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# Origins of the American Deaf-World

*Assimilating and Differentiating Societies and  
Their Relation to Genetic Patterning*

THE DEAF-WORLD in the United States has major roots in a triangle of New England Deaf communities that flourished early in the nineteenth century: Henniker, New Hampshire; Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts; and Sandy River Valley, Maine. The social fabric of these communities differed, a reflection of language and marriage practices that were underpinned, we hypothesize, by differences in genetic patterning. In order to evaluate that hypothesis, this article uses local records and newspapers, genealogies, the silent press, Edward Fay's census of Deaf marriages (1898), and Alexander Graham Bell's notebooks (1888) to illuminate the Henniker Deaf community for the first time and to build on prior work concerning the Vineyard community.

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In this article, the authors use capital *D* in *Deaf* throughout as they are writing about people who are culturally Deaf.

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## Henniker, New Hampshire

The first great American Deaf leader was Thomas Brown (1804–1886), who was born in Henniker, New Hampshire, thirteen years before the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb opened in Hartford, Connecticut, and who died in Henniker six years after the Congress of Milan. We begin with his story.

Thomas Brown's grandfather, also named Thomas, lived in Stow, Massachusetts, with his wife, eight daughters, and a son, Nahum—the first, as far as anyone knew, Deaf-Mute in the family (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> The senior Thomas Brown was the grandson of Jabez Brown, who emigrated from England and settled in Concord, Massachusetts. Jabez's son, Joseph, moved to Stow, where his son, Thomas, was born and raised, took up the trade of blacksmith, and in 1763 married Persis Gibson.

In 1785, fearing debtor's prison, Thomas Brown set out by himself for Henniker, a virtual wilderness some hundred miles away where his wife's family, former residents of Stow, had moved. Thomas had contracted a hard currency debt that he was unable to pay due to the rapidly depreciating value of colonial currency. His troubles stemmed from an abundance of "fiat money," money printed by the colonies during the American Revolution that was not backed by coin. Because too much of this money was printed, Thomas's money lost its value. According to his son, Nahum, he once took a bushel of fiat money and dumped it into a grain bin in the attic (Thwing 1868). Increasingly lenders wanted repayment in British gold, pounds, or other hard currency. Thomas, not being able to repay his debt, fled to Henniker.

On arriving, Thomas made a clearing and built a log cabin that stood for nearly a century and came to be known as the Brown House. Then, according to one account, he sent word to Nahum, his 13-year-old Deaf son, to hitch two yoke of oxen to a sled, load the furniture and food, bundle his mother and sisters atop the load, and, armed with a goad, prod the oxen 100 miles through the snow to Henniker (it is not clear how he would have told Nahum to do this) (Thwing 1868). According to another account, Nahum preceded his father to Henniker and was living with his uncle; it was his

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1. The primary sources for the pedigrees of which figures 1–3 are excerpts were Banks (1966); Gordon (1892); Cogswell (1880); Mayhew (1991); E. A. Fay's census of Deaf marriages (Fay 1898); the data forms for Fay's census in the Gallaudet

father, Thomas, who brought the family (Braddock 1975; Cogswell 1880).

The contemporaries of Thomas Brown Sr. described him as smart, energetic, and fond of books; in later years he held minor elected posts. His eight daughters—tall, blue-eyed, and good looking—were said to be brilliant, witty, and well educated; most became teachers. Neighbors and relatives had a harder time judging Nahum's intellect since he was Deaf; he was called plucky, skillful as an axeman and hunter, a model farmer, and a first-rate teamster of oxen and horses. Of course, no one thought of his becoming a teacher or even of his going to school.

Curiously, the first deed of land to the Browns that is recorded was 100 acres to Nahum, who was only 17 at the time. Perhaps his father could not afford to buy land some four years after moving to Henniker, and it was Nahum's mother's family that bought the land and gave it as a gift to Nahum, endeavoring to provide for their Deaf grandchild. The elder Thomas Brown died when he was 82—old enough to outlive two of his three wives; to attend the marriage of his son Nahum to Abiah Eastman, a hearing woman of the town; to witness the birth of their daughter, Persis, in 1800, and their son, Thomas, in 1804, both Deaf; and to hear of the opening of the first school for Deaf students—in Hartford in 1817. His grandson Thomas would enroll there five years later.

As a young man in Henniker, Nahum did not wear shoes; in order to chop wood, he stood on warm planks in the doorway of his family cabin. The many chores he performed as the sole male child with eight sisters prepared him for a life of responsibility and hard labor. According to his son Thomas, he worked hard from dawn to dusk and was known as a good parent and neighbor (T. Brown 1860). He never learned to read or write, however, and communicated in pantomime or “natural sign.” His wife served as his interpreter and aided him in such activities as buying and selling cattle.

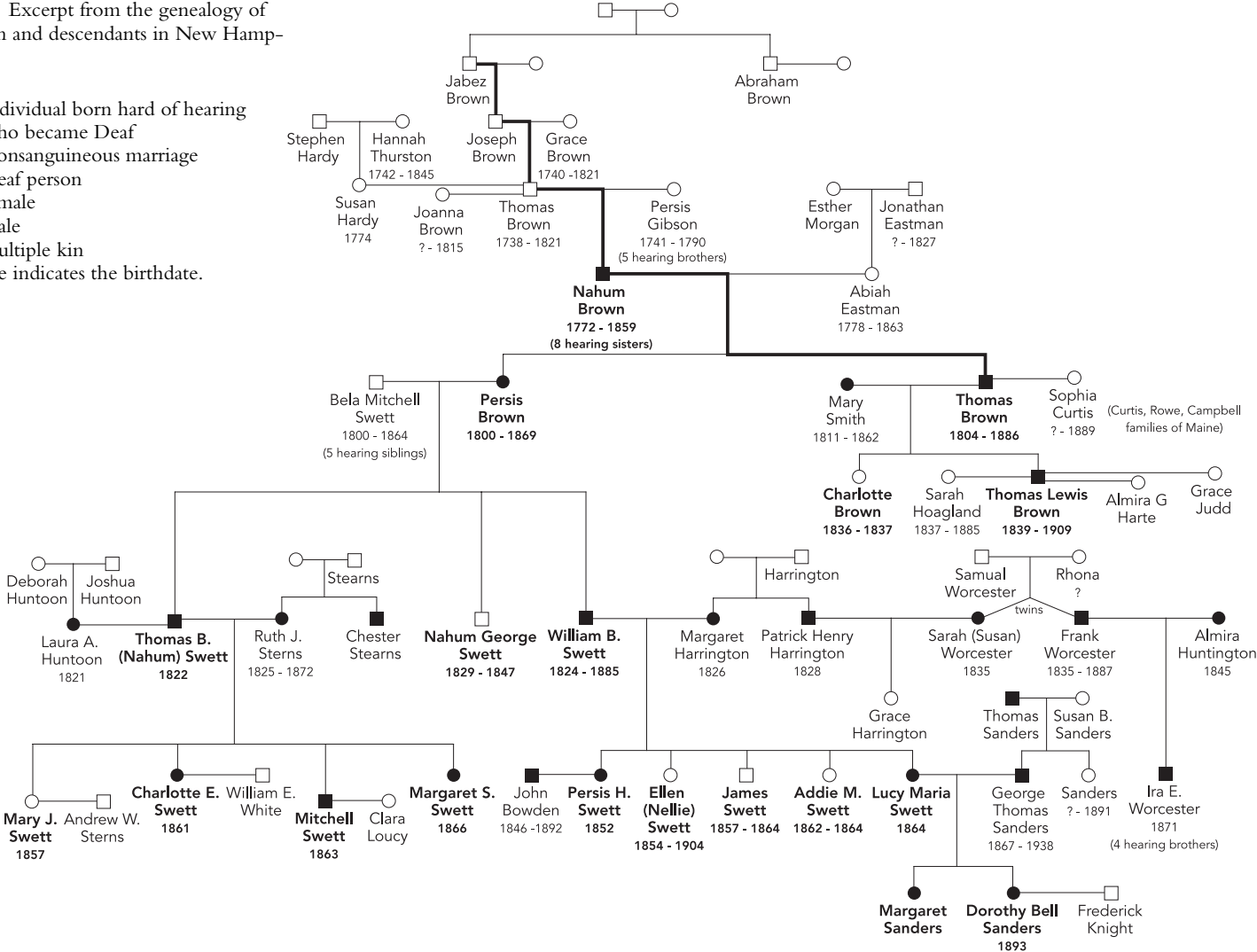
Like his father, Nahum had a long life, dying at age 88. He raised his two Deaf children, Persis and Thomas, saw them marry and raise his five grandchildren, three of them Deaf. The following generation brought nine great-grandchildren, five of them Deaf. In an era when

