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## “A Grave and Gracious Woman”: Deaf People and Signed Language in Colonial New England

SARAH PRATT OF WEYMOUTH, Massachusetts, lived a fairly typical New England life in an era defined by Puritanism. Born July 4, 1640, as Sarah Hunt, she grew up in a large blended family, with a stepfather and various step- and half-siblings, until the death of her mother when she was twelve, after which she came under the care of guardians whom her mother had appointed. Sarah married at age twenty-one. Both she and her husband enjoyed long lives, and their marriage produced nine children. Along with her husband, she was accepted into church fellowship, which entitled her to participate in the Lord's Supper, following the obligatory questioning by the elders of the church. She could give a good account of the doctrines of New England Puritanism taught by the ministers of the Weymouth church and, like many women whose “spiritual relations” were recorded in the first and second generation of Puritan settlers, proved her genuine interest in religion by the concern she had for her own soul. As Increase Mather reported in 1684, Sarah was “to the best observation, a grave

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and gracious Woman.”<sup>1</sup> She died in Weymouth on August 3, 1729, at the age of eighty-nine.

Typical as she was, the circumstance that earns Sarah a place in Increase Mather’s 1684 *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* is that she was deaf from the age of about three. Her husband, Matthew Pratt,<sup>2</sup> was also deafened through sickness at the age of twelve. Although he, too, was a full member of his church, it is Sarah’s conversion and its communication through sign language that Mather records as an “illustrious providence.” While Mather realized that Sarah’s ability to understand and participate in church fellowship was remarkable, what is noteworthy for sign language history today is that a signed language capable of this level of abstraction and used within an extended family existed in America only a generation after the founding of Plymouth colony.

Mather’s commemoration of Sarah’s life and of her comprehension of “the great Mysteries of Salvation” occurs in chapter IX of his *Essay*. The chapter, about twenty pages in length, begins by transcribing in full a four-page letter from an informant in Weymouth who describes Sarah and Matthew, revealing the remarkable level of access they seem to have had to church and community life. The following eight pages are devoted to Mather’s comprehensive summary of scholarship on the implications of deafness for salvation, which cites a wide range of European sources on deaf people, their communication, and their literacy. The remaining pages of the chapter deal with other “afflictions” such as blindness.

The history of deaf people in the United States—their communities, signed languages, and education—is now relatively well documented (e.g., Lane 1984; Groce 1985; Van Cleve and Crouch 1989; Baynton 1996; Lang 2007). Most of this history has concentrated on the beginnings of deaf education in the early nineteenth century, the spread of deaf schools, communities, and organizations, and debates about education throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—usually regarded as the formative period in the evolution of the modern Deaf community and its language (e.g., Lane 1984; Van Cleve and Crouch 1989). Accounts that deal with earlier deaf history usually begin with the deaf population on the island of Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

where there was a much higher than usual incidence of deafness and, as a consequence, widespread use of sign language by both deaf and hearing people (Groce 1985). Groce (*ibid.*) reported that the first recorded observation of a deaf person on Martha's Vineyard was in 1714—this was Jonathan Lambert, who was born in the town of Barnstable in Massachusetts and had moved to the island in 1694. Lang (2007) has recently described several instances of other deaf persons in the American colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and Mather's text gives us more detailed information about one of the instances Lang cites, that of Sarah and Matthew Pratt.

Mather's chapter appears to be the first extended account of deaf people written in America and is thus a significant discovery. It invites reassessment of current versions of American deaf history, the origins of American Sign Language (ASL), and the history of deaf literacy before the establishment of deaf education. This article reviews and analyzes what is known or can be gleaned from existing records about Sarah's and Matthew's families, education, signing, and participation in the life of their community. We suggest that the signed communication they employed was almost certainly more complex than a protolanguage or homesign system and that literacy played a part in their participation in church and community life. First, however, we look at what Mather—writing in the early 1680s—knew about deafness, deaf people, and signed communication and at the purpose and assumptions of his book.

### Seventeenth-Century Knowledge about Deafness and Signed Languages

Increase Mather (1639–1723) was one of the foremost clergymen of Massachusetts during the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He was educated at home, at Harvard College, and at Trinity College in Dublin. After some time preaching in England, he returned to Massachusetts in 1661 and became minister of the Second Church of Boston. While he is less well known than his son Cotton, he was no less important in the leadership of the early colonies, and his prolific writings on scientific, theological, and historical subjects show that he was an exact and thorough scholar (see figure 1).



FIGURE 1. Increase Mather

Mather's *Essay* was written before the full blossoming of the Enlightenment and its almost frantic interest in language and quixotic search for the "original" or "perfect" human language. Vico's hypothesis that a signed language preceded all spoken languages and Condillac's and Diderot's musings on "the primitive poetic energy of visible gestures" (Rée 1999, 135–36) all lay in the future, as did the schools for deaf children founded by Thomas Braidwood and Charles-Michel de l'Épée. Commentary on deaf people, their sign language, and their education often occurred in the context of religious debates, and education itself was a matter for individuals and family rather than institutions or the state. Mather had access to and had clearly read almost all of the relevant sources available at the time, including theological analyses of deaf people's status and accounts of deaf people's lives and education.

### *Theological Works*

Mather begins his overview of scholarship on deafness and sign languages not with the sensational reports of early deaf prodigies such as Luis de Velasco, Alexander Popham, and Daniel Whaley but rather with the Protestant churchmen Luther, Melancthon, Gerhard, Althing, Voetius, and Balduinus, all of whom, Mather summarizes, determined “that those who were either born, or by any accident made Deaf and Dumb, if their Conversation be blameless and they able by signs (which are Analogous to verbal expressions) to declare their knowledge and faith; may as freely be received to the Lords supper, as any that shall orally make the like Profession” (1684, 294). Recent research has discussed early Roman Catholic and Reformation Protestant attitudes toward both deaf people and signed language (Miles 2001). Although theologians did not always agree, Mather was drawing on established authorities in asserting that deaf people could demonstrate understanding by signs and could therefore be admitted to full communion in the church.<sup>3</sup>

### *Accounts of Deaf People's Lives*

Mather's second set of authorities includes those that document communication by deaf people. The first mentioned is “Mr *Ricaut*, in his History of the present State of the *Ottoman Empire*,” which documents the use of a signed language in the Turkish seraglio, where a large number of deaf people were part of the sultan's retinue (see also Miles 2000). This work created a sensation when it was published in England in 1668. Ricaut is followed in Mather's summary by (Joachim) Camerarius, a sixteenth-century German associated with Melancthus, (Felix) Platerus, a Swiss physician well known even today in medical history and otherwise, chiefly from being cited by Thomas Browne in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Mr. (Samuel) Clark, who provides the example of Gennet Lowes of Edinburgh, who “could understand anyone in her house, meerly by the moving of their lips,” and “Mr. Crisp of London” as a well-known lip-reader (Clarke 1656, 156), and “Borellus,” Pierre Borel, a seventeenth-century French physician and scholar. Mather credits all four with reports of deaf people who could either read and write or lip-read or both. Bulwer's *Philocophus*, which

Mather does not cite, covers the same ground—and in exactly the same order, though in greater detail (1684, 169–81). Mather then cites “*Mr. Baxter’s Church History*,” which mentions people who were able to speak after having their tongues cut out; the author was Richard Baxter, a well-known seventeenth-century Puritan pastor. Concluding this section are two stories, about a French child who could speak plainly despite having a putrefied tongue (Mather gives no source for this) and another about a man who could speak for just one hour a day (from “the *Germanic Ephemerides of Miscellaneous Curiosities*, for the Year 1679”). While this segment of Mather’s sources may seem obscure to a modern reader, the men and books he cites were indeed the medical and religious authorities of the day.

