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Chapter · January 2014

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Laurent Clerc: A Complex and Conflicted Deaf Man in America

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The unexamined life is ignorance. In the 1970s Robert F. Panara, a renowned deaf professor of literature at the Rochester Institute of Technology, acknowledged the depressing lack in both American and world literature of the genuine life stories of deaf people: "[I]t is time that the deaf are studied as the human beings that they are—as a living representation of the experience of Everyman in his journey through life."[1] Since then, postrevisionist writers have brought hundreds of deaf persons to light in the literature.[2] In this chapter we draw on primary sources to examine Laurent Clerc's inner self, his successes and struggles as a deaf man in the New World, and how he dealt with issues relating to family, religion, deafness, and the growing Deaf community.

Family: Deaf Wife, Hearing Children, and Hearing Grandchildren

As a young, single, Catholic man in a growing country, Laurent Clerc desperately needed someone with whom he could share life and rear a family. When Clerc first taught at the Hartford school, he was thirty-one years old. His deaf female pupils ranged in age from nine to forty. Naturally, the pupils, female and male alike, looked up to Clerc as their role model, for he was deaf, communicated in sign language, and knew about the world. After school they would visit him in his apartment for conversation in sign language. In September 1817 school board member Nathaniel Terry, whose deaf daughter attended the school, wrote a letter to Thomas H. Gallaudet accusing Laurent Clerc of fraternization with students. The issue was later resolved when Gallaudet responded, in writing, and defended Clerc's character:

> to have an opportunity out of school hours, of enjoying the pleasure of social conversation with the young ladies. They esteem this, too, a peculiar privilege, & I may add, also, that it is a singular advantage to them, in as much as their chief business here is to acquire language, & his language of signs is the foundation of all their improvement. . . . the origin of the charge, which has been made, that he is too attentive to them. I know his disposition well. He is as far aloof from any petty jealousy or retaliation as any man I was ever acquainted with.[3]

Well into retirement, Clerc continued his habit of welcoming groups of students to his home after class for a chat. It is certain that one of the ladies who frequented Clerc's social affairs was Eliza Crocker Boardman from Whitesborough, New York, who enrolled at the Hartford school in 1817 at the age of twenty-four. Of Laurent Clerc, Eliza wrote the following in a letter to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet: "Mr. Clerc made signs and teaches the deaf and dumb about God and Jesus Christ . . . I believe Mr. Clerc will go to France in one year. We are sorry it."[4] Clerc, love struck by Eliza's beauty, intelligence, and character, needed to wait until Eliza's graduation in 1819 to share his love. Clerc was relieved when Eliza told him that she felt the same way. They were married at her uncle's house

at Cohoes Falls near Watertown, New York, on May 3, 1819, one month after graduation.

Clerc was shocked when Gallaudet advised him not to marry a deaf woman for fear that they would produce deaf children or encounter more inconveniences in society as a deaf couple.[5] When Gallaudet, upset that Clerc was ignoring his advice, declined to be part of the wedding, Clerc asked Lewis Weld, one of the teachers at the Hartford Asylum, to help celebrate the wedding with him. Weld was his best man, not Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, for whom Clerc held a high respect. This was a heartbreaking moment for Clerc, but he knew he needed Eliza Crocker Boardman to love for the rest of his life. After all, they possessed a shared deaf experience and conversed in sign language.

From his perspective, Laurent Clerc was vindicated when all of his children and grandchildren were hearing. In his April 28, 1858, retirement address Clerc related that "the first thing he did, on the birth of his child, was to satisfy himself by experiment that the child could hear, and how pleased he was to find that the discouraging predictions of his friends had failed to come to pass."[6] During his time, many deaf-mutes were happily married. In fact, several of his hearing friends had married deaf-mutes and had only now and then a deaf child among their offspring. In a letter to a friend, Clerc wrote: "I have now four grandchildren, all blessed with the sense of hearing, as well as their parents."[7]

On the day of Laurent Clerc's death, he had outlived four of his six children and his parents and sisters. The passing of his children, Helen (1822), John (1831), Charles (1852), and John's twin sister, Sarah (1869), must have been heartbreaking for Clerc and his wife, although the mortality of children was high at the time. The passing of his two sisters in France and the faltering health of another sibling, also in France, prevented Clerc from visiting that country for a fourth time. In his 1857 letter to a friend, Clerc wrote of the death of his sisters and the cancellation of his anticipated trip to France. As his childhood family and relatives in France passed away, the sense of nostalgia for France and family faded as there would be no communication support from extended family.[8] At the time of letter writing, Clerc knew he would never visit France again or see his old friends and family relatives.

