bases of American Sign Language. In P. Siple (Ed.), *Understanding Language Through Sign Language Research*, pp. 333-348. (New York: Academic Press 1978).

72. James Woodward, “Historical Bases,” 345.