

INTRODUCTION

The participation of deaf people in the Civil War has been examined by neither historians nor educators. Deaf men, women, and children across the country made concerted efforts to follow their passions in the face of this national crisis. Putting aside their own personal experiences with discrimination and prejudice, deaf soldiers fought in the shadows of such great warriors as Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant. Deaf writers, living in the shadows of such hearing notables as Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Julia Ward Howe, contributed in their own meaningful ways through published verse and prose, and through private writings. Deaf citizens served as shipyard workers, sword makers, farmers, spies, printers, tailors, nurses, and doctors, as well as in other capacities supporting the Union or Confederacy. Even deaf children supported troops through personal sacrifice and the efforts that were mobilized in their schools on both sides of the conflict. Until now, their stories have not been collectively told.

In this volume I first summarize the deaf experience during the antebellum period. For the reader unfamiliar with deafness, I introduce the many different ways to be deaf. Causes of deafness were extremely varied. Levi S. Backus, a newspaper editor, was born deaf. University of Mississippi chancellor Frederick A. P. Barnard and his brother John G. Barnard, a Civil War general, had a hereditary form of progressive deafness that began in adolescence. Frederick became a fluent signer and taught in a school for deaf children, while his brother did not choose to socialize with others in the deaf community. The outspoken British social reformer Harriet Martineau, writing regularly on slavery and freedom issues, became deaf as a result of illness when she was young. In today's vocabulary, she and the Barnard brothers were "adventitiously" deaf, meaning that they had acquired spoken and written English before losing their hearing.

Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson lost a substantial amount of his hearing from his years of service in the U.S. Army as an artillery officer before the Civil War. His partial deafness resulted from concussion rather than from disease or heredity. In this book there is a special emphasis on soldiers whose deafness occurred before the war, and I refer to them as having "pre-enlistment deafness."

For deaf people thrust into a life in the "shadows" by a hearing society that viewed deafness as abnormal, the fact

that they were themselves marginalized by society did not mean they were sympathetic to the plight of African Americans in bondage. On this issue, they were much like their hearing neighbors. In this book I include bottom-up stories of deaf abolitionists and others supportive of emancipation, but also stories of deaf proslavery advocates, deaf slave owners, and even a deaf slave catcher.

This is not a history of the Civil War per se. To provide context for the stories about how deaf people put aside their personal experiences with discrimination to participate in the Civil War, I use a selection of military events, such as the Peninsula, Kentucky, Vicksburg, and Gettysburg Campaigns, Sherman's March to the Sea, and other battles and engagements. Within these contexts I illustrate the range of participation of deaf people, from military advisors and generals to common civilians supporting the armies. To further demonstrate how the deaf experience was a part of mainstream history, I also include among the stories such critical events as the Trent Affair, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the assassination of President Lincoln.

Additional stories relate to the experiences of civilians, deaf students in the residential schools, and information about hearing soldiers who were thrust into the deaf world by concussions, disease, and exposure while serving in the armies. Arbitrary and separated as these stories may appear, they reveal a previously untold deaf experience during the war—the central theme of this book.

In the last part of this book, I briefly examine the lives of deaf people in the aftermath of the Civil War. In particular, I focus on how discrimination returned in force after the war's end. In some ways, the war instilled a sense of empowerment and identity that led many deaf people, over the 150 years to follow, to escape the label of "unfortunates" and to gain more control of their own destiny.

Some of the deaf characters in this book were products of the twenty-three schools serving deaf children established around the country before 1860. The oldest of these state-sponsored schools in the nation (now known as the American School for the Deaf) had been in operation for just a little more than forty years by the time the war began. The deaf community in America was still relatively young by the middle of the nineteenth century. Yet, in that short time, these schools produced a remarkable cadre of

talented deaf men and women who are important to the narrative of this book. Granted, some of the more accomplished writers in this book were “outliers,” reflecting the fact that then, as now, educators have not had unqualified success with all, or even most, deaf children.