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University Archives; and the records of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. The pedigrees are incomplete and may contain inaccuracies, as these sources occasionally contain conflicting information.

FIGURE 1. Excerpt from the genealogy of Jabez Brown and descendants in New Hampshire.

KEY  
■, ● = Individual born hard of hearing who became Deaf  
== = Consanguineous marriage  
■, ● = Deaf person  
○ = female  
□ = male  
◇ = multiple kin  
A single date indicates the birthdate.



being born Deaf was most often attributed to maternal fright (Groce 1983), Nahum and his family must surely have been puzzled.

Nahum saw his son Thomas become educated, among the first Deaf-Mutes in the nation to do so, and emerge as a preeminent Deaf leader, beginning at midcentury. Five years before Nahum's death, a group of Thomas's friends gathered in the Brown household to draft a constitution for the first enduring Deaf organization in the United States, the New England Gallaudet Association of Deaf Mutes. Nahum's sight had begun to fail. He suffered severe headaches and became blind first in one eye and then the other. "During his helpless and blind situation," son Thomas related, "he would sign for [us] to come and see what he wanted. With his arms moving slowly, he understood the movement of our hands" (T. Brown 1860, 12; Swett 1859). Just before his death, he signaled for his wife to come near; with her hands upon him, he passed peacefully away.

When Thomas Brown was 18—a slender, powerful man with a large head, gray eyes, and a facial tic from a childhood encounter with an ox—he enrolled at the American Asylum. The town of Henniker annually voted funds to assist Thomas in paying his educational expenses until the state legislature undertook to pay for Deaf-Mute pupils from New Hampshire (T. L. Brown 1888). Thomas and his sister Persis, four years older, were both considered bright—Thomas was "shrewd, wild but not vicious"—and both could no doubt have attended the school, but Persis was bound by a marriage contract to a hearing carpenter from Henniker, Bela Mitchell Swett, and was not free to go (Childs 1861).

Thomas studied under the founders of American Deaf education, the Deaf Frenchman, Laurent Clerc, and hearing American, Thomas Gallaudet, and under an intellectual leader of the profession, Harvey Peet, who would later direct the New York School for the Deaf (Lane 1984). Thomas, we are told, was an excellent student; at the completion of his five-year course, he agreed to stay on for two years as monitor and carpentry instructor. However, at the end of that period, 25 years old, he declined to become a teacher at the Ohio School for the Deaf and returned instead to Henniker to help his parents work their 123 acres. (After the death of his father and a protracted family wrangle over the settlement of Thomas Sr.'s estate

upon his third wife, Nahum had sold his house and land in what later became the center of town and had moved to a farm in West Hennifer in 1825 while his son Thomas was away at school in Hartford.)

In view of Thomas's tireless efforts in later years to organize Deaf people, to honor their leaders past and present, and to promote their interests, one wonders to what extent and in what ways his years at the American Asylum developed his early consciousness of Deaf people as a distinct social group. The Central Society of the Deaf in Paris, with its annual banquets honoring Deaf language, history, and leaders, began shortly after Thomas left school, so he could not have learned about it while he was a pupil of Clerc's, although no doubt he learned of it subsequently, for it was clear to American educators of Deaf students that their methods derived from the French, and transatlantic visits were made in both directions.

Perhaps the sense of Deaf people as a distinct group was in the very air at the American Asylum in the 1820s. After all, a single language was emerging that connected Deaf people despite wide differences among them in region, family circumstances, isolation, and former methods of communication; with it, a sense of we-who-use-this-language might naturally have emerged. Indeed, the first initiative for creating a Deaf state was organized by a group of seniors at the American Asylum just two years after Thomas left (Chamberlain 1858). It was, however, short lived.

### Chilmark, Massachusetts

One of the scattered enclaves of Deaf people that were gathered and to some extent amalgamated by the schooling of their number at the American Asylum was the Deaf community of Martha's Vineyard; it was indeed the largest single source of pupils at the asylum for several years. While at school, Thomas met Mary Smith, whose family came from the Vineyard, where Deaf people—especially in some remote communities “up island,” such as Tisbury and Chilmark—were quite common. Three years after his return to his father's farm in Hennifer, Thomas made the journey to the coast, where he took a boat for the Vineyard, six miles off the Massachusetts shore, and then traveled a day on horseback to arrive at the village of Chilmark,

where he and Mary were married (April 1, 1832) in the presence of her many Deaf and hearing relatives and friends.

Mary Smith's mother, Sally Cottle, was hearing; she was the daughter of Silas Cottle (hearing) and Jerusha Tilton (Deaf; see Figure 2 for Mary's maternal ancestry). Jerusha's mother and father (Mary's great-grandparents) were cousins and descendants of Governor Thomas Mayhew, who bought Martha's Vineyard in 1640 from the two patentees under royal charter then disputing ownership of the island. Jerusha's father, a Tilton, also traced his island ancestry back to one Samuel Tilton, who had come to the Vineyard in 1673. Because the Tiltons early intermarried with the Skiffes, Mary was also descended from James Skiffe, who in 1699 purchased land on the Vineyard, settled in Tisbury, and sold the remaining tracts there to friends. Jerusha's maternal great-grandmother was James Skiffe's daughter.