Religious Conversion

At a time when religion defined a person's identity, one's religious association was usually passed along by family and/or political ties. Laurent Clerc was born to a Roman Catholic family and educated as a Catholic at the Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris under the supervision of the Abbé Roch Sicard. For Clerc, the world could be comprehended by an understanding of God and Jesus Christ. As Clerc's writings demonstrate, difficult life conditions were alleviated by one's faith in God.[9] Fearing that Clerc would convert to Protestantism should he accompany Thomas H. Gallaudet, a Congregationalist, to a country where Catholicism was not highly regarded, Abbé Sicard had Clerc promise to be faithful to Catholicism: "[Y]ou would lose faith, you would have embraced a false religion for sure . . . which would be fatal if you go to a country of heretics or you would lose yourself for an eternity. I never will cry over your fate. And I never will regret the pain and care that I had given you as a good Catholic and a good Christian."[10] In a conversation with Gallaudet, Sicard was adamant that Clerc "not . . . be called upon to teach anything contrary to the Roman Catholic religion which he professes, and in which faith he desires to live and die."[11]

Arriving in New York City from Le Havre, France, Laurent Clerc noticed numerous church steeples throughout the town, indicating the American belief that people should have freedom of religion. During his first years of teaching at the Hartford school, Clerc taught Catholicism to his deaf pupils.[12] One of his first religious struggles came when he fell in love with Eliza Crocker Boardman, an Episcopalian. Although his May 3, 1819, wedding was conducted as an Episcopalian ceremony at the home of his fiancé's uncle, Benjamin Prescott, Clerc remained a Catholic. Although he wrestled with his promise to Sicard, Clerc knew he would have to answer to him when he visited France after the expiration of his first contract with the Hartford school. In 1820, one month after his first daughter's birth, he visited France for a year. In Paris he reaffirmed to Sicard his Catholic religion. After the death of his parents in the late 1810s and then Sicard in 1822, Laurent Clerc was at last free from any binding promise. He became an Episcopalian several years later: "In middle life he became a communicant of the Episcopal

church, and ever after retained his connection with it."[13] In addition, Clerc attained US citizenship on December 11, 1838, thereby forfeiting his loyalty to the sovereign of France, King Louis Philippe, but gaining religious freedom.[14]

Language Use: The Unfortunates

From August 1816 to March 1817, the first seven months of Laurent Clerc's time in the United States, he accompanied Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Mason F. Cogswell (a wealthy physician and a father in search of a better education for his deaf daughter, Alice) up and down the Eastern Seaboard on a fund-raising and marketing drive to establish and recruit pupils for a new school for deaf children.[15] While in the eastern cities for legislature sessions and public audiences, Clerc gave addresses in sign language with Thomas Gallaudet's voicing and, with chalk and slate, exhibited his knowledge of and perspectives on the world. In his addresses Clerc would categorize deaf people as "unfortunates." In an address in New York City on August 19, 1816, Clerc concluded: "I thank you for it, and the interest you express for us poor unfortunates."[16] In Hartford he urged the audience to be benevolent to the deaf and dumb: "Be then so good as to hasten their happiness; your countrymen have been too negligent of that unfortunate class of deaf and dumb."[17] In Boston on September 10, 1816, he opened his address to a male audience in similar fashion: "[I wish to] speak to you more conveniently of the deaf and dumb, of those unfortunate beings who . . . would be condemned all their *life*, to the most sad vegetation if nobody came to their succor, but who entrusted to our regenerative hands, will pass from the class of brutes to the class of men."[18] To a female audience in Boston the following day he reiterated his address: "[Yesterday we spoke] of the poor deaf and dumb who abound in your own country" and of the "more than two thousand unfortunate deaf and dumb in the United States . . . While it lies in your power to contribute to render them happy here below, will you leave them to die in this sad state?"[19] Clerc's constant portrayal of deaf people as "poor unfortunates" stemmed from his experiences in France and England as part of a traveling exhibition with his mentor, the Abbé Roch Sicard, director of the Paris school

for Deaf children. In the exhibitions Roch Sicard routinely portrayed deaf people as "the unfortunate," "the abandoned," and "strangers to society." Witnessing the success of Sicard's emotional appeal, perhaps Clerc adopted the same approach.

