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## **Curating Deaf Spaces in Rochester: A Historical Self-Guided Mobile Application Tour**

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Curating Deaf Spaces in Rochester:  
A Historical Self-Guided Mobile Application Tour

The Rochester Institute of Technology  
College of Liberal Arts

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Bachelor of Science Degree  
in Museum Studies  
History Department

By Allison Thompson

May 2015

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Allison Thompson submitted on Saturday, May 16, 2015.



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## **I. Introduction**

Rochester is widely considered by many to be one if, if not the most, Deaf-friendly city in the nation due to having the one of the largest Deaf populations per capita in the country.<sup>1</sup> The research question focused on whether sufficient material could be assembled to provide a self-guided historical tour application (still in the planning stages) that will feature locations related to Rochester's deaf community. The content that I curated was chosen based on the historical significance and accessibility of locations to visitors. The tour demonstrates how and why Rochester has achieved its reputation as the location of such a nationally distinguished local deaf community. The historical significance of each site is revealed through facts and photographs – all to be made accessible through the application.

This tour originally was planned to be developed as part of a self-guided historical multi-tour mobile application, *Rochester: Then and Now*, which would feature multiple historical self-guided tours focused on various prominent components of Rochester's history. While the plans for the mobile application fell through, this tour has still been made for the Rochester Public Library's Rochester Voices project, directed by Michelle Finn and Christine Ridarsky. This tour may instead be featured on the Rochester Voices website, as platforms and funding to generate a mobile application are continued to be sought after.

The content for this tour consists of descriptions of each historical location, accompanied by photographs and videos. The historical descriptions will provide a brief

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<sup>1</sup> "Number of Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing: Rochester, NY," National Technical Institute for the Deaf, accessed February 24, 2015, [http://www.ntid.rit.edu/sites/default/files/number\\_of\\_persons\\_who\\_are\\_deaf\\_or\\_hard\\_of\\_hearing.pdf](http://www.ntid.rit.edu/sites/default/files/number_of_persons_who_are_deaf_or_hard_of_hearing.pdf)

summary of the historical context and impact on the Deaf community. The text will accompany at least one photograph of each location. The *Rochester: Then and Now* application would have shown on a map exactly where the photographer stood to take the picture – similar to the app it was going to be modeled after, *Albany: Then and Now*.

Locations to be featured in the application include prominent educational institutions (such as the Rochester School for the Deaf and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf), in addition the still-existent sites of both defunct and active deaf social/recreational organizations.

## **II. The Research Process**

### **a. Finding Sources and Locations**

The first step of the research process has been to identify the most obvious locations of significance through whatever relevant sources I can find. The first of these locations would be the two major institutions of education that continue to attract deaf individuals from all over the country – especially those seeking higher education, as the National Technical Institute for the Deaf is one of just two colleges for the deaf in the United States (the other being Gallaudet University in Washington, DC). The Rochester School for the Deaf, which teaches kindergarten through twelfth grade students, holds a place in history as one of Western New York’s first schools for the deaf.<sup>2</sup> Given how integral the preservation of local deaf history is to the mission of these institutions, I chose to first look for sources in their archives. Through the RSD archives, I have been given access to photographs and articles specifically pertaining to the history of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Rosenburg-Naparsteck, “The Rochester School for the Deaf,” *Rochester History* LXIV (2002): 6.

school. Through the RIT/NTID archives, I have been given access to a greater variety of materials, such as various Deaf publications, news clippings, photographs, records belonging to local (defunct and present) deaf organizations, and memorabilia.

I have also sought out locations through interviews with people who possess insider knowledge of spaces where the deaf congregate, including long-time Deaf residents of Rochester (including RIT faculty members) and Mary Beth Kitzel, a professor who specializes in the unique field of Deaf Geographies.

### **b. Deaf Geographies with Dr. Kitzel**

Dr. Kitzel has spent seven and a half years studying the concept of Deaf Geographies. The concept itself is fairly avant-garde, as the terms “Deaf Geographies” and “Deaf Space” are still quite new terms. Because of this, the definitions are still becoming more developed and clear. These terms cover can be used to discuss the following “Deaf Space Taxonomy” scales to describe levels of interaction between Deaf people: purposefully built spaces for the Deaf to congregate (such as a Deaf club), interpersonal communication (such as online chat rooms), body performance (degree of hearing loss and communication preferences), and the concept of individual space (the self).