Finding detailed stories about deaf people during the Civil War was a daunting task. Unlike the case for women and African American soldiers, for example, the lack of awareness of the role of deaf soldiers is due to an almost complete absence of research and writing on this subject. In the case of deaf slaves, only brief anecdotal fragments can be found. As is typical in many areas of historical research, I sometimes reached a dead end. This happened, for example, with the search for information about a “deaf and dumb strange negro man” who had appeared in peculiar dress each evening for months on the streets near Harpers Ferry before the raid occurred; and he was never seen again after the raid.¹ Who was he? F. Vernon Aler, who was a teller at the Bank of Berkeley at the time of the raid, was in the position of having much knowledge from his interactions with the citizens of the towns. In his *History of Martinsburg and Berkeley County, West Virginia*, he described the “alarm” this man had caused, marching as if under military orders. Some thought he was insane and paid little attention to him, but Aler wrote that “[this deaf man] has always been coupled, in my mind, as an aider of the Brown gang.”² Although we are left in the dark as to whether such reports were just folklore, we remain hopeful that this and many other mysteries might be solved as other documents are uncovered in time.

In an essay in the *New York Times* in 2013, historian William G. Thomas III described his efforts to investigate his family’s legends about a Civil War hospital that may have been located near his present farm. He discussed the difficulty of weighing lore against records, raising a question about whether one form of history is more reliable than the other. He presented the difficulties in drawing upon circumstantial evidence and the partial nature of records he was able to examine. He could not prove the plausibility of his conjectures in a way “that any professional historian would accept.”³

This was a challenge I faced a number of times when family notes and legends were not supported by archival records, newspaper reports, or other evidence. In *The Children’s Civil War*, James Marten describes the dilemma historians sometimes face in dealing with reminiscences written long after events were purported to have happened. Such is the case with the story of Joshua Davis. Whether viewed as a personal fable that had become folklore over time in the deaf community or an actual event summarized on a

handwritten document and passed down through the family over the years, it is uncertain whether the Joshua Davis story is hard truth or an embellished tale describing how the war had affected a young deaf man.

The story is told that during the Atlanta Campaign in 1864, Joshua Davis, then eighteen years old and unmarried, was squirrel hunting with a rifle in a patch of woods near his home. Davis lived with his parents and deaf brothers near Macon, Georgia. On their plantation of thousands of acres was a large mansion with tall columns on the front porch. His family had earlier owned about three hundred slaves. While hunting, Joshua found himself surrounded by soldiers from Sherman’s army. He attempted to communicate to them that he was deaf, but the soldiers threatened him and shoved him along, not believing that he was really deaf.

When Joshua Davis was brought by Union soldiers within sight of his house, he pointed and gestured that he lived there. The soldiers took him to the house, where other soldiers were hauling away furniture and food, and preparing to burn down the mansion. The boy’s captors suspected that the young man with the rifle was a spy, and they planned to hang him. His parents explained that he was their son and was indeed deaf, but the unruly mob dragged Davis a distance, awaiting a rope and ignoring the parents’ pleas.

At this moment, family records summarize, a Union officer on horseback rode into the midst of the scene. A soldier informed him that they had caught a spy who was pretending to be deaf. The officer reined in his horse and approached the boy, looked at him keenly and used sign language to ask: “Are you deaf?”

Surprised at the ability of the officer to use signs, Davis purportedly responded that he was indeed deaf. The officer followed with a question about where he was educated, and Davis responded that he had gone to school at the Georgia Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb in Cave Spring. The officer, who had a deaf brother, then looked at his men and, after some thought, ordered the boy released and the house spared. Sign language had saved his life.

Joshua’s parents, greatly relieved, invited the officer to stay for dinner. The unnamed officer then made efforts to prevent other soldiers from further looting the premises after his departure. Nevertheless, as this story is told, within a short time all of the cattle, swine, horses, carriages, farm implements, and over a hundred bales of cotton belonging to the Davis homestead were confiscated.⁴

This story was told by Joshua Davis’s son, a retired teacher of nearly fifty years, who, after checking with his brothers, sisters, and other relatives, claimed that although “necessarily

hazy in spots,” was “otherwise straight.”⁵ As with several other stories in this book, we can only go so far with the research. Family records are often inaccurate, and in this first attempt to document the deaf experience in the Civil War, I made an extra effort to verify findings by examining census data, National Archives documents, and other sources. Still, as historian William Thomas has pointed out, there are times when the information, or its interpretation, may not be acceptable to professional historians. This is one reason I have heavily footnoted the stories. We can hope that, as new documents are discovered, the reliability of one source of information or another will be improved as new facts come to light.