#### *Accounts of Deaf Education*

Mather’s third group of sources is more familiar to deaf historians, although it begins with an odd mistake that shows how easily sign systems can be misunderstood and how easily sources can be misquoted. Mather begins this section by citing the “*Dectylogy* [*sic*] of Bede . . . whereby Men speak as nimbly with the fingers as with the tongue: taking five fingers of the one hand for Vowels, and the several positions of the other for Consonants” (1684, 298). The Venerable Bede, an eighth-century Benedictine monk, wrote prolifically on subjects ranging from English church history and saints’ lives to scientific treatises, most significantly on chronology. A book of his on that topic includes an introductory section on the Roman finger calculus, a poorly recorded but most certainly widely used system in antiquity and the Middle Ages for calculation on the fingers. Bede’s finger alphabet, as described in this work, was nothing more than a parlor game (Bragg 1997) in which the finger calculus configuration for “1” stood for “a,” that for “2” stood for “b,” and so on. Mather’s description of a finger-spelling system is clearly not referring to Bede—and indeed Mather was too meticulous to make such a mistake. The error is from George Havers’ 1664 translation of a French collection titled *A General Collection of the Discourses of the Virtuosi of France*, which Mather is quoting word for word at this point.<sup>4</sup>

Mather’s next authority is Castro, who taught a boy born deaf to speak. This is Pedro de Castro, who asserted that he learned the method

from Ramírez de Carrión ([Plann 1997](#)). Mather indicates that he had heard of Castro through the *Germanic Ephemerides* he had cited in the previous section. Following Castro is the story of "a Spanish Noble Man (Brother to the Constable of *Castile*)" who was taught to speak by "a certain Priest." The Spanish nobleman was certainly Luis de Velasco, whose great-uncles Francisco and Pedro de Velasco had been taught to read and write by Pedro Ponce de León in the mid-sixteenth century. Luis's teacher was the same Ramírez de Carrión who taught Castro his method and whose book describing it, *Maravillas de naturaleza*, was published in 1629. This was not likely to have been available to Mather, whose note "*vid. Conferences of Virtuosi*," refers again to the *Discourses of the Virtuosi of France* (this time to volume 2). Mather seems to be drawing from two sources, although he quotes the *Conferences* word for word at some points. The ultimate source of this story may well have been Kenelm Digby's *Two Treatises* of 1644. Digby met Luis de Velasco in Madrid in 1623, and his account of that meeting was widely talked about in London ([Plann 1997](#)). Mather could also have known Digby's account or its reprinted version in Bulwer's *Philocophus*.

Mather's next (and penultimate) source is Francis Mercury van Helmont, a seventeenth-century metaphysician who believed that Hebrew was not only the original human language but also the natural language of God and that its alphabetic characters were pictographs of the vocal organs (Rée 1999). Mather reports that van Helmont taught a deaf man to speak Hebrew, but there is no evidence that he ever worked with deaf people, although his followers did. Mather concludes with an account of two contemporary British teachers, John Wallis and William Holder, who argued in the pages of the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions* about which of them could take credit for teaching two deaf boys. Mather referred only to the issue in which Wallis made his claims (1670, no. 61) and so incorrectly gives Wallis most of the credit.

For all the obscurity of Mather's sources as they appear to modern readers, he did have a remarkably thorough grasp of the available contemporary writing on the subject of deafness, sign language, and deaf education. He was clearly familiar with both scientific and theological works and a wide range of writers, which lends further credibility to his account and his interpretation of the story of Sarah and Matthew Pratt.

## Mather's Essay

Increase Mather's *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* was published in Boston in 1684. According to its preface, it grew out of a project that had begun twenty-six years earlier in England. The manuscript beginning of this project made its way to New England, where it was discovered among the papers of a John Davenport after his death in 1670. Mather, on finding the manuscript, proposed to a group of clergy that something similar be undertaken to record "providences" in the New England colonies. They subsequently drew up a list of the types of events that they considered appropriate:

Such Divine Judgments, Tempests, Floods, Earth-quakes, Thunders as are unusual, strange Apparitions or whatever else shall happen that is Prodigious. Witchcrafts, Diabolical Possessions, Remarkable Judgments upon noted Sinners: eminent Deliverances, and Answers of Prayer, are to be reckoned among Illustrious Providences. (Preface)

However, the *Essay* is not simply a book of curiosities or sensational events. The ministers obviously took its accuracy seriously, for they agreed that "When any thing of this Nature shall be ready for the Presse, it appears on sundry Grounds very expedient, that it should be read, and approved of at some Meeting of the Elders, before Publication" (Preface).

The concern for accuracy grew out of Mather's theological purpose. He and his fellow ministers were recording things "for Gods Glory, and the good of Posterity"; this was not a book written for entertainment as we would understand it. It reads more like a scientific tract in its structure and criteria but with an overarching theological purpose: to record accurately the wonderful works of God. At the end of the preface, Mather hints that he would like to write or see written "the *Natural History of New England* . . . the rules and method described by the Learned and excellent person *Robert Boyle* Esq. being duely observed therein." For Mather, the scientific and the theological were never in conflict. Rather, since God controlled everything in the world, scientific observation was, by definition, an observation of the works of God.

As we have seen, Mather draws upon more than twenty different Eu-



ropean sources of information about deaf people and their education, physical condition, and communication. His presentation of Sarah and also Matthew Pratt as “remarkables” and “illustrious providences” did not preclude but rather demanded a scientific interest in the condition of deafness and its possible amelioration through medical science and education. The range of sources he was able to consult, even if he accessed some of them through secondary sources, indicates an extensive personal library (his library was indeed famous), access to the library of Harvard College (he graduated from Harvard in 1656 and was president from 1692 to 1701), and an enduring interest in scholarly debate and discovery (he founded the Boston Philosophical Society in 1683 and corresponded with members of the Royal Society in London and other prominent English scholars). His studies at Trinity College in Dublin between 1656 and 1658 and subsequent work in England may also have given him access to some of these sources.

Increase Mather’s informant for the story of Sarah Pratt, as for other accounts included in the *Essay*, is not named. Mather says that he heard of Sarah and “made enquiry about this matter of some that are fully acquainted therewith, and have from a good hand received this following account.” The account was dated June 27, 1683. Mather’s informant was possibly the minister of Weymouth at the time, Samuel Torrey, whom, according to his diary, Mather saw frequently during the time he was writing the *Essay* (Mather Family Papers). Increase’s more famous son Cotton Mather adapted Sarah’s story and included it in abbreviated form in his monumental history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, as an appendix to the life of Thomas Thacher (Cotton Mather 1979 [1702], 495–96).<sup>5</sup>

### Some Puritan Precepts

Two areas of Puritan doctrine inform Mather’s approach to the subject of the Sarah’s deafness. They are the Puritan paradigm of conversion and the Puritan understanding of “affliction.”