Laurent Clerc was an educated person with a brilliant mind; however, he did not cease to make negative generalizations about deaf people as a group. At the age of eighty-three Laurent Clerc wrote in a letter to a friend, "Thanks to God, I still enjoy good health and wish I had not retired so early as I could have continued to do more good to my unfortunate fellow Beings and to teach new teachers how to teach well."[20] His conviction was that uneducated deaf people may have more limitations in different aspects of life and that deaf people without knowledge or understanding of God are doomed in the afterlife. He strongly believed that deaf children need a good education so that they will be able to open their eyes to God and live independently in society through the use of reading and writing. In fact, Laurent Clerc, educated at the Paris school and an esteemed teacher, referred to himself as an "unfortunate." While in New York City during his first days in the United States, he met with Nathaniel F. Moore, a professor at Columbia College, and communicated with him by writing with chalk and slate. The day after, Nathaniel wrote a letter to the Reverend John McVickar about his meeting with Clerc: "We all are very much interested in this poor unfortunate, as he calls himself; though he has, as I told him, almost lost all claim to that name."[21] Moore himself did not see Clerc as a poor unfortunate, but Clerc thought otherwise. It is possible that Clerc continued to make emotional appeals to hearing people because he believed that, if he did so, society would help people in need.

Deafness, Deaf Community, Audism

Deafness can be perceived as a cultural identity, a biological condition, a disability, or a trait. Living in a society that highly values audiological input and spoken language can be a struggle for many deaf people. Some find it gratifying to be different from the norm and have unique experiences; others find it frustrating in terms of not being able to overcome societal obstacles or stigma. Laurent Clerc became deaf at a very

early age, possibly at birth, from a fever or, as his family maintained, a fall into a fireplace. In spite of his many successes as a deaf person, Clerc would often wonder whether the grass was greener on the other side. During his second visit to France in 1843, he saw an opportunity to cure his deafness:

> One day, in walking through Lyons, seeing a crowd of persons reading a notice stuck on the wall at the corner of a street, I had the curiosity to examine it. It announced that a Mr. LaFontaine would give in the evening, at the hotel Du Nord, an exhibition of experimental magnetism, at which he would operate on a young girl and present the physical phenomena [*sic*] of magnetism, and produce ecstasy under the influence of music; that he would also introduce a deaf and dumb young man of Lyons, whom he said he had succeeded in making hear by magnetism, and submit to the magnetical operation many other deaf and dumb, whom he would try to enable to hear also. I immediately concluded to attend the exhibition, and to request Mr. LaFontaine to experiment upon me, should he succeed, that the operation might be decisive.[22]

However, Clerc was prevented from attending the exhibition when his son, Charles, became ill. He later learned from deaf students at a nearby school that the experiment was a total failure. Clerc felt that God had a better plan for him, which was to continue educating deaf people.

Sign language is the lifeblood of the Deaf community. Laurent Clerc was proud that he brought his sign language from France to the United States. In his teaching, he employed the methodical signs, that is, English-order signing, as he believed it was the only way for students to learn reading and writing. His educational experience dictated this belief, as he had learned French through the methodical French signs. Occasionally, he would criticize his students for sign production errors and for not adhering to his sign repertoire. A former student wrote the following:

> It seemed to distress him [Clerc] to see me make any sign wrong, or in a clumsy manner. I remember well how I once met him in a street in a great hurry, and told him my mother was visiting me. I was going to

> run right by, but he stopped me, and made me repeat what I had said, and then corrected one or two faults, nor would he let me go until I had made every sign to his satisfaction.

During that incident, Clerc became upset when the student signed MOTHER with an open-palmed hand (5) with a thumb resting on the cheek rather than the old sign with two productions, MOTHER-BABY (the baby symbolizes motherhood). Though he was the originator of the modified French American Sign Language, Clerc struggled with the natural evolution of this language. He did not realize that languages must evolve if they are to survive; all he wanted was for everyone to use the same language.