The involvement of deaf men in noncombat roles presents a previously unexplored subject. Far from being “disabled” by their deafness, they were very *able* to apply their skills and knowledge to support the causes in which they ardently believed. Not only were they tradespeople, some were landowners who assisted (or resisted) troops during battles. Whether born deaf or deafened in infancy, childhood, or adulthood, they experienced the Civil War in ways that varied as much as their degree of deafness and age of onset. They included those who knew sign language and were members of the growing deaf community in America and those who lived apart from the social interactions common in urban life. They fought using their pens as newspaper correspondents, editors, or poets. They applied their trades to support soldiers. And even deaf slaves “voted with their feet,” as did hearing people in bondage.

The experiences of deaf soldiers and members of militia groups provide a glimpse at the bravery and patriotism of men who ignored the regulations that generally exempted them from military service. As participants in the military, they were challenged by both attitudes and communication difficulties. Deaf soldiers were, by and large, not writers, and consequently, they did not describe at any length their personal tests of fortitude and perseverance. To complain about difficulties associated with deafness would also run the risk of inviting discharge. Men desiring to support the Union or Confederate armies as soldiers made such decisions either alone or with their families, and sometimes had to combat the wishes of others. Many people did not believe that deaf men should or could fight on the battlefields. Yet they not only battled against these attitudes and government regulations, they also took extraordinary risks to defend their political or ideological beliefs. Although their numbers were small, they responded to threats to their towns or reacted out of fear for what their country might become if they did not join the armies and militias.

Some followed the promise of bounty. Others who were stopped by the regulations, or who could not fight because they were incapacitated by the war, pursued noncombat duties in the military. In this book I present several types of deaf soldiers. Those with pre-enlistment deafness include both men from the American deaf community (graduates of schools for deaf students), and those who had no relationship with sign language or the residential schools. I also include men who became deaf in the war and continued to fight. Officers, both those with pre-enlistment deafness and those who were deafened in the war, are briefly mentioned.

This book highlights just a sampling of deaf soldiers and citizens. Their experiences were often no different from those of hearing people. Like their hearing neighbors, for example, deaf civilians were sometimes caught in the crossfire of battles and unable to avoid the bloodshed. In this sense, deaf people, too, served as reminders of the cost of innocent life in any war. On the other hand, the attitudes and communication barriers they faced provide another dimension to their war experiences.

In the face of the devastating loss of life—more than 620,000 Americans died during the Civil War—it is tempting to forget or to minimize the impact of deaf civilians or deaf soldiers during the war. There were also individuals with a wide range of other disabilities among the hundreds of thousands of casualties. An examination of these other disabilities, however, is a project for future historians.

Historian Shelby Foote once said, “I can’t begin to tell you the things I discovered while I was looking for something else.” When I began research for this book, never did I imagine that I would find such stories as John Wilkes Booth learning sign language from a deaf poet who was also friends with Abraham Lincoln and his family; or the fact that such notable characters as General Robert E. Lee, the “Gray Ghost” John Singleton Mosby, and General Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson posed for portraits by a deaf artist in the middle of the war. The stories a deaf instructor from the Hartford Asylum told the renowned abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison through a pad-and-pencil conversation about deaf students from slaveholding states confirmed Garrison’s own writings about slavery. By writing this book, I emphasize my belief that these and many other incidents involving deaf people should be an integral part of mainstream history.

Through this rich opportunity to examine the common condition of deafness, we learn the extent to which deaf people were involved in events that changed the course of our history, and we develop new insights into mainstream interpretations of the conflict.