Dr. Kitzel studied this field extensively while working for the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom. She has always been fascinated by the history of Martha’s Vineyard, of which the high Deaf population is believed to have been descended from Sussex. This is evidenced by records in courthouse vineyards and county poorhouses, which were nearly impossible to find. Her work is just as cutting edge in the U.K. as it is here, as no one else taught any Deaf Studies courses at the University of

Sussex, aside from ASL. Her collaborator from the U.K. is Mike Gulliver, who is the most published person on the subject of Deaf Spaces (as one can see at [mikegulliver.com](http://mikegulliver.com)). He is currently working on helping to develop London's first church for the Deaf – Saint Savoir.

Some interesting things Dr. Kitzel has studied includes how early schools for the Deaf were often built with the same principles in mind as mental asylums, built with a goal of confinement more so than a goal of education – treating the Deaf like rejected members of society. Dr. Kitzel also mentioned that there are people who focus on purposefully-built Deaf Spaces at Gallaudet University, noting innovative accommodations that can include a special floor that vibrates so a Deaf person can tell when another person is walking toward him or her.

Another thing we discussed is the fact that physical spaces seem to be getting taken over by digital spaces over the course of the modern digital age. Less towns are forming Deaf Clubs, as more people congregate in digital spaces through social media or video chat rooms. Dr. Kitzel noted that one of the things that sets Rochester apart from other cities is the fact that a Deaf club with a physical location (The Rochester Recreation Club for the Deaf) still exists.

### **c. Challenges and Solutions**

I have encountered quite a few challenges throughout the research process that I must work with. Many of these locations no longer exist or may not be appropriate visitor sites, plus I do not own a vehicle to easily visit off-campus locations. However, the most prominent issue that there is very little pre-existing published research available



pertaining specifically to Rochester's deaf community (despite its reputation and the data indicating its prominence).

The first two challenges have relatively simple solutions, while the third does not. For the first challenge, I have chosen to include the non-existent sites and the ones inappropriate for visitation (such as private properties) in my research, but not necessarily the application, in order to help provide as much context as possible and/or lead me to newer sites that may be related. The second challenge, not having a car, can be solved through paying someone to take me to these sites or using public transportation when possible.

The challenge of little pre-existing research being available is a complex dilemma. The most prominent reason is probably due to the historical stigma mainstream society has held against the Deaf community, which instilled a mistrust against hearing people. Until the last couple of decades, signing in public was not even seen as acceptable – it would draw rude stares, dirty looks, and offensive encounters from prejudiced or ignorant hearing people wherever they went. This is why many deaf organizations and clubs became very elusive of mainstream society, even (perhaps especially) from researchers – as they have historically been studied in ways reminiscent of being within an animal testing laboratory or within a zoo exhibit by people who historically misconstrue their perspective due to fundamental attribution error.<sup>3</sup> In addition to having been subject to questionable research practices, Deaf people have been historically discriminated against when it comes to employment. The few avenues of employment made accessible to them has historically tended to be in manual labor or

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<sup>3</sup> Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 6.

industrial in nature.<sup>4</sup> This means that until recent decades, it is safe to say that published research on Deaf history been almost entirely written by outsiders – hearing individuals.<sup>5</sup>

Even in present-day Rochester, outside of institutions of education, the Deaf community within the city remains fairly elusive to outsiders. The closest you will get to finding meeting places of the Deaf in Rochester through a simple Google search would be through the Deaf Rochy and the Rochester Recreation Club of the Deaf websites.<sup>67</sup> Deaf Rochy appears to be a tourist site, as it while it provides a calendar that notes public events that may be of interest to the deaf community, aside from that it only lists a bunch of links to general mainstream locations of recreation, such as the Seneca Park Zoo and Memorial Art Gallery (MAG). The Rochester Recreation Club of the Deaf (RRCD), founded more than sixty years ago, seems to hold more consistent events for locals, but does not seem very welcoming to outsiders of the community. The entire “About Us” page pertains to past challenges regarding maintaining their tax-exempt status. This may seem odd, until you realize that they are telling a story that demonstrates continuous oppression:

“Since the founding of the club some sixty years ago up to the big fire of its clubhouse on St. Paul Street in 1989, the club had been exempted by the City of Rochester from property taxes since the club provided beneficial services to the deaf community. Several months after the relocation to the present location on Lyell Avenue, the city tax authorities made a surprise visit to the clubhouse to

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<sup>4</sup> John Vickrey Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own* (Washington: Gallaudet University, 1989),155.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *Mask of Benevolence*, 69-70.