A few years after Clerc arrived in the United States, he conceived the idea of establishing an exclusive community of, for, and by deaf people, where they would find jobs and communicate in sign language. In 1819, after he found that a land parcel in Alabama had been put aside for funding the Hartford School, Clerc suggested "the plan of selling such part of the land . . . for the Asylum, and then having the rest as *head quarters* for the deaf and dumb, to which they could emigrate after being educated." The idea was tabled until John Jacobus Flournoy, a deaf Georgian and former student of the Hartford school, picked it up in 1855 and petitioned for the formation of a deaf colony in the West; Oregon was the destination. In the Deaf community, the deaf colony debate intensified, and Clerc felt obliged to respond to it. He realized it would take a miracle to make this colony happen, especially when deaf parents have hearing children. What would become of these youngsters? Clerc pointed out this problem: "It was very convenient to have some hearing persons within call in many cases, as for instance, *sickness* and *fire.*"[23]

Clerc acknowledged the potential of deaf people, as when, in his 1816 Philadelphia address, he described French deaf people in early 1800s: "Many are married and have children . . . Many others are employed in the offices of the government, and other public administrations. Many others are good painters, engravers, workers in mosaic, and printers. Some others . . . are merchants, and rule their affairs perfectly well."[24] However, he believed deafness imposed job-related limitations in terms of deaf people's ability to work as doctors and firefighters. During

his 1843 visit to France, he stopped by a school for deaf children in the suburb of Lyons. The school was run by a deaf couple, a Mr. Forestier and his wife.[25] Before Clerc left the school to visit his family in Le Balmes, he advised Mr. Forestier to "associate with him a clergyman, or a gentleman of respectability and talents, who could hear and speak, for the greater prosperity of the school and the better improvement of the children in written language and religious knowledge; my opinion being that, however instructed a deaf and dumb person might be, he was still less so than those who hear and speak."[26] Convinced he could run the school independently, Mr. Forestier naturally dismissed Clerc's advice. Another example of Clerc's belief that deaf people have limitations comes up in his 1864 address to the First Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, for the inauguration of the National College for Deaf-Mutes. Near the close of his address, in which he pointed out the importance of higher education for deaf people in their pursuit of happiness and independence, he signed, "The degree of Master of Arts can be conferred on the deaf and dumb when they merit it; but, on account of their misfortune, they cannot become masters of music, and perhaps can never be entitled to receive the degree of Doctor in Divinity, in Physic, or in Law."[27] His belief that deafness imposes such limitations is a classic example of *audism:*[28] "when deaf and hearing people have no trust in deaf people's ability to control their own lives."[29] Although he had directed and transformed the Philadelphia School for the Deaf in almost eight months, he had worked under the supervision of hearing people for most of his life. What he experienced and believed was not uncommon among deaf people of the nineteenth century.

Elitism in Two Communities

Throughout his life Laurent Clerc learned the importance of being affiliated with people in upper-class society, for it brings advantages in terms of opportunity and recognition. During his traveling exhibitions, he was no stranger to royalty and people of affluence in Europe. In the United States, through Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Clerc met, conversed with (through writing), and gave exhibitions to wealthy people, religious leaders, professors, politicians, and presidents.[30] His comfortable salary,

in addition to what he earned as a private sign language tutor at the Hartford school, afforded him a life of prosperity. He traveled to Europe three times, owned a house and a pony, and attended social events in Hartford and elsewhere. Through his contacts in Philadelphia, Clerc met Charles Wilson Peale, who painted a portrait of Laurent and another of Eliza with baby Elizabeth Victoria Clerc.

Laurent Clerc maintained his elite status in the hearing community until the resignation in 1830 of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, his gatekeeper to upper-class society for almost fourteen years. Clerc was upset when Gallaudet decided to resign from his principal position: "We had been so intimate, so harmonious, so much attached to each other; we had labored together so many years; that I parted with him with unspeakable grief."[31] After his resignation, Gallaudet chose to take up writing, support women's education, and become a minister at a mental asylum. Laurent Clerc could no longer rely on Gallaudet for communication and networking. His status in the hearing community gradually diminished, and he continued to maintain his networks only through his children and their extended families.[32]

As the number of educated deaf people was growing exponentially, Laurent Clerc was christened by younger deaf leaders as the "Apostle to the Deaf People in the New World."[33] Clerc was invited to give presentations at events held by deaf organizations and teachers' groups. At conferences he was often given an honorary chair while the meetings were in session. Although his status in the hearing community began to decline, his standing in the Deaf community increased. In one situation during the 1850s he repeatedly petitioned the Hartford school's board of directors to help pay the maintenance costs for his house. Although he was drawing a pension from the school, he could not afford the house repairs, but, to Clerc's utter frustration, the board denied his requests. In response, the Deaf community initiated a fund-raising drive to cover the cost of the repairs, posting announcements in deaf newsletters and Hartford newspapers. Clerc was upset with the notice in the Hartford newspapers, preferring that hearing people not know of his financial problems. He was embarrassed by this fund-raising drive because it put him in the spotlight in the Hartford community. In the Deaf community, Laurent Clerc was highly respected, as he remains today.