Mary's father, Mayhew Smith, was hearing, but her paternal grandfather, Elijah Smith, was Deaf and married a hearing woman; he was descended from the island's first Smith, John Smith, who arrived in 1653 (see Figure 3 for Mary's paternal family tree). Mary had eight hearing siblings and one older Deaf sister, Sally, who also attended the American Asylum. Sally married a hearing cousin, Hariph Mayhew, who had seven Deaf and three hearing siblings. Mary's brother, Capt. Austin Smith, married Levinia Poole (she was hearing and also descended from Samuel Tilton); they had four children, two hearing and two Deaf. One of their Deaf children, Freeman, married a Deaf cousin, Deidama West. (There is no record of the other three children marrying.) Deidama had three Deaf siblings and four hearing. Deidama's parents (mother, Deaf; father, hearing) were distant cousins, both descended from Gov. Thomas Mayhew, and her father was descended from the first recorded Deaf person on the island, Jonathan Lambert, a carpenter who arrived from Barnstable in 1694.

In her work on the Vineyard Deaf population, Groce identified 72 Deaf individuals, of whom 63 could trace their ancestry to James Skiffe, 32 to Samuel Tilton, and 9 to Jonathan Lambert (Groce 1985). Most of the Deaf people on the island had all three of these colonists in their pedigrees. Remarkably, Groce found that all three families were linked before they arrived on the Vineyard. In 1634 a minister

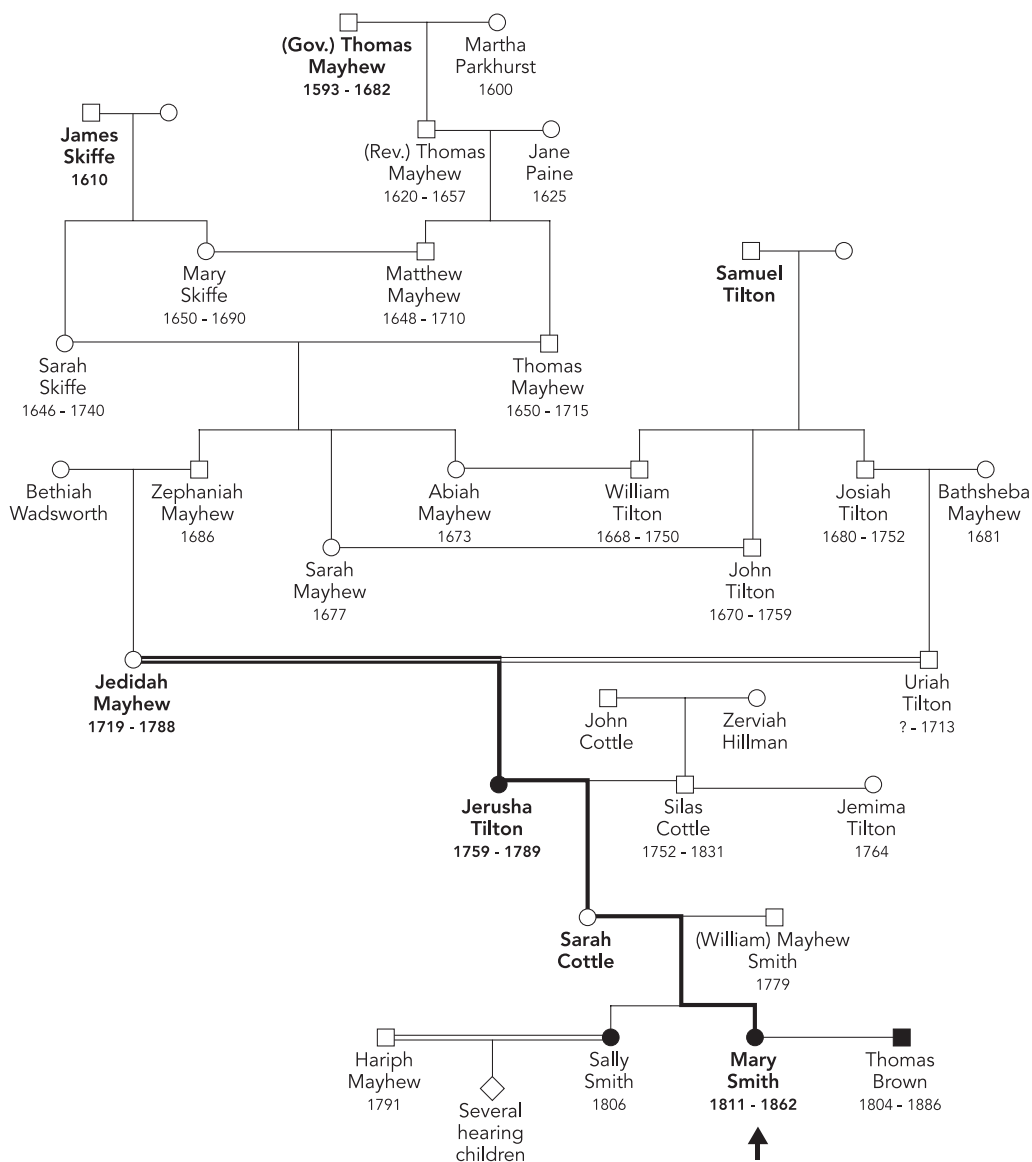


FIGURE 2. Excerpt from the Mayhew-Tilton-Skiffe-Lambert pedigrees as they relate to Mary Brown's maternal ascendants on Martha's Vineyard. Mary Smith, the wife of Thomas Brown, is marked by an arrow.