#### *The “Conversion Narrative”*

Mather views himself as a recorder of God’s works, and, for a Puritan, one of the greatest of God’s works is that of conversion, which

implies an inward event—a profound experience of God—rather than public adherence to a particular system of belief. (Indeed, most of those who recorded conversion narratives had been diligent churchgoers for years before their conversions.) As the event relies on understanding rather than mere compliance, Sarah’s conversion is thus the central “remarkable providence” in Mather’s account. It is particularly remarkable in the Puritan context, for this conversion event and the full church membership it implied was by no means assured, even for the most faithful adherents of Puritan churches. Indeed the requirements for membership were so stringent that in most churches relatively few congregants became full members (Pope 1969). Matthew’s and especially Sarah’s membership marked them as “visible saints” who had given an account of their conversion to the church elders and thus is very significant. These accounts were sometimes recorded, as in the well-documented case of Thomas Shepard’s congregation in Boston (Selement and Woolley 1981). Mather is at pains to record Sarah’s concern for her own soul: The ministers who examined her found that she:

was under great exercise of Spirit, and most affectionately concerned for and about her Soul, her Spiritual and Eternal estate. She imparted herself to her Friends, and expressed her desire of help. . . . She did once in her Exercise write with a Pin upon a trencher three times over, *Ah poor Soul!* And therewithal burst into tears, before divers of her Friends. (1684, 293)

Sarah’s concern for her soul will strike many modern readers as an excessive, burdensome guilt or even a serious neurosis. In fact, the Puritan paradigm of conversion required such a stage of “contrition” as a sign that the person was beginning to rely on God for salvation rather than the fatal natural state of self-reliance and self-confidence usually called “security.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of that paradigm, the account of Sarah’s anxiety and conversion affirmed her status as a genuine Christian, although in typical New England style the wording is cautious: Sarah “hath approved herself to the best observation, a grave and gracious Woman.”<sup>7</sup>

*The Puritan View of "Affliction" and "Providence"*

The second Puritan doctrine that informs Mather's approach to the subject of Sarah's deafness is that of providence, which states that God is in control of every event and circumstance of a person's life but that one cannot assume an evil intent behind even the worst "affliction." Increase's son Cotton is a case in point, for he stuttered in early adulthood and thought of this potentially disastrous affliction—especially debilitating given that he was a minister—not as punishment per se but as God's fatherly discipline. As Kenneth Silverman points out, Cotton's self-analysis does not result in soul-destroying guilt or unhappiness but in an acknowledgement of God's good purpose, of making him "more happy than other men" (cited in Silverman 1984, 34).

When it came to accidents of various kinds, there were cautions given to those who might assume too much about God's intentions. Increase Mather wrote often on the doctrine of providence, and he prefaced one sermon with this warning: "It becometh us, not to censure those that are made Examples of divine Severity." Rather he advised his readers that "sudden changes upon particular Persons are warnings to the whole" (Mather 1675, To the Reader). Contrary to popular belief, the Puritans were cautious in attaching any meaning to events or drawing any conclusions about God's intent, especially when it came to the lives of individuals.

In the case of both Sarah and Matthew Pratt, Mather makes no attempt to put their affliction down to sin on their part or to imply that their parents were being punished. Indeed, Matthew's parents and Sarah's brother are mentioned as "godly" and Sarah's parents as "Religious." In this context, Mather makes no speculation or assumption about God's intent in allowing Sarah's deafness. Rather, he records her story in order to encourage his readers to praise God for her remarkable salvation.

Mather's Account of the Pratts

In these contexts—historical, scientific, and theological—Mather records the story of Sarah and Matthew as he received it in a letter

“from a good hand” (1684, 290). The central section of the account is as follows:

*Matthew Prat* aged about fifty five years, was in his minority by his godly Parents educated religiously, and taught to read: When he was about twelve years old, he became totally Deaf by sickness, and so hath ever since continued; after the loss of his hearing he was taught to write: his Reading and Writing he retaineth perfectly, and makes much good improvement of both, but his Speech is very broken, and imperfect, not easily intelligible; he maketh use of it more seldom, only to some few that are wonted to it. He discourseth most by Signs, and by Writing. He is studious and judicious in matters of Religion, hath been in Church-fellowship, a partaker of all Ordinances near thirty years, hath approved himself unto good satisfaction therein, in all ways of Church Communion, both in publick and private; and judged to be a well wrought Convert and real Christian. *Sarah Prat* his Wife, being about forty three years old, was also quite deprived of Hearing by sickness, when about the third year of her Age, after she could speak, and had begun to learn Letters, having quite lost Hearing, she lost all speech (doubtless all remembrance and understanding of Words and Language), her Religious Parents being both dead, her godly Brother *Ephraim Hunt* (yet surviving) took Fatherly care of her, she also happily fell under the Guardianship and Tuition of the Reverend Mr. *Thomas Thacher*, who laboured with design to teach her to understand Speech and Language by Writing, but it was never observed that any thing was really effected; she hath a notable accuracy and quickness of understanding by the Eye, she discourseth altogether by signs, they that are able to discourse with her in that way, will communicate any matter much more speedily (and as full) as can be by Speech, and she to them. Her Children sign from the Breast, and learn to speak by their eyes and fingers sooner than by their tongues. She was from her Child-hood naturally sober, and susceptible of good civil Education, but had no knowledge of a Deity, or of any thing that doth concern another life and world. Yet God hath of his infinite mercy, revealed Himself, his Son, and the great Mysteries of Salvation unto her by an Extraordinary and more immoderate working of his Spirit (as tis believed) in a saving work of Conversion. (1684, 290–92)

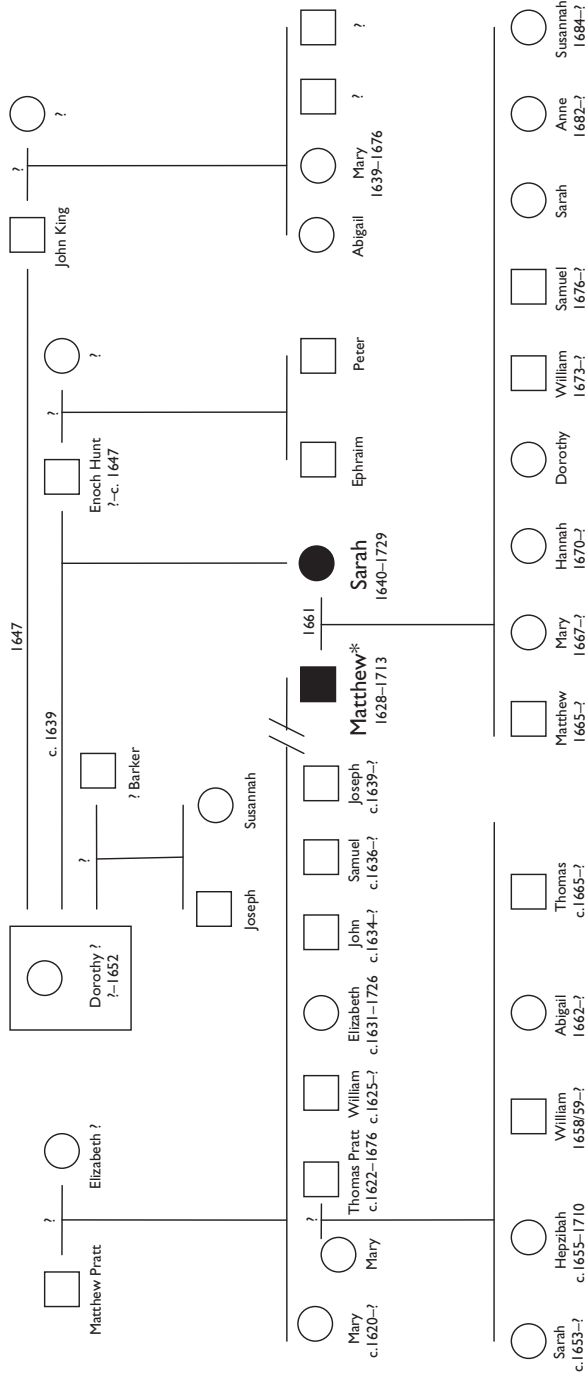
Mather’s informant goes on to detail Sarah’s conversion experience, including her examination on points of doctrine and her use of read-

ing and writing skills. Further research into the people identified by Mather gives us a more complex picture of the Pratts' family backgrounds, their position in the community, their signing, their literacy, and their lives in early Massachusetts.