<sup>6</sup> “Deaf Rochy,” Deaf Rochy, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.deafrochy.com/>

<sup>7</sup> “About Us,” Rochester Recreation Club for the Deaf, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.rochesterdeafclub.com/about-us/>

determine if the purpose and intent of the club remained the same. The timing of the visit could not have come at the worst possible time; there was a social taking place and there were no interpreters available to facilitate communication between the club's officers and the tax authorities. The authorities did not know what to make of this situation and decided to revoke the tax privilege that the club had since it acquired the property at St. Paul Street in 1966.”<sup>8</sup>

The situation was resolved in the end when they contacted a sign-proficient lawyer who helped them obtain federal tax exemption, which they enjoy the benefits of this day while continuing to serve the deaf community.<sup>9</sup> Still, one cannot help but wonder if the city tax authorities would have exhibited the same behavior towards other groups given that they made that surprise visit to see if their intent and purpose were the same, and despite the ongoing activities that indicated so, they revoked their tax exemption simply because they “did not know what to make of the situation” and were unable to communicate. One would think that upon making a surprise visit to a deaf club, they would arrange to be accompanied by an interpreter. Alas, this situation just demonstrates just one of many ways the deaf have been repeatedly punished throughout history for the use of their unique natural language.

To further complicate this challenge, I must try to approach the community in the most appropriate way I can with my role. To understand my role, I must explain the difference between being part of the deaf community and being culturally Deaf. It may have been noted by now that sometimes I refer to people as “Deaf” with a capital “D” rather than “deaf.” This is not a mistake, as “Deaf” refers to deaf people as a

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<sup>8</sup> “About Us.”

<sup>9</sup> “About Us.”

cultural group that shares the same language (American Sign Language), customs, and challenges while “deaf” simply represents the audiological condition of severe to profound hearing loss.<sup>10</sup> The general deaf community includes almost anyone who identifies as someone with hearing loss – such as hard-of-hearing individuals (this includes myself), late-deafened, oral-deaf, etc. In other words, it includes deaf people who identify as more culturally hearing than deaf – some may even describe themselves as “hearing people with hearing loss,” meaning their perspectives are more pathological than cultural.<sup>11</sup> That being said, not necessarily everyone who is within the deaf community but not immersed in Deaf culture holds a pathological view, while not everyone who uses sign language is considered to be culturally Deaf. The deaf community is by far one of the most diverse communities, including people of all kinds of hearing loss, different upbringings, different ethnicities, different languages, and different geographical locations all over the world.

As for me, I identify as hard-of-hearing and wear hearing aids in both ears. I have moderate-to-severe hearing loss, which means I do have potential to become culturally deaf - but that was not how I was raised. I grew up using oral communication in mainstream public schools and was never given the chance to learn sign language until I arrived at the RIT/NTID campus. However, I quickly learned that despite inherently being part of the deaf community, many still considered me to be an “outsider” (while less so now that I know more sign language, many still do). This is because my fluent use of speech would instantly align me more in their eyes

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<sup>10</sup> Irene W. Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities: Perspectives on Deafness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), vii.

<sup>11</sup> Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities*, 6.

with hearing people than deaf people – and again, there are many reasons for the deaf to mistrust the hearing, as evidenced throughout history (or even in the above story about RCCD). This is also because many deaf or hard of hearing people prefer not to be associated with Deaf culture, as it does get irritating to constantly be grouped in with sign language peoples when you are not one of them – sometimes (in most situations, hearing) strangers will try to sign whatever they can to you soon as they find out about your hearing loss.<sup>12</sup> Admittedly, this bothered me before college, but not so much anymore. In my time associating with and learning about the deaf community, I have come to the conclusion that I cannot identify myself as hearing or deaf – just somewhere in between (my chosen label being hard of hearing), though I am far from the only one. While some Deaf strangers might immediately assume that I hold a strictly pathological perspective and identify as a hearing person just because of my speech, both my D/deaf and hearing friends know this is not the case. The connections I have made through my D/deaf friends and acquaintances within the community have been invaluable throughout my research, as without them, it is very likely I would regularly be seen as another “outsider” who could only obtain minimal information.

Despite these connections and my status as a hard-of-hearing individual, some people may still view me as an outsider. This may be why my efforts to contact RRCD with my request to feature its location and for any old photographs of the buildings have been unsuccessful.

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<sup>12</sup> Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities*, viii.

### **III. Review of Sources**

#### **a. Human Resources**

##### **i. Joan Naturale**

Joan Naturale is the NTID reference librarian for the Wallace Center Library at the Rochester Institute of Technology (NTID). She is also active building and gathering information for the Deaf Studies Archive, which is part of the RIT Archives and Special Collections.

Joan was extremely helpful in providing direction in where to search for information and how to find potential locations. She provided the email contact information for almost all of my human resources. The only exception is Patti Durr, as she teaches *Deaf Art & Cinema* – a course that I have completed.