#### KEY

□, ● = Individual born hard of hearing who became Deaf

== = Consanguineous marriage

■, ● = Deaf person

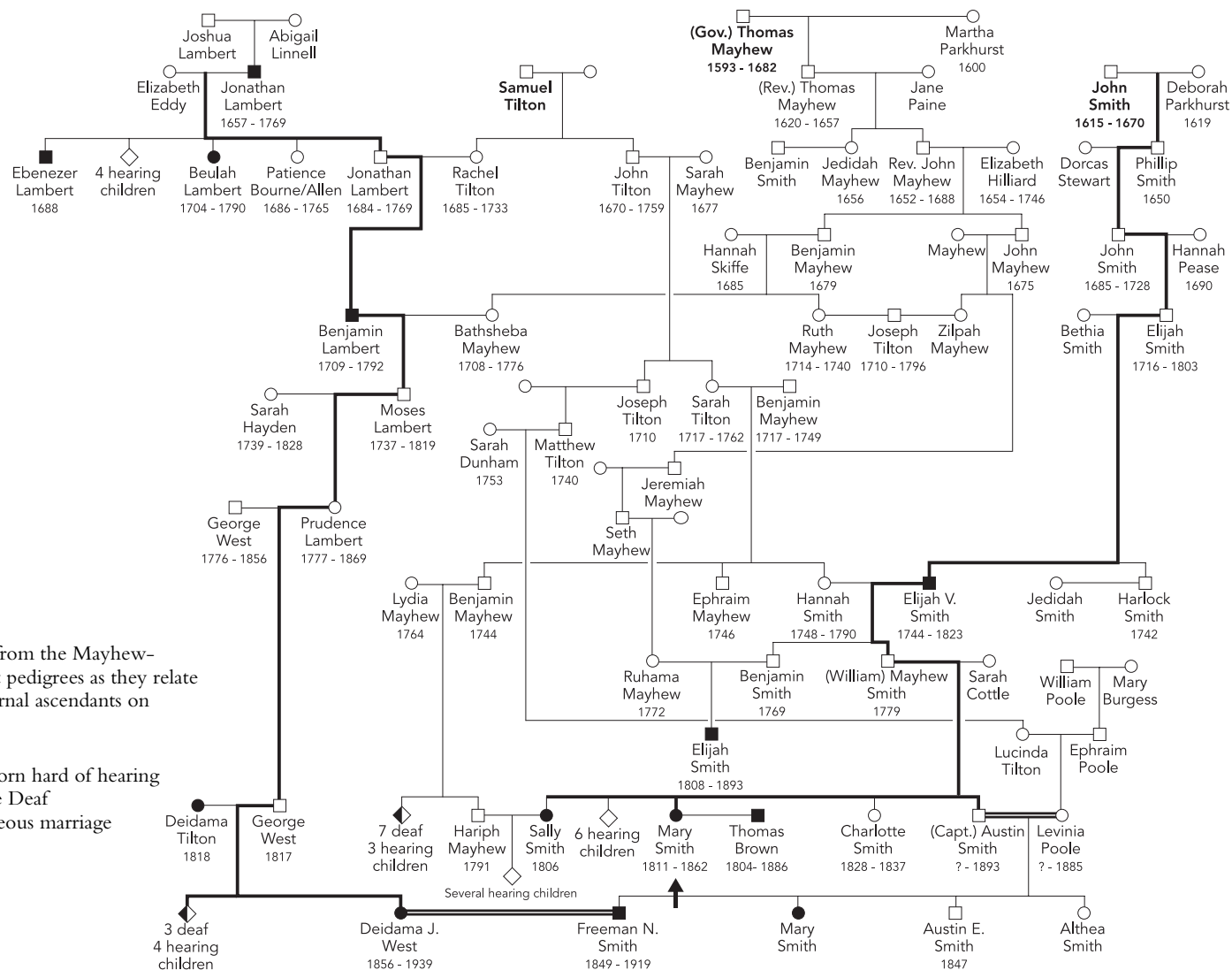
○ = female

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named Lothrop and some 200 members of his congregation and their servants, all from parishes in an area in the English county of Kent known as the Weald, arrived in Boston harbor. They made their way to Scituate, where half the population was from the Weald, and then to Barnstable on Cape Cod. In 1670 several of these families moved to the Vineyard when James Skiffe, who was from Kent, sold land in Tisbury. In the ensuing decades, more of these families—Tiltons, Lamberts, and others—moved across Vineyard Sound, settling in the Chilmark area (Banks 1966). Because of the very early appearance of Deaf people on the island and because not all the known Deaf Vineyarders can be traced to a common Vineyard ancestor, Groce concludes that the island's Deaf heritage, and thus Mary Smith's, originated in the Weald and arrived on the island with the colonizing families.

The colonizers were drawn to the Vineyard by availability of farmland, the long growing season, the surrounding sea that abounded in lobster and fish, and the numerous ponds, where game birds were to be found, along with fish and shellfish of vast variety. The sandy soil was adapted to sheep raising. The Indians were friendly and taught the islanders how to catch whales—nearly every family on the Vineyard had a member aboard a whaler by the time of Thomas's wedding there (Freeman 1807; Poole 1976; Mayhew 1956). In 1700, 400 people lived on the Vineyard; the population stopped growing about 1800 at some 3,000. Not surprisingly for this relatively isolated community whose ancestors were from the same parishes, most people married someone to whom they were already related and who was from their own village on the island (Groce 1980). A symptom of this practice was the proliferation of the same family names: An 1850 census counted 132 Mayhews and 87 Tiltons in Tisbury and Chilmark (Groce 1985). In 1807, 32 names composed three-fourths of the island population! (Groce 1981).

Mary Smith's marriage to a man from off-island was thus an anomaly, one brought about by the opening of the American Asylum and the desire of families on the Vineyard to see their Deaf children educated. The number of Deaf people gradually rose, peaking at 45 around the time of Thomas's marriage. Groce (1985) estimates that,

later in the nineteenth century, 1 in every 155 people on the Vineyard was born Deaf (0.7 percent), almost 20 times the estimate for the nation at large (1 in 2,730, or 0.04 percent). An 1830 census found 12 Deaf people in Chilmark; no doubt Mary Smith was one of them. The town's population was 694; hence 1.7 percent of the town was Deaf, whereas only 0.01 percent of the population in the neighboring islands was Deaf—a ratio of more than 100 to 1 (Burnet 1835; *Deaf and Dumb* 1895).

The marriage of Thomas Brown and Mary Smith was anomalous in a second sense: Unlike the practice on the mainland, most Deaf people on the island married hearing people. On the mainland only about 20 percent of Deaf people's marriages were to hearing people; on the Vineyard it was closer to 65 percent—and it was even higher before the opening of the American Asylum (Groce 1985). The high rate of mixed marriages on the Vineyard was probably a reflection of, and contributor to, a broader feature of life on the island—the blending of Deaf and hearing lives.

Like Mary Smith (and her Deaf grandmother, Jerusha), most children born Deaf on the Vineyard had two hearing parents, as well as many hearing siblings, the more so as birth rates were high on the island (Groce 1980). Another reflection of, and contributor to, this blending was the widespread use of a sign language among both Deaf and hearing people (no doubt with varying degrees of fluency [Bahan 1998]). The language may have originally been British Sign Language brought over by the colonizers: When Martha's Vineyard signs elicited from elderly hearing residents in 1977 were presented to a British Deaf signer, he identified 40 percent of the signs as British Sign Language cognates. (An ASL informant found 22 percent overlap [Bahan and Poole-Nash 1995].) There have been twelve generations since Jonathan Lambert settled on the Vineyard, so Martha's Vineyard sign language has had lots of time to diverge from its origins, the more so because most Deaf children, like Mary Smith, were sent to the American Asylum, where they encountered other sign language practices, and most, unlike Mary, returned to the island.