### Family Background of Matthew and Sarah (Hunt) Pratt

Matthew Pratt's father, also named Matthew Pratt, had arrived in Weymouth in 1623 as one of a group of settlers that intended to establish the Church of England in the colony. This attempt was not successful: After early difficulties appointing a minister, the town was secured for orthodox Puritanism by 1644. Matthew Pratt and his wife, Elizabeth, had seven children, and their third son—Matthew—was born in 1628.

Sarah Hunt's family was rather more complicated because of deaths and remarriages, creating a network of half- and stepsiblings. Her father, Enoch Hunt, married and had a family of two sons—Ephraim and Peter—in England before his wife died there. Around 1639 he and his sons came to America, where Enoch married Dorothy Barker, a widow. At the time of the marriage, Dorothy Barker had two children: a son, Joseph, and a daughter, Susannah. Sarah Hunt, born in 1640, was the only child of Enoch and Dorothy Barker Hunt. Enoch returned to England for some reason since we know he died there by 1647: Whether he might have abandoned his wife and daughter shortly after Sarah's birth or, alternately, never fathered another surviving child with Dorothy and simply returned to England on necessary business that year is not known. His sons Ephraim and Peter, Sarah's half-brothers, remained in America. Sarah's mother, Dorothy Barker Hunt, then married John King in 1647. King had two sons and two daughters from a previous marriage and, after Dorothy's death, married a third time and had one more son. Thus Sarah, though an only child of her parents' marriage, had two half-brothers on her father's side, a half-brother and a half-sister on her mother's side, and five stepsiblings, the children of her stepfather, John King (see figure 2).



\* Matthew was the third son of  
Matthew and Elizabeth Pratt

FIGURE 2. Hunt/King/Pratt family

When Sarah was twelve, her mother, Dorothy King, died. Dorothy's will bequeathed to Sarah those movables "which were mine before I married with my now husband John King; . . . the care of her I committ to Mr. Thomas Thacher, Mr. Richard Collicott and Hon Kingsley of Dorchester" (Chamberlain 1923, 350). It is not clear how Mr. Richard Collicott or the Hon. Kingsley of Dorchester were related to Sarah's family or how uncommon it was for stepfathers to be excused from the care of stepchildren after the death of the child's mother, but in this case it seems that Dorothy wanted to make sure that her deaf daughter would have guardians other than John King. Mather's informant also claimed that Sarah's half-brother Ephraim Hunt "took Fatherly care of her," though this was not specified in Dorothy's will. Although we cannot be sure with whom Sarah actually lived, the mention of Thomas Thacher in Dorothy's will and the fact that Mather's informant says that Sarah "fell under [his] Guardianship and Tuition" (Mather 1684, 291) indicates his importance in Sarah's life. It seems that he was a key figure in Sarah's education and in her acceptance into the Puritan community.

### Thomas Thacher

Thomas Thacher, physician and Puritan minister, was born in 1620 and grew up in Salisbury, England, where his father, Peter Thacher, was rector of St. Edmonds. His father had hoped to send him to Oxford or Cambridge, but Thomas's religious beliefs precluded him from making the subscription to the tenets of the Church of England, which was required for access to instruction at these universities. At the age of fifteen, therefore, he sailed to America with his uncle, Anthony Thacher, and arrived in Boston in 1635. Thomas and his uncle parted ways (that summer, Anthony Thacher and his wife were subsequently the sole survivors of a shipwreck off what is now called Thacher's Island near Barnstable, Massachusetts: Their survival is one of the other "remarkable providences" recorded by Mather in the *Essay*). What Thomas Thacher was doing during his first six years in America is not known, but by 1641 he was settled in Scituate, Massachusetts, where he studied both medicine and theology with the Rev. Charles Chauncy (or Chauncey) (see figures 3 and 4).

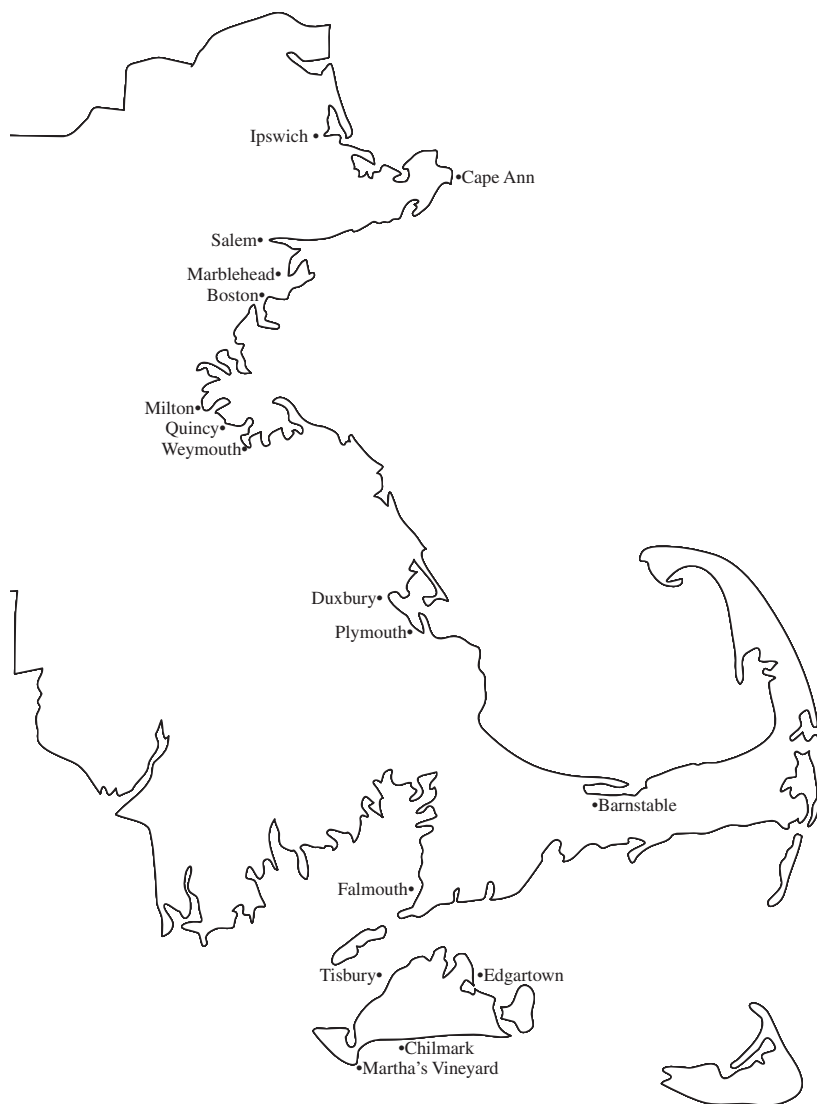


FIGURE 3. Map of Weymouth and surrounds

In seventeenth-century Puritan New England, unlike in Virginia or New York, which followed the Church of England, it was common for ministers like Charles Chauncy to have read medicine during their university training and to serve as community physicians (Handerson





FIGURE 4. Thomas Thacher

1899; Bloch 1973). Medical education in England at the time was carried out largely by apprenticeship. Rarely a student would elect to take a degree on the continent, whether in Leyden or in Padua. Thacher's tutor, Chauncy, most likely read medicine at Cambridge while studying for the Bachelor of Divinity degree, where he also became proficient in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic.<sup>8</sup> After some conflicts with church authorities, Chauncy finally settled in Scituate in 1641, where Thacher became his pupil.<sup>9</sup>

As it happens, other residents of Scituate at the time Thacher and Chauncy lived there were the Lambert, Tilton, and Skiffe (or Skiff) families from the Weald in Kent, who are believed to have brought hereditary deafness from the Weald to Martha's Vineyard. In fact, Scituate had been founded by a group that included four of

the thirty members of Lothrop's congregation who had left the Weald in 1634 ([Groce 1985](#)). In 1636 and again in 1640 almost half of all Scituate households originated in the Weald, and in 1641 a count of the male population gave the same percentage, just under half. Although we have no reports of any deaf people in Scituate, it is possible there were a few among them during the decade they lived in Scituate, 1634–1644, when Thacher was studying with Chauncy (1641–1644).