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Every human being has successes and struggles. Even the apostles of Jesus Christ had internal struggles as they wrestled with faith, family, and money. The Apostle to the Deaf People in the New World was first and foremost a human being who happened to be deaf and who was the right man in the right time and place to bring bilingual teaching methods to the United States. As mentioned earlier, some of Clerc's experiences and perspectives on the world are not uncommon among deaf people, especially the belief, rooted in audism, that deafness is inferior to hearing. On his deathbed on July 18, 1869, at the age of eighty-four, Clerc had fulfilled his dreams: finding love, home, and a growing community that continues to venerate him as the Apostle to the Deaf People in the New World.

Notes

1. Panara, "Deaf Studies in the English Curriculum," 15. Panara has published articles and books on deaf Americans and deaf characters in literature. See Robert F. Panara, *Great Deaf Americans* [Rochester, NY: Deaf Life, 1996]; "The Deaf Writer in America from Colonial Times to 1970: Part I," *American Annals of the Deaf* 115, no. 5 (1970): 509–13; and "The Deaf Writer in America from Colonial Times to 1970: Part II," *American Annals of the Deaf* 115, no. 7 (1970): 673–79, for examples.

2. Postrevisionism was a movement in the 1970s and 1980s that held that history should stick to actual facts [who, what, and where] to explain the effects of incidents or political contexts. See Harry G. Lang, *Silence of the Spheres: The Deaf Experience in the History of Science* [Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1994], and Jack Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* [Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 1981]. In *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf,* author Harlan Lane (1984), from the vantage point of Laurent Clerc, reconstructed historical events from primary sources and from Lane's own political agenda on how deaf children should be taught.

3. Thomas H. Gallaudet, letter from Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to Nathaniel Terry, Thursday, September 1817. American School for the Deaf Library Archives.

4. Eliza Crocker Boardman, letter to Thomas H. Gallaudet, April 3, 1818.

5. Clerc, "Autobiography," 111.

6. Porter, "Retirement of Mr. Clerc," 181.

7. Clerc, "Autobiography," 111.

8. Clerc, letter to B. Hudson.

9. Baynton, "Abraham Lincoln, Laurent Clerc, and the Design of the Word."

10. Sicard, conversations with Laurent Clerc.

11. Gallaudet, "Conversation with the Abbé Sicard."

12. Clerc, contract between Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, June 13, 1816.

13. Turner, "Laurent Clerc."

14. U.S. Citizenship Certificate, Laurent Clerc, December 11, 1838.

15. The group visited Boston, Salem, Hartford, New Haven, New York City, Albany, Philadelphia, and Burlington, NJ.

16. Clerc, "Address concerning the Deaf and Dumb in America."

17. Clerc, "Address."

18. Clerc, "Autobiography," 107–108.

19. Ibid., 109.

20. Clerc, letter to Parson.

21. Moore, letter to Reverend John McVickar.

22. Clerc, "Visits to Some of the Schools for the Deaf and Dumb," 66.

23. William M. Chamerlain, "Proceedings of the Third Convention of the New England Gallaudet Association of Deaf-Mutes," 212.

24. Laurent Clerc, "Publick Meeting," *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser,* December 12, 1816.

25. Mr. Forestier was a former teacher at the Paris school and moved to Lyons after the sign language debate at the institution.

26. Clerc, "Visits to Some of the Schools for the Deaf and Dumb," 66.

27. Laurent Clerc, "Address," 43.

28. Tom Humphries, "Communicating across Cultures [Deaf/Hearing] and Language Learning" [PhD diss., Union Graduate School, Cincinnati, OH, 1997].

29. Ibid., 13.

30. Some of these people were Yale president Timothy Dwight, Noah Webster, Speaker of the House Henry Clay, and President James Monroe.

31. Clerc, "Autobiography," 112.

32. Elizabeth Victoria Clerc, his first child, married George Webster Beers, a prominent merchant from Litchfield, CT. Sarah Clerc married Henry Champion Deming, mayor of Hartford and a Civil War general. Francis Joseph Clerc was an Episcopalian priest, and Charles Michael Clerc worked as a silk merchant in New York City.

33. Abbé Roch Sicard coined the honorific in his 1816 letter to the bishop in Boston.

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PART 3

Deaf Community Collective Histories: Stories from the Continents