Bahan and Poole-Nash maintain that Deaf people on the Vineyard were thoroughly assimilated and, as with Deaf people in the

Mayan community studied by Johnson (1994), they valued their village more than they valued the company of other Deaf people: “Being Deaf itself is irrelevant, as Deaf people have access to everyone in the village” (Bahan and Poole-Nash 1995, 19). In accord with this “village-first” value in assimilative societies, the Mayan villagers, according to Johnson, tended to identify first with their family, then with the village, and then with Mayan society. When Johnson gave a party for all the Deaf people in the village and their families, he learned that it was the first event in the village that singled out Deaf people. Similarly, Groce relates that on the Vineyard “All these [Deaf] people were included in all aspects of daily life from their earliest childhood. . . . One of the most striking aspects of this research is the fact that rather than being remembered as a group, every one of the Deaf islanders who is remembered is remembered as a unique individual” (Groce 1980, 95).

Mary Smith would find her life quite changed when she took up residence on the mainland in the intensely Deaf Brown family, far from her hearing family, numerous relatives, and friends on the island. She decided to take with her some remembrances of her island home—a whalebone, some big beautiful seashells, and shark teeth with scrimshaw sailor carvings on them (Colby 1961). And then Mary and Thomas began the trek to Henniker. Their descendants would have the combined Deaf heritage of the Vineyard, some six generations deep, and of the Henniker Deaf enclave, merely a generation old at that time.

### Back to Henniker

Thomas and Mary settled on his parents’ farm; his father was 60, his mother 66, and strong hands were sorely needed. More than that, Thomas brought to the task many natural gifts. He was a good horseman. He drove his own oxen and won prizes at the county fairs in Concord, New Hampshire, for drawing a load with a large boulder, over a ton, the allotted distance. He won awards for plowing and for his colts, and Mary drew a premium of \$2 for a nice lot of cheese she had prepared (Anon. 1869a). Thomas raised cattle and poultry and grew fruit, wheat, and hay. He divided the large farm into lots of pasturage, tillage, orchard, woodland, and so on, and each lot had a

name. Those that have come down to us were figures in Deaf education such as Gallaudet, Clerc, and Peet (Chamberlain 1886). He kept his accounts carefully and was frugal, practical, and methodical (T. L. Brown 1888; Anon. 1861). Some years were very hard: At times early and severe frosts killed the crops; some seasons were extremely dry, and then small fruit withered and fell from the trees and clouds of grasshoppers settled on the fields, devouring everything (Cogswell 1880).

The close-knit family and Deaf community made the hard times bearable, even rewarding. In addition to his father, Nahum, and sister, Persis, the family included Persis and Bela's two Deaf sons, Thomas B. Swett (called Nahum in honor of his grandfather), born the year Thomas went off to school, and William B. Swett, two years older. In 1837 Thomas B. Swett went to the American Asylum, and Mary gave birth to a hearing daughter, Charlotte, but illness took the infant's life within a year. Then, two years later, William Swett went off to school, and Mary gave birth to a Deaf son, Thomas Lewis Brown. On return from Hartford, the Swett boys took Deaf wives. William married Margaret Harrington, a Deaf woman from Ireland, whose Deaf brother had also married into a large Deaf family. William had a colorful career as an explorer, showman, mechanic, writer, and artist before settling down. William and Margaret had three hearing children, two of whom died quite young, and two Deaf daughters, who married Deaf men. William's brother, Thomas Swett, and his wife Ruth Stearns had four children—three Deaf and one hearing.

Joseph Livingstone, a Deaf carpenter who owned the blind and sash company where William worked, lived with the Swetts. Sometimes Deaf workmen would live on the Brown farm (for instance, Joel Lovejoy, one of the Deaf Lovejoys from Concord, New Hampshire, and Josiah Smith, who had Deaf relatives in Hillsboro). In addition, a nearby Deaf couple—the Goves—were close friends. (Abigail Clark Gove was from two towns away, New Boston, home of the Deaf Smith clan, who were good friends of the Browns.) So it was quite a little community that worked, celebrated, and prayed together at the interpreted services in the Congregational Church (Colby 1961). However, the Deaf community extended beyond

Henniker and into contiguous towns. Thomas Brown socialized with Thomas Head and his family in Hooksett and George Kent and others in Amherst (both two towns away from Henniker); Mrs. Head was from a large Deaf family in nearby Francestown, one town away from Henniker (Anon. 1869b, 1874; Turner 1880). In his notebooks devoted to genealogical studies of Deaf people, Alexander Graham Bell lists all the Deaf people in New Hampshire according to the Seventh Census of the Deaf and Dumb, conducted in 1880 (Bell 1888). Including only towns that are contiguous to Henniker, or at one remove, we find an additional 13 Deaf residents, for a total of 27, including Henniker itself.

A different gauge of the size of the Deaf community in and around Henniker may be had from the 1887 publication of cumulative enrollments at the American Asylum since its opening in 1817. Six children from Henniker enrolled, as did an additional 38 from townships contiguous or at one remove, for a total of 44. Both the census and enrollment measures are in one respect underestimates of the Henniker Deaf enclave because participants could certainly live more than two towns away and, indeed, with the coming of the railroads, could live a considerable distance away. On the other hand, presumably not all Deaf people within easy reach of Henniker chose to participate in its social life.

As midcentury approached, an idea germinated in Thomas's mind that would prove epochal: the largest gathering of Deaf people to be assembled anywhere, any time in history. Brown proposed that the mutes of the United States should gather to show their gratitude to Thomas Gallaudet (who had retired from the American Asylum in 1830) and Laurent Clerc (who, at 65, was still teaching). Later events would reveal that Brown likely had a political agenda that went beyond gratitude and sought to counteract the inherent diaspora of Deaf people by gatherings that could also serve as a basis for improving their lot. When Brown, no doubt leveraging off his standing in the New Hampshire Deaf community, suggested a tribute to Gallaudet and Clerc and asked for contributions, "the flame of love ran like a prairie fire through the hearts of the whole Deaf-Mute band, scattered though they were through various parts of the country" and \$600 was soon raised (Rae 1851, 42).

Two hundred Deaf people—some from as far away as Virginia—and two hundred pupils of the American Asylum gathered in Hartford for the ceremony in which beautifully engraved silver pitchers were presented to the founders of American Deaf education. Significantly, the engraving was rich in symbolism from Deaf history: On one side of the pitcher, Gallaudet and Clerc are shown leaving France; the ship is at hand, and beyond the waves their future school can be seen. On the other side is a schoolroom with Deaf pupils. On the front is a bust of Clerc's teacher, Abbé Sicard, and around the neck are the arms of the New England states (Syle 1887). For the presentation, a procession made its way to Hartford's Center Church, in the presence of the Governor of Connecticut, and then Brown, towering above the celebrants, his red beard streaked with gray, gave the welcoming address, the first of several orations in sign. In their replies, Gallaudet and Clerc reviewed the progress of Deaf education from France to the United States. At an evening gathering, there were toasts, addresses, and resolutions, and many Deaf participants stayed on through the weekend in order to enjoy a religious service interpreted into sign language.