Chauncy, who would later serve as the second president of Harvard College, “is constantly spoken of as being an eminent physician, though no details of his work in that capacity have descended to us. He is said to have held the opinion that there should be no distinction between physic and divinity” ([Packard 1901](#), 36). Along with “an understanding of the elements of medicine” ([Viets 1930](#), 28), Chauncy taught Thacher Arabic and Hebrew and, oddly, clockwork.

In 1643 Thacher married Elizabeth Partridge, a daughter of Ralph Partridge of Duxbury, and a year later was ordained a minister in Weymouth. For the next twenty years the Thachers would remain in Weymouth, where they raised five children—and accepted the guardianship of the deaf girl Sarah Hunt—while Thomas “conducted his pastoral duties and practiced ‘physic’” ([Bloch 1973](#), 700). Thacher's dual practice of medicine and divinity followed the lines laid out by his mentor, Chauncy.

A digression on two of Thacher's sons and a grandson shows a continuing contact between the Thacher family and the Weald families. A son Ralph, or Rodolphus, named for his maternal grandfather, married Ruth Partridge of Duxbury, his first cousin: Ralph's mother, Elizabeth Partridge Thacher, and Ruth's father, George Partridge, were brother and sister. Their son, also named Ralph or Rodolphus, became the pastor at Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard in 1697, and in 1711 he married Patience Skiffe, who was born on Martha's Vineyard. The Skiffes were a prominent Vineyard family with many deaf members. Patience, who had been born in 1682, was a daughter of Nathan Skiffe, born in 1658 and a resident of Sandwich who moved to Tisbury around 1680. Nathan himself was a son of Englishman James Skiffe (b. 1610), who is the ancestor of all of the

Vineyard Skiffes and a brother to the James Skiffe (b. 1638) who also settled in the Vineyard.

Another of Thomas Thacher’s three sons, Peter, lived in Barnstable from 1678 to 1680. His diary indicates that during this time he had contact with “Joshua Lumbert and his wife” (*The Journal of Peter Thacher of Milton*, entry for March 26, 1680), who may have been the parents of Jonathan Lambert, born in Barnstable in 1657 and later the first known deaf resident of Martha’s Vineyard, where he moved in 1694. After Peter Thacher’s departure from Barnstable for the neighboring town of Milton, his friendship with Weymouth minister Samuel Torrey frequently took him to that town, where Sarah and Matthew Pratt were living. It seems, then, that three generations of the Thachers lived and worked among the Weald families, who brought hereditary deafness to Martha’s Vineyard.

Thacher’s wife of many years, Elizabeth, died sometime before 1664, the year Thomas Thacher married a Boston widow and moved to Boston. There Thacher practiced as a physician before being called as the first minister of the Old South Church in 1670.

In 1666 and again in 1678 outbreaks of smallpox swept New England, and Thacher conceived the novel idea of printing a broadside that would “inform the people about the cause, mechanism, and nature of smallpox” (Bloch 1973, 701). For this purpose, he used passages from Thomas Sydenham’s leaflet published in London in 1666 (Viets 1930, 29) and produced a one-page document that “explained the nature of smallpox, gave directions for its control, described its course, offered simple, sensible rules of treatment, presented a theory of its cause, gave its symptoms, and outlined early, doubtful, hopeful, and fatal signs” (Bloch 1973, 702). Published in January 1678, this broadside was the first medical publication in America, and, before 1700, the *only* such publication (Viets 1930, 43). Thacher died that same year, at age fifty-eight from a fever he caught from a patient. He is remembered by medical history today as the

author of the first medical writing in America and an example of the careworn, humane, clerical practitioner who provided medical care, comfort, and advice to seventeenth-century settlers at a time when practically no physicians were available. Thacher also deserves recog-

dition as one of the pioneers in American public-health history.  
(Bloch 1973, 702)

To this encomium we may now add that he seems to have been a significant figure in early American deaf history, too.

### Family and Community

As a Puritan family, the Pratts were typical in having a large number of children. Nine were born to Sarah and Matthew over the space of nineteen years: Matthew (1665), Mary (1667), Hannah (1670), Dorothy (?), William (1673), Samuel (1676?), Sarah (?), Anne (1682), and Susannah (1684). Seven of their children—Mary, Hannah, Dorothy, Samuel, Sarah, Anne and Susannah—are recorded as having married. Though this may seem a large family to modern readers, it was nothing out of the ordinary for the time.

We can never know the full nature of Sarah and Matthew Pratt's participation in their community, church, and extended family, but the evidence we have suggests they were by no means excluded. We are told that Matthew Pratt was "studious and judicious in matters of Religion, hath been in Church-fellowship, a partaker of all Ordinances near thirty years, hath approved himself unto good satisfaction therein, in all wayes of Church Communion, both in publick and private; and judged to be a well wrought Convert and real Christian" (1684, 291). His "publick" participation in the Weymouth community was political and economic, as well as religious. Indeed there is evidence that he participated in political events of his day, as his name appears with those of other male family members in the list of men who "took the oath of allegiance to His Majesty, Charles II, before the Worshipful Joseph Dudley, Assistant, in the year 1678–79" (*History of Weymouth*, vol. 1, 203).

Sarah and Matthew lived through many of the privations and hardships of the early years of the Massachusetts colony, as well as seeing it expand, prosper, and provide opportunities to people such as themselves. They survived the brief but violent King Philip's War against the Indians (1675–1676), during which a number of towns,

including Weymouth, came under attack. It seems likely that the Pratts, along with many other residents of the outlying towns, fled for a time to Boston—their son Samuel is listed as having been baptized at Boston’s Third Church in April 1676 by their old teacher, Thomas Thacher (Chamberlain 1923). Just a few weeks later Matthew’s older brother Thomas was killed by Indians. During such times, Sarah and Matthew would have needed to communicate with neighbors and officials, as well as family, as residents were urged to move to garrisons or abandon their homes, and news of the war was constantly being circulated.

The death of Matthew’s brother gives us more information as to the Pratts’ level of involvement in family affairs. When Thomas was killed, it appeared that he had left no will, and a petition was brought to the county court for the purpose of settling the future distribution of his estate to his five children. The petition was brought by William Pratt, and other Pratt brothers and friends were involved as guardians, but Matthew was not. (Suffolk County [Massachusetts] Court 1679). The court records give no explanation, so we can only speculate that, when it came to complex administrative matters, the family decided to entrust matters to Matthew’s hearing brothers.

Matthew’s own will shows that he had substantial possessions including, importantly, land, which most likely provided the family’s livelihood since there is no reference to Matthew working in a trade, and agriculture was an essential occupation in the early colony (Chamberlain 1923, 500–501). The value of his “Real Estate Housing and Lands” was listed as £1301, a significant sum for the time (Suffolk County [Massachusetts] Court 1731). The will’s careful and even division of his land among his three sons indicates that he expected them to continue farming in and around Weymouth, and his daughters received portions of money (and in the case of Hannah, a portion of land as well) of 10–15 pounds each. Sarah was well provided for under the terms of Matthew’s will, but Matthew also appointed “my Loving Friends Stephen French Senior and Captain John Hunt, to be Overseers and to be helpful to my Wife and Children” (Suffolk County [Massachusetts] Court 1711). It seems that he was well connected to the community around him but that he considered some

extra help for Sarah necessary. Sarah herself appears twice as one of the few women in lists of land ownership in 1663 (*History of Weymouth*, vol. 1, 200–201). She was also the only woman not designated “widow” in these lists and interestingly appears under her maiden name two years after her marriage to Matthew.

What strikes an historian of the American colonies is the overwhelming normality of the Pratts’ lives. From the evidence we have, they seem to have been the equals of their fellow Puritans in almost every sphere of life and in their admission to full church membership, their ownership of land, and their large and healthy family somewhat above the norm.

### The Pratts’ Signed Communication

Mather’s account refers frequently and positively to the signs that Sarah and Matthew Pratt used. He describes these as “Analogous to verbal expressions” (1684, 294) and writes that they could “communicate any matter much more speedily (and as full) as can be by Speech” (291–92). This passage would not describe a communication system used by two isolated deaf people in a recently settled colony where the sole source of signs would have been (or would have developed from) a homesign system. On the contrary, the Pratts’ signing appears to have been capable of communicating more complex and abstract thought than could be expressed by a protolanguage of two users in a single generation. In particular, they were described as conversing about highly complex subjects that were outside their direct experience.

In assessing whether the Pratts’ signed communication constituted a language, we have referred to [Baker and Cokely’s \(1980\)](#) definition of *language*:

A language is a system of relatively arbitrary symbols and grammatical signals that change across time and that members of a community share and use for several purposes: to interact with each other, to communicate their ideas, emotions, and intentions, and to transmit their culture from generation to generation. (31)

Other scholars have applied similar criteria to the study of sign systems that appear to have been in use before deaf education became wide-

spread. In her study of sign systems before the seventeenth century, Bragg (1997) reserved the word *language* for “natural communication systems that (1) have both a lexicon and a grammar, (2) are capable of expressing any thought on any subject, (3) are learned by at least some infants during the normal language-acquisition-threshold age, and (4) are living, growing, changing systems” (2).

A system that does not meet these criteria Bragg judged either sub-linguistic (gesture, lexicons without grammars), protolinguistic (home-signs), or an encoding system for a spoken language. The Pratts’ signing was certainly not an encoding system and apparently not merely gesture or a lexicon since grammar would be needed to discourse on salvation. Lacking a description of the Pratts’ signing, we can examine what Mather says about the content and social contexts of their communication in order to discern the extent to which it may have met Bragg’s four criteria.

As we have seen, Sarah and Matthew signed with each other, with two of Sarah’s sisters, and with their children. There are also references to Sarah’s “divers . . . Friends,” though this frequently meant family members in the Puritan context. The possibility of other interlocutors who could sign is left open by the descriptions of their habitual ways of communication. Matthew “discourseth most by Signs, and by Writing” (1684, 291), and Sarah “discourseth altogether by Signs” (ibid., 291). Mather reported that “there are several others in this Countrey who are Deaf and Dumb” (ibid., 301), and though he did not mention whether they were in contact with each other or with the Pratts, it seems that the term “Countrey” referred to those in the local vicinity rather than the whole colony. These remarks suggest the possibility that the language was used in a larger community than is described here.

Sarah’s sisters were described as “intelligent persons, and notably skill’d in her artificial Language” (ibid., 292) and as having helped with Sarah’s examination by the church elders (presumably acting as interpreters to some degree): “An account of her Experiences was taken from her in writing by her Husband; upon which she was Examined by the Elders of the Church, they improving her Husband and two of her sisters . . . by whose help they attained good satisfaction.”

This passage is quite specific in saying “two of her sisters,” mean-

ing that she had at least three. As we have seen, there were several possibilities. Sarah had no full sisters, but she did have one older half-sister, possibly three older sisters-in-law, and two stepsisters from her mother's marriage to John King, not to mention the wives and sisters among Matthew's many siblings. It is likely that her stepsisters, Abigail and Mary King, are the sisters meant here. They were close in age to Sarah and had grown up around her and thus would have had opportunities to become "notably skill'd" in signing. Of course, this conclusion suggests that Sarah, who entered the King household at the age of seven, was already signing by that time.

Mather's informant described Sarah's language as "artificial," but the term did not necessarily designate a language that had been "made up." Contemporary usage of the word applied it to any skill that required practice and persistence to attain, and the tone could be read as admiring rather than pejorative. There were attempts in seventeenth-century England by scholars such as John Wilkins and George Dalgarno to create what we would now call "artificial" languages, but they were not usually referred to as such by their creators (see Lewis 2008). Without knowing more about Mather's informant, it is difficult to say with certainty the implications of his calling Sarah's language "artificial." Much later, the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" language classed all complete human languages as "artificial," in contrast to inferior "natural" language used by those who had not been able to acquire a first language with ease. This was reflected, for example, in Joseph Watson's description of some of his deaf pupils in England in 1809:

The naturally deaf do not always stop here with this language of pantomime. Where they are fortunate enough to meet with an attentive companion or two, especially where two or more deaf persons happen to be brought up together, it is astonishing what approaches they will make towards the construction of an artificial language. (78)<sup>10</sup>

Although it would be anachronistic to apply this usage directly in Sarah's case, the descriptive term "artificial language" does lend support to the notion that her language was a complex one.

The examination by the elders dealt with abstract subjects such as "all the Principles of Religion: Those of the Unity of the Divine



Essence, Trinity of Persons, the Personal Union, the Mystical Union," and they were "satisfied that her Knowledge and Experience was distinct and sound" (1684, 292). While we cannot assume from this that their signing included lexical items for such concepts, Increase Mather and his informant do not seem to question that Sarah was able to demonstrate adequate understanding of these concepts through her signing.

We are also told that Sarah and Matthew's nine children "sign from the Breast, and learn to speak by their eyes and fingers sooner than by their tongues" (*ibid.*, 292). This suggests that Sarah's and Matthew's signing was complex enough to be passed on to their children as a viable method of communication during the generally accepted critical period for language learning.<sup>11</sup>

The extent of Sarah's knowledge of the world around her provides further evidence of the sophistication of their signing. Matthew's education by his parents, as well as his ability to read and write, can be credited with much of his knowledge and ability to participate in church activities. Sarah's knowledge of the world reveals more about the possibilities of their signed communication, as she became deaf at an early age and therefore could not be assumed to have acquired much incidental knowledge by any other means:

She understands as much concerning the state of the Countrey, and of particular persons therein, and of observable occurrences, as almost any one of her Sex; and (which is more wonderful) though she is not able to speak a word, she has by signs made it appear that she is not ignorant of Adam's fall, nor of Mans' misery by nature, nor of Redemption by Christ, and the great concernments of Eternity, and of another World (*ibid.*, 290)

Since Sarah's literacy skills were limited, she would have had to acquire such knowledge through signed conversation with or instruction by others, such as Thomas Thacher, her sisters, or Matthew, who could read and write and was "studious and judicious in matters of Religion" (*ibid.*, 291).

In the absence of details about the features of their signing, we can only draw conclusions from the content and the contexts of their communication. From this it appears that their signed communication

does meet most of Bragg's criteria. It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that Sarah and Matthew Pratt were using a relatively well-developed signed language.

Where might Sarah and Matthew have learned their signing? There is no indication that either of their families originated in the Kentish Weald (both sets of parents seem to have come from the English county of Buckinghamshire). Sarah may have developed and used a homesign system as she was growing up, especially as some of her step- or half-siblings appear to have signed with her. If Matthew had any access to signs after he was deafened at twelve, he might have used them with more complexity since he was literate and educated. Matthew might have learned to sign from Sarah after they met (though there was a twelve-year age difference between them). However, it is also quite possible that Thomas Thacher was their link to a more sophisticated signing system. As we have seen, Thacher had lived among the Weald families in Scituate for some years. Although we have no evidence that those Weald families had signing deaf members at the time, it is not impossible. The fact that Sarah's mother specifically designated Thacher to be one of her daughter's guardians could also indicate that he had shown a superior ability to communicate with her.