As it turned out, the 1850 tribute in Hartford was the forerunner of conventions and associations of Deaf people in the United States. The following year Thomas Gallaudet died; at his funeral, Clerc announced that Thomas Brown and others would form a society of Deaf people and frame a constitution in order to raise funds for a Gallaudet monument. In 1853 a convention was held for that purpose in Montpelier, Vermont, with Deaf participants from that state, as well as from Massachusetts and New Hampshire; many used free passes provided by the railroads. Brown reported on successful fundraising for the monument and urged the formation of a permanent society "for the intellectual, social and moral improvement of Deaf-Mutes (Convention of Deaf-Mutes 1853, 4)." A committee under Thomas Brown was appointed to organize such a society.

Accordingly, less than a year later, on January 4, 1854, Deaf representatives from each of the New England states gathered at the Brown household in Henniker for a week to frame a constitution for the New England Gallaudet Association. From the resolutions of thanks for hospitality, it appears that some representatives were

lodged in the Brown home, others at the Swetts, and still others at the Goves. The constitution the representatives drafted envisioned the publication of a newspaper by and for Deaf-Mutes, the *Gallaudet Guide and Deaf Mutes' Companion*. Thomas Brown was chosen president of the new organization, which was scheduled to convene at the same time as the Gallaudet monument unveiling in Hartford in September of that year.

In the fall, Deaf-Mutes from “all parts of the union” gathered at Hartford for the unveiling of the Gallaudet monument. Among other Deaf orators, whose sign was interpreted for hearing members of the audience, Thomas Brown gave a speech reviewing the history of Deaf education. Deaf artist Albert Newsam designed the monument, and Deaf sculptor John Carlin created the panels. Indeed, “the whole monument was to be the exclusive product of Deaf-Mute enterprise” (Rae 1854, 19). As planned, the “Henniker Constitution” was read and adopted, and officers were elected with Thomas Brown president. Thus was the first formal organization of and for Deaf people created in the United States (Chamberlain 1854).

The second biennial meeting of the New England Gallaudet Association took place in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1856 (Chamberlain 1857). A listing of the members that appeared shortly thereafter showed 44 from Massachusetts (including 4 Mayhews and 3 Tiltens from Chilmark); 34 from New Hampshire (mostly from towns close to Henniker); 30 from Connecticut; 19 from Vermont; 11 from Maine; 7 from Rhode Island; 1 from Illinois and 1 from Louisiana. At this meeting the eminent Deaf minister and teacher, Job Turner, dubbed Thomas Brown “the mute Cincinnatus of Americans” because he was so ready to drop his plough and come to the aid of his fellow mutes. The honorific, Mute Cincinnatus, stuck.

The construction of Deaf people as a distinct class had clearly emerged. It was not too great a step to imagine an enclave of Deaf people much larger than that to be found in the vicinity of Henniker or, for that matter, at the American Asylum. The idea of a Deaf commonwealth, debated at length at the 1858 meeting of the New England Gallaudet Association, responded to the yearnings of many (Chamberlain 1858). The following convention was held in 1860 at the American Asylum, with some 300 attending (Anon. 1860;



Chamberlain 1860). Brown gave the presidential oration, and Laurent Clerc took the assembly to historic sites in Deaf history, such as the house in which he met the little Deaf girl Alice Cogswell, who had inspired efforts to found American Deaf education. In the evening the conventional Deaf banquet was held with its toasts, orations, and resolutions.

In 1860 Thomas's friend and collaborator, William Chamberlain, began the association's publication, the *Gallaudet Guide and Deaf Mutes' Companion*, one of the earliest periodicals in the United States printed exclusively for Deaf readers. The publication contained news of Deaf meetings, marriages, illnesses, and deaths and discussions of Deaf issues such as education and of broader social issues such as slavery and religion. (Prior to this publication, the proceedings of the Gallaudet Association's conventions and their communications were judged sufficiently important to be carried in the *American Annals of the Deaf*, and all members of the association received a subscription to the *Annals* upon joining.)

Just at the time when his network of Deaf friends and associates was the strongest yet, Thomas, age 56, suffered a series of personal losses. The year before, he had lost his father, Nahum, age 87, who gradually became blind and helpless. Then, two years later, his wife Mary died, 61 years old, after an excruciating, year-long illness. Some months later death took his mother, Abiah, age 85. Then Bela Swett and Bela's grandchildren, Addie and James, died. Bela's son, Thomas's nephew, William B. Swett, deeply depressed at the loss of his children to diphtheria, left to pursue the life of an adventurer and guide in the White Mountains. Thomas's son, Thomas Lewis Brown, age 20, graduated from the American Asylum and accepted a position as a teacher in the Deaf and Dumb Asylum at Flint, Michigan. It was not uncommon in that era for a widower to remarry; Thomas's thoughts turned to the scion of one of the large Deaf families in Southern Maine, Sophia Curtiss.

#### Sandy River Valley, Maine

In the period after the American Revolution, several of the families on Martha's Vineyard—among them, Tilttons, Smiths, Mayhews, and Wests—decided to migrate to southeastern Maine. They had had

enough of the despotic rule of Governor Thomas Mayhew. Then, too, with the growing population, the extensive land required for sheep raising was becoming scarce. The war had crippled the whaling industry, which was increasingly centered in the South Pacific. And Massachusetts offered free land in the province of Maine (Poole 1976).

The first settlers from the Vineyard went to the Sandy River Valley, abundantly forested with all sorts of game and streams that teemed with fish such as trout and salmon. Other Vineyarders soon followed, creating the towns of New Vineyard, New Sharon, New Gloucester, and twenty-seven others. Inter-marriage among the Vineyard families continued on the mainland, while some of the settlers gave up and returned to the island, and still others married into unrelated Deaf families on the mainland. Twenty-seven Deaf pupils enrolled at the American Asylum between its opening and 1887 who gave one of these thirty towns as their residence. This includes large Deaf families such as the Rowses and Campbells in New Gloucester, Maine, and the Lovejoys in Sidney.