This information about Sarah and Matthew Pratt's signing may provide another avenue for investigation into the origins of modern American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is a descendent of Old French Sign Language, brought to the United States in 1817 by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet ([Armstrong 1999](#)). Woodward (1978) found that 58 percent of a sample of signs from modern French Sign Language and ASL were cognates. The other influences on modern ASL are usually agreed to have been early indigenous sign languages such as those from Martha's Vineyard, some Native American sign languages, and the process of creolization, which occurred naturally when deaf people were brought together in residential schools in the early to mid-nineteenth century (Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996). The apparent sophistication of Sarah and Matthew Pratt's signing suggests that indigenous varieties may have been richer, more diverse, and more widely used than hitherto suspected. It also indicates that the first deaf settlers on Martha's Vineyard (e.g., Jonathan Lambert) may have

come from a Massachusetts environment that already had a signed language in use.

### Sarah and Matthew Pratt's Literacy

During preindustrial times, literacy would have been less central to deaf people's participation in social and economic activities, as the majority of people in many societies were illiterate and did not necessarily depend on these skills to be productive. Eighteenth-century Paris, for example, appears to have had a large signing Deaf community, some of whose members participated to an extent in religious and social life without formal literacy skills (Desloges 1984). Similarly, deaf people on Martha's Vineyard during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appear to have participated actively in the fishing and farming economy, as well as at social and religious gatherings, without being widely literate. However, Sarah and Matthew Pratt lived in an environment that was more than usually conducive to the development of literacy skills compared to contemporary society in Europe. The Puritans placed a very high value on being able to read and (to a lesser extent) to write. Everyone in the Puritan community—both men and women—was required to study the Bible. In Thomas Cartwright's words, “If (as has been showed) all ought to read the scriptures then all ages, all sexes, all degrees and callings, all high and low, rich and poor, wise and foolish have a necessary duty therein” (quoted in Lake 1982, 288).<sup>12</sup>

However, reading and writing were not seen as being necessarily complementary. While all were expected to learn to read, writing was taught separately, at a later stage, and only to those who were considered likely to have a need for it (usually men). Lepore (2002) explains that “women's education, especially, was likely to stop after they learned to read. Women's literacy was meant to be passive; their quiet reading of the Scriptures was never to be a defiance of their minister's authority. Meanwhile, women who did write were always exquisitely conscious of just how far they were overstepping the bounds of their sex” (42). Parents were expected to take responsibility for teaching their children to read, and this was reflected in the first legislation relating to education in New England, the Massachusetts Act of 1642 (Morison 1956,

66). A later act, the Massachusetts Act of 1647, provided for a “common schoolmaster” to be appointed to each town of fifty families and a “Grammer-School” to be established in towns of a hundred families or more (ibid., 68), but there seems to have been no schoolmaster in Weymouth when Matthew and Sarah were children.

Sarah and Matthew Pratt followed different pathways to literacy, due not only to their different sexes and divergent family circumstances but, more important, also to the difference in the age at which each became deaf. Matthew lost his hearing at twelve, after he had learned to speak and had been taught to read by his parents. He was taught to write after the onset of his deafness (though we are not told who taught him), possibly to give him an extra skill to make up for the perceived disadvantage of his hearing loss. According to Mather’s informant, Matthew continued to read and write productively—“he retaineth perfectly, and make[s] much good improvement of both” (1684, 290).

Sarah became deaf at about three years of age, also after she could speak and “had begun to learn Letters.” After the onset of her deafness, she “lost all speech,” and Mather’s informant also reported that she had lost “all remembrance and understanding of Words and Language” (ibid., 291). However, it is noteworthy that Thacher attempted to teach Sarah to write since this was unusual instruction for girls. As in Matthew’s case, it may have been theorized that writing would help to ameliorate the disadvantages of her deafness.

The result of Thacher’s teaching, according to Mather’s informant, was that “it was never observed that any thing was really effected” (ibid.). Nonetheless, this casual judgment is qualified by other observations of Sarah’s literacy practices. In her efforts to understand her “Spiritual and Eternal estate,” she did make use of texts:

She made use of the Bible and other good Books, and remarkt such places and passages as suited her condition, and that with tears; she did once in her Exercise, write with a Pin upon a Trencher three times over, *Ah poor Soul!* . . . She hath been wont to enquire after the Text, and when it hath been shewed to her to look and muse upon it. She knoweth most, if not all persons Names that she hath acquaintance with. If Scripture Names, will readily turn and point to them in the Bible. (ibid., 293)

These observations reinforce the constant presence of the Bible in Puritan environments, which would have been conducive to Sarah’s recognition of “Scripture Names” and her practice of marking particular passages. They also remind us that Sarah’s family aided her in her spiritual searching and her use of texts. Whether she could write much more than “*Ah poor Soul*,” however, is doubtful. When she was giving her “account of her Experiences” to the church elders, it “was taken from her in writing by her Husband” (ibid., 292), which suggests that her own writing—or rather, English—was very limited.

Seventeenth-century printing conventions would have been conducive to Sarah’s development of literacy skills. The Geneva Bible (which was in print from 1560 to 1644 and was popular with the Puritans) contains many innovations that made it accessible to readers with a wide variety of literacy skills. Unlike previous translations, it was printed in readable roman type, and each chapter was divided into verses (Berry 2007). Unlike the later King James Version, it also contained explanatory marginal notes (which may have helped Sarah to “mark” passages that she wanted to remember). It used running headings that frequently contained names of people in the text (which would have helped Sarah to turn to a name easily when it was mentioned), had short summaries at the start of each chapter, and even contained some woodcuts of maps, buildings, and scenes in the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup> Many of the adaptations we still regularly make to texts for beginning or delayed deaf readers were evident in this Bible—short paragraphs, illustrations or visual representations, repetitions of key names, and plain-English annotations.

Materials for teaching early reading to children often contained recurring emblems or symbols. Although printed much later than the period in which Sarah would have been learning to read, the *New England Primer* (ca. late 1680s), a small book used for instructing young children in the rudiments of reading, indicates much about Puritan attitudes toward the use of visual aids in education. The Puritans were averse to using excessive visual imagery, but they were open to the use of emblems in certain contexts. Particular symbols (e.g., a skeleton to represent death) recur and provide the child with a way to navigate the concepts contained in the book. On the title pages of some Puritan works such as John Preston’s *Doctrine of the Saints Infirmities* (1636), em-

blems serve as a kind of shorthand for biblical stories (a rooster to represent Peter's denial of Christ, a lamb to represent King David's adultery). Visual symbols seem to have been accepted in education, and it is easy to see how this may have helped to inform Thacher's attempts to teach Sarah to read.<sup>14</sup>

The Puritan attitude toward native languages and bilingualism may be another clue to the kind of education Sarah might have received. Having written a short Hebrew lexicon, Thacher was known for his skill as a linguist, and it is not unlikely that, in his attempt to educate Sarah, he took an interest in and encouraged her signed communication, especially if he had seen other deaf adults use it. Puritan ministers were often willing to learn the languages of the surrounding Indian people, and in fact the first Bible to be printed in America was John Eliot's Algonquin Bible of 1663. It was followed by other publications such as a "Logick Primer" (1672). An early account of a visit to a neighboring Indian tribe by several ministers contains Indian words (glossed in the margin in English) to denote people and artifacts that could not be adequately described in English.<sup>15</sup> This implies a careful attention to languages other than English (hardly surprising for a group of ministers who had effectively been educated bilingually themselves) and a tendency to value and promote literacy in whatever language was most easily accessible.