However, significant numbers of Deaf people lived in nearby townships—for example, the Sebec branch of the Lovejoys; the Jacks and Jellisons in Monroe; the Browns, Jellisons, and Staples in Belfast; and the Berrys in Chesterville. The Lovejoy-Jellison-Berry family of southeastern Maine has the distinction of being one of only two early American Deaf families in the Northeast with three or more consecutive generations of Deaf people (with the first born before 1800); the Brown-Swett-Sanders family of central New Hampshire was the other (Jones 1996). Sophia Curtiss's family was apparently from Leeds, Maine (two townships away from New Sharon, three from Sidney), but moved to New Gloucester; she and her parents were hearing, but she had four Deaf and two hearing siblings, who inter-married with Deaf Rowses and Campbells. Perhaps Thomas met Sophia through her brother George, who overlapped with him at the American Asylum. The wedding notice in the *National Deaf-Mute Gazette* (successor to the *Guide*) reveals both Brown's stature and the need to explain his mixed marriage: "Mr. Brown is too well known to need any notice at our hands. His wife is a hearing lady whose relationship to and constant intercourse with mutes enables her to

use their language” (Anon. 1867). Thomas and Sophia were married in Yarmouth, Maine, in November 1864 and then took up residence in Henniker.

THOMAS CONTINUED his life as a farmer—and Deaf leader. In 1866 the New England Gallaudet Association met in Hartford to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the American Asylum. Some 500 people heard Brown give the presidential address, in which he announced that, after twelve years of service, he would resign in favor of his vice-president (Chamberlain 1867). Two years later the *Deaf-Mute’s Friend* (successor to the *Gazette*) published a letter from Thomas Brown, proposing a national convention of Deaf-Mutes. According to an eminent Deaf teacher and journalist who endorsed the suggestion in the following issue, Brown had first made this proposal “to the convention in Syracuse in 1865”—no doubt the meeting of the Empire State Association of Deaf-Mutes (T. Brown 1869).

In the same year, 1869, Thomas’s sister, Persis, died, as did Laurent Clerc (Chamberlain 1869b). Thomas, 65 years old, won awards at the state fair and cattle show. His son, Thomas Lewis, came home from Michigan to host a large birthday party for his father. Just as the *Gazette* reassured its readers that Brown’s new wife knew sign language, so the *Friend* explained to its readers that one of the storytellers at the birthday party “although a hearing man is a very good sign-maker” (Swett 1869, 123). In 1874 Brown took on the presidency of the Clerc Monument Association (T. L. Brown 1888), and four years later he founded the Granite State Deaf-Mute Mission and was elected president (Tillinghast 1878).

William B. Swett followed in his uncle’s footsteps in promoting Deaf welfare: He published (with William Chamberlain) the *Deaf-Mute’s Friend*; he was a director of the Deaf-Mute Library Association; he was business manager of the Boston Deaf-Mute Mission; and he founded a school of industrial arts for Deaf adults, which shortly added an educational program for Deaf children; it continues today as the Beverly School for the Deaf (Swett 1874).

Thomas Brown was a trustee of his nephew’s school in its early years (T. L. Brown 1888). In 1880 the first national convention of

Deaf people in the United States was convened just as Brown had proposed—except for the venue: It was held in Cincinnati, not Hartford, and Brown, 76 years old, could not attend. He did, however, attend the meeting in New York in 1884 and then traveled to the Vineyard with his son Thomas Lewis to visit the friends of his late wife (T. Brown 1884). Thomas Brown died March 23, 1886.

### Assimilative and Differentiating Societies

The story of Thomas Brown and the emergence of the first American organizations of and for Deaf people that he led can be seen as the story of emerging class consciousness, which surfaced clearly in the mid-nineteenth century. The formation of the numerous societies of Deaf people over which he presided; the explicit goals of the first enduring organization, the New England Gallaudet Association, which he founded: “We, Deaf-Mutes, desirous of forming a society in order to promote the intellectual, social, moral, temporal and spiritual welfare of *our mute community* . . .” [italics added]; the ritual-like rehearsal at meetings of the great events in Deaf history; the raising of monuments to important figures—all these testify that Brown and his associates saw the Deaf community as a distinct group with a language and way of life that should be fostered. “That these conventions tend to keep alive the feelings of brotherhood and friendship among the mutes at large cannot be disputed,” wrote William Chamberlain (1869a). Consequently, he supported the gatherings of “the children of silence.” In the silent press, Brown was referred to as the “patriarch of the silent tribe” (David 1879), and his eulogist stated that Brown was always ready to do his share “for any plan which promised to promote the welfare of his class” (T. L. Brown 1888). (“Class” here clearly refers to the “tribe,” i.e., the Deaf-World, and in this article we use the term in this sense.)

In stark contrast, the accounts available to us of the lives led by Deaf and hearing people in Tisbury and Chilmark during the same era are marked by an apparent absence of events and structures that would set Deaf people apart from hearing people. These accounts do not reveal any leader, any organization, any gathering place, any banquet or other ceremony, any monuments—indeed anything at all that suggests that Deaf people on the Vineyard had class consciousness.

Now that we have made this bald claim, something contradictory may well come to light, but it seems unlikely that the difference in degree will be eliminated by future discoveries.

The pedigrees that we have constructed (of which excerpts appear in Figures 1–3), although they are incomplete, have led us to the hypothesis that a difference in the genetic basis of the Deaf societies in the two locations is responsible for the difference in the emergence of class consciousness. Other possible explanations come to mind, foremost among them, perhaps, differences between the two locations in language and marriage practices. After presenting the genetic hypothesis, we will argue that those differences are, like class consciousness, heavily influenced by the genetic difference.

The hereditary difference between hearing and Deaf people can be traced to any of numerous genes, most often acting singly. As a result, the occurrence of Deaf and hearing people in the family tends to follow the “laws of heredity” first spelled out by Austrian botanist Gregor Mendel in the mid-nineteenth century (but not widely recognized until the end of the century). Mendel identified two main patterns of genetic transmission, called dominant and recessive.

The Brown family of Henniker exemplifies the dominant pattern of inheritance (or transmission). To the best of our knowledge, none of the twenty-three ascendants of Nahum Brown whom we found was Deaf. But Nahum and some of his descendants in every generation were Deaf, indicating that the genetic difference in this family began with Nahum. If the pattern of genetic transmission was dominant in Nahum’s family, then on average half of his children would inherit that genetic difference and be born Deaf, whereas the other half should be born hearing. Within a small margin of statistical sampling, this is just what happened. Slightly more than half (nearly 57 percent) of Nahum’s descendants were Deaf: 12 out of 21. All Deaf members of the family had a Deaf parent (except Nahum, of course), and all Deaf members who married had at least one Deaf child.

The Mayhew, Tilton, Lambert, and Skiffe families of Martha’s Vineyard (Figures 2 and 3), who intermarried extensively both before and after arriving on the island, exemplify the recessive pattern of inheritance. In this pattern, many people in the family will possess the critical gene and yet not be Deaf themselves (hence the term

*recessive*). If both parents have that gene, then one quarter of their children will be Deaf, but if only one parent has it, none of their children will be Deaf, unlike dominant transmission. Many Deaf children will not have Deaf parents (because their parents must be carrying the gene but may not be Deaf themselves). The odds of both parents having exactly the same recessive gene are much greater if they are related to one another. Inter-marriage among relatives is most likely in a community that is isolated—and Martha's Vineyard is a prime example. Many Deaf children on the Vineyard had no Deaf parents, and many Deaf parents, provided they married hearing people, had no Deaf children (cf. Figures 2 and 3). Consequently, far fewer than half the descendants of any progenitor are Deaf; the families of Deaf people have many more hearing people.

In dominant transmission such as we believe occurred in Henniker then, every generation is likely to have Deaf children: Each Deaf person receives a Deaf heritage and may pass it along; each generation of his or her parents and grandparents, children and grandchildren will likely contain Deaf individuals. Marriage between relatives is not necessary for such generational depth to occur. In recessive transmission such as we believe occurred on the Vineyard, on the other hand, a Deaf person may have cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, or more distant relatives who are Deaf, but it is less likely among the immediate family when compared with dominant transmission. That Deaf person may readily have hearing parents or hearing children, or both; generational depth is less likely, and marriage among relatives is characteristically required for any Deaf family members to occur at all.<sup>2</sup> In such a setting, the Deaf person may feel a part of a rather extended family that includes hearing people because he or she is related to so many people in the community. But that Deaf person may not feel like a crucial link in the chain of Deaf heritage.

A clear result of the difference in genetic patterning in the two communities is that the Henniker community necessarily had far

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2. Recent studies have shown that mutations in the gene GJB2 are very common among people who were born Deaf and as many as 1 in every 40 people in the general population have at least one mutated copy of the gene (Green et al. 1999). If this gene was widespread on Martha's Vineyard, marriage among relatives would not necessarily have been required for offspring to be Deaf.

fewer hearing people as an integral part of the family structure compared to the Chilmark community. The numerous hearing children of Deaf parents (called *codas*) in Chilmark would be likely to acquire sign language as a native language; they and their Deaf siblings would thus form a critical mass within the family for sign language use. The Deaf children of hearing parents would learn the language from their parents, if they knew it, or, if not, from Deaf peers, elders, and codas, and they would seek to use it with their own parents and hearing siblings. Numerous hearing relatives in the community might also be motivated to master the sign language, at least to some extent, to communicate with their Deaf relatives. Thus the difference between Henniker and Chilmark in the spread of sign language into the hearing environment may be traceable, in part, to the difference between them in genetic patterning.

The incidence of mixed hearing and Deaf marriages on the Vineyard seems to have been more than triple that on the mainland, as cited earlier. This difference may be attributable, at least in part, to the more widespread use of the sign language among hearing people because a common language greatly facilitates meeting one's life partner in the first place and then developing a deep interest in and affection for that person.

Finally, we hypothesize that the differences in language use and marriage practice, which are underpinned in part by the differences in genetic patterning, mediate in turn differences in class consciousness. What we are suggesting is that it takes a "them" for an "us" to develop, and the blending of hearing and Deaf lives on the Vineyard, because of shared family life and language (underpinned by genetics), discouraged the construction of hearing people as "them." Conversely, many members of the Henniker Deaf enclave had Deaf parents, Deaf grandparents, and Deaf great-grandparents, and the boundary with the surrounding hearing community was relatively sharply demarcated. That said, other factors may also have fostered Chilmark blending, such as a sense of isolation on a remote island and an awareness of shared ancestry.

Recent findings concerning Deaf people and hearing residents of a village in Bali help to evaluate the notion that Deaf genetic patterning, marriage and language practices, and class consciousness are

related. Of the 2,185 people in this village, 2.2 percent are Deaf (Winata et al. 1995). Following Branson, Miller, and Marsaja (1996), we refer to the village as Desa Kolok (“Deaf Village”—not its official name). The genetic patterning in Desa Kolok is recessive as on the Vineyard, and, as on the Vineyard, marriages between hearing and Deaf people are completely acceptable. There are sixteen families in Desa Kolok with two hearing parents and at least one Deaf child, so it is clear that there is more blending of hearing and Deaf lives in the nuclear family than in Henniker, which had no families with hearing parents and Deaf children. However, the blending of hearing and Deaf lives in Desa Kolok may not have been as great as on the Vineyard; in Desa Kolok, the twenty families with a Deaf parent (or two) had 75 percent Deaf children. Thus, among those families with Deaf children, more families than not had a Deaf parent, and the children in those Deaf families were themselves predominantly Deaf.

Beyond the blending of hearing and Deaf lives within the nuclear family in Desa Kolok, cultural and social forces ensure widespread contact between Deaf and hearing people. Of particular note, Balinese villages are kin based, and Deaf people grow up in house yards shared with their hearing relatives. Thus, with respect to the mixing of hearing and Deaf lives, the extended family of the Desa Kolok house yard may be more like Vineyard families than like Henniker families. Perhaps for this reason, the use of a sign language in Desa Kolok is nearly universal, and Deaf people are integrated in many facets of social life including groups organized for work and for some religious practices. Moreover, hearing attitudes toward Deaf islanders, many of whom are relatives, are generally positive (Hinnant 1998, 1999; Branson, Miller, and Marsaja 1996). Thus, the evidence from Desa Kolok suggests that the mixing of hearing and Deaf people in the family determines their mixing in community life, as we hypothesize was the case on the Vineyard.

It is not clear to us whether Deaf people in Desa Kolok lack class (i.e., group) consciousness, as we hypothesize was the case on the Vineyard. On the one hand, certain activities in Desa Kolok are associated with Deaf villagers who also have specific roles with regard to certain festivals, which might engender such group consciousness. Moreover, being Deaf restricts one’s prospects outside the village and



participation in some skilled labor and in musical events (Hinnant, personal communication). On the other hand, “the Deaf villagers interact freely and equally with other villagers” (Branson, Miller, and Marsaja 1996, 42). Perhaps the mixed evidence for group consciousness is a reflection of an intermediate status for Desa Kolok between Henniker and the Vineyard with regard to the blending of hearing and Deaf lives.

### Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the following people for their assistance in preparing this article: Dr. Kathleen Arnos, Genetics Program, Department of Biology, Gallaudet University; Dr. Ben Bahan, Department of Deaf Studies, Gallaudet University; Dr. Jan Branson, National Institute for Deaf Studies and Sign Language Research, La Trobe University; Dr. Nora Groce, School of Public Health, Yale University; Mr. Ulf Hedberg, Gallaudet University Archives; Dr. John Hinnant, Department of Religious Studies, Michigan State University; Ms. Carole Mair, Librarian, Michigan School for the Deaf; New England Genealogical Society; Dr. Don Miller, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University; Mr. Michael Olsen, Gallaudet University Archives; Dr. Joan Poole-Nash, Newton, Mass.; Volta Bureau, Alexander Graham Bell Association.

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