Mather's informant theorized about Sarah's literacy practices by suggesting that "she understands neither Words, Letters, nor Language; yet she understands things Hieroglyphically. The Letters and Words are unto her but signs of the things, and as it were Hieroglyphicks" (1684, 293). This remark suggests that Sarah deciphered written words logographically, memorizing the shape of the written word. Seventeenth-century usage of the word "hieroglyphic" often meant "emblematic" (OED), and, in fact, Francis Bacon used the word specifically to refer to the signing of deaf people. In his 1605 *Of the Advancement of Learning*, Bacon speculates that gestural signs are the equivalent of Chinese ideographs and Egyptian hieroglyphics: "Gestures are as transitory Hieroglyphics, and are to Hieroglyphics as words spoken are to words written, in that they abide not; but they have evermore, as well as the other, an affinity with the things signified" (quoted in Rée 1999, 122). Mather's (or his informant's) use of the word, then, not only suggests

the ideographic quality of the written word for readers who do not know the spoken language encoded in it but also implies that deaf readers such as Sarah may have been thinking emblematically, or “hieroglyphically.”

Sarah Pratt’s literacy practices, though incompletely understood, were presented in the context of emerging philosophical beliefs about the possibilities of deaf education and the Puritans’ emphasis on reading the Bible. Sarah provides another historical link in the long quest to understand how deaf people learn and use literacy.

## Conclusion

Increase Mather was a thorough and exact historian, theologian, scientist, and writer. His 1684 *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, as well as transcribing a firsthand account of Sarah and Matthew Pratt’s lives, expounds on almost all of the known sources on deafness that were available at the time, showing Mather’s interest in the educational, social, and the spiritual implications of deafness. Above all, however, he wrote for future generations, beginning the chapter about the Pratts with this statement: “I now proceed in commemorating some other *Remarkables*, which it is pity but that Posterity should have the knowledge of.” It would indeed have been a great pity for the history of deaf education, the study of American Sign Language, and our understanding of the Puritans’ willingness to accommodate difference if Mather had not recorded the Pratts’ story for us. Although Mather sees Sarah and Matthew as “remarkables,” they are most interesting to us because of the simple fact that their deaf lives were notably *unremarkable*, normal, and even prosperous by the standards of their contemporaries.

## Notes

1. Increase Mather (1684, 293). Subsequent references included in the text.
2. Most sources give the spelling as “Pratt” but Mather uses “Prat.”
3. While the Roman Catholic Church, since at least the time of Jerome (ca. 400), had always countenanced the use of signs by deaf parishioners for demonstrating understanding of the sacraments, these rulings—if

they were even known—were frequently circumvented due to local superstitions about deaf people (Miles 2001). Martin Luther criticised the frequent and successful attempts to defraud deaf parishioners, for example, by presenting them with “unblessed wafers” (*Luther’s Works* 35: 110, quoted in Miles 2001). For Luther, the question of deaf people receiving the Eucharist was not merely theoretical, however, as he certainly knew at least several deaf persons: “If they are rational and can show by indubitable signs that they desire it in true Christian devotion, as I have often seen [*wie ich oft gesehen habe*], we should leave to the Holy Spirit what is his work” (*Luther’s Works* 35: 110, quoted in Miles 2001, with original German inserted by Miles). Luther had known the Cotta family of Eisenach, which had a young deaf daughter, and Philip Melancthon writes of one other case that was brought to his attention. In this case, a pastor in Gotha asked Luther’s opinion about a deaf-mute girl among his parishioners who was able to demonstrate her understanding of Christianity and her desire for communion by pointing to pictures in books and making basic gestures. Later, in the 1620s, Fridericus Balduinus (or Baldwin) examined the question in greater detail, citing Luther, Melancthon, and two of the other casuists Mather cites. Balduinus, emphasizing not the condition of deafness but rather whether the deaf person had been instructed and was able to give signs of comprehension, determined that those born deaf and mute could receive communion because they are capable of learning through signs and pictures. (Lib. II Cap XII casw. 12., quoted in Miles 2001).

4. If we attempt to trace the error to its source, it may have originated in John Wilkins’s 1641 *Mercury or the Secret and Swift Messenger shewing, how a man may with privacy and speed communicate his thoughts to a friend at any distance*. Wilkins introduces his finger alphabet with a reference to the Roman finger calculus and says an alphabet “may be performed, either as the numbers are set down in the Authors before cited [e.g., Bede], or else by any other compact that may be agreed upon. As for example: Let the tops of the fingers signifie the five vowels” (117, emphasis added). It is easy to see how this could have been misinterpreted.

5. Lang (2007) uses this later and considerably shorter source for his account of the Pratts.

6. Robert Middlekauf remarks with some puzzlement that “this anxiety did not often produce morbidity among the Puritans. Children who had been taught, almost as soon as they left their mothers’ breasts, that they reeked of sin, continued in this belief and tormented themselves over their inner condition but still grew into adults who worked productively, married, reared children and lived useful lives by any standards” (1971, 7). The difference, according to Middlekauf, is that this anxiety was a “reasoned anxiety” with a defined end: conversion. Mather’s cheerfulness in relating Sarah’s agony of soul is not unusual, for such anxiety was considered a healthy sign.



7. Patricia Caldwell notes that American conversion narratives were not always as conclusive as contemporary ones in England (1983, 34).

8. [Packard \(1901\)](#) and [Handerson \(1899\)](#) both state that Chauncy received an MD from Cambridge, but other sources ([Bloch 1973](#); [Viets 1930](#)) doubt this.

9. After a time as professor of Greek at Cambridge, Chauncy turned to the ministry but soon came into conflict with the Anglican establishment, claiming that “there is much Atheism, Popery, Armenianism, and Heresy, crept into the Church” (Mather 1979, 135): Specifically, he was opposed to a rail around the communion table (“Charles Chauncy”). Brought before an ecclesiastical court in 1629 and 1634, he recanted in 1637 and immediately—and for the rest of his life—regretted it. He immigrated to America that year and became an associate pastor in Plymouth but was dismissed for advocating that infants be baptized by full immersion.

10. We acknowledge Bencie Woll for bringing this quotation to our attention.

11. This claim foreshadows some modern debates about the “sign advantage”—whether babies exposed to sign language produce their first signs earlier than most babies begin to produce spoken words (see, e.g., Emmorey 2002).

12. The original Puritans who fled England for Holland—and later the New World—included a large proportion of literate community leaders; thus, the first generations of Puritans in Massachusetts were highly educated. According to Wright, “Because of the unique nature of the ‘Great Puritan Migration’ of the 1630s, New England society was top heavy with intellectuals: by the 1640s, out of a population of twenty-five thousand, nearly a hundred New England men had attended Oxford or Cambridge, at least fifty of whom held advanced degrees” (Wright, quoted in Lepore 2002, 39). Lepore (*ibid.*, 42) reports that “about 60 percent of white men and 30 percent of white women in New England were literate in 1660, and the numbers only increased, leading to near-universal white male literacy by the end of the colonial era.” These high literacy levels were also reflected in probate inventories from seventeenth-century New England, which have found that “59 percent of even the poorest New Englanders owned ‘religious books,’ as did 74 percent of the middling classes, and 100 percent of the well-to-do” (*ibid.*, 40).

13. Facsimile examples of the Geneva Bible may be seen at <http://www.thedcl.org/bible/gb/index.html>.

14. New England sermonizing also followed an established structure that guides the reader or listener. Although the patterns of sermons are unfamiliar to us, they follow a set structure that predictably takes a single “text,” expounds the doctrine, answers questions about it, and then gives its “uses” for the congregation. If any of the “other good Books” that Sarah used were sermons by local ministers, we can be sure that their structure would have been

predictable, and this might have helped her to navigate through the text with relative ease.

15. Anonymous (1647).

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