##### **ii. Pat DeCaro**

Patricia “Pat” DeCaro is an archivist at the Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD) Archives, and also does work for the RSD Museum. As such, she is a great source of information regarding RSD and was very helpful in deciding how to present RSD on the tour.

From her, it was learned that the Rochester School for the Deaf is not an appropriate site for a walk-in visit – they will need to coordinate their visit with them in advance. It is still a private residential school, so while visitors may respectfully walk around the grounds, the only building they could have access to is Perkins Hall. Perkins Hall is the historic building that is home to the RSD Archives and RSD Museum, which

are both accessible to visitors by appointment. It is recommended that they call or email at least two weeks in advance.

DeCaro also brought to my attention the existence of gravesites of RSD children (most dating back from when the school was originally named the Western New York Institute for Deaf Mutes) and gravesites the Perkins family at Mount Hope. She provided me with any information they have within their records regarding the gravesites.

### **iii. Harry Lang**

Harry Lang is a deaf professor who retired from the National Technical Institute (NTID) for the Deaf after 42 years of teaching in 2011. Upon retirement, he was honored with the rank of Professor Emeritus. He is also the author of books such as *A Phone of Our Own: The Deaf Insurrection Against Ma Bell*.

Lang was able to give me a little more information about the Rochester Recreation Club for the Deaf (RRCD). He stated that particularly in the 1970s, before the days of videophones and other electronic telecommunication devices, RRCD was where everyone went to communicate face-to-face. After such devices were made accessible, the club remained a place where friends could see each other in person and play cards or sports.

Lang also mentioned that users of my tour might be interested in knowing about RSD's annual "Adventures in Education" lecture series in October, which hundreds of deaf and hearing people attend every year.

### **iv. Miriam Lerner**

Miriam Lerner is an interpreter for RIT/NTID and is a co-producer of the *Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* DVD. She has been active in the local ASL poetry scene since it

arose in the 1980s. She told me that Susan Plunkett was the owner of the café (Jazzberry's) where many of the ASL Poetry nights documented within *Heart of the Hydrogren Jukebox* took place. She stated that while Jazzberry's is no longer in business, Plunkett now has a catering business called Plunkett's Fabulous Foods.

Lerner also suggested including the Writers and Books store on University Avenue as a site on the tour because the owner, Joe Flaherty, was one of the first proponents of ASL Poetry in Rochester. I ultimately decided not to include it, however, since he is hearing and I was unable to find enough information connecting Writers and Books to the deaf community aside from Flaherty's contributions to the ASL poetry scene.

## **b. Literature**

### ***i. Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community***

Harlan Lane's *Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* is a fantastic resource and guide to understanding the history behind the socioeconomic and psychological factors that have fueled deaf oppression. Issues of identity, representation, cultural misunderstanding, and struggles within the deaf education system are among the topics explored. He also makes a case for how there are parallels between the colonization of African communities and the colonization of the deaf community.<sup>13</sup>

This book makes a wonderful introductory guide to understanding Deaf culture and the field of deaf studies. Not only does it introduce basic terminology, but it also provides extremely valuable insight into the perspectives of both the oppressed and the oppressors. More importantly, especially since this book was published in 1992 just as

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<sup>13</sup> Lane, *Mask of Benevolence*, 31.



the field of deaf studies was emerging, it served to advocate for the support of ASL and Deaf culture.<sup>14</sup>

**ii. “Number of Persons who are Hard of Hearing or Deaf in Rochester”**

Very little research has been done to confirm that Rochester has the largest per-capita population of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (D/HH) individuals, despite the fact that this claim is frequently used in the media. Researchers at NTID generated this case study using data provided by the American Community Survey’s 2008 – 2010 three year public use population estimates to determine whether there is basis for this claim. It was determined that of Rochester metro area’s approximately 1,155,000 residents, about 43,000 or 3.7 percent are D/HH, which is higher than the national average of 3.5 percent.<sup>15</sup>

Through analysis, they learned that such a broad statement about the per-capita population needs to be qualified since there are other demographic variables associated with hearing loss – such as old age. An example used is how 3.9 percent of the residents of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania are D/HH – making it a higher per capita population than Rochester. However, the difference is accounted for by the fact that Pittsburgh has a much higher proportion of elderly individuals (over the age of 64) than Rochester. Once the analysis was limited to individuals under the age of 65, Rochester had the highest proportion of D/HH individuals of all the metro areas selected for analysis.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lane, *Mask of Benevolence*, 165.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Gerard and Richard Dirmeyer, *Number of Persons who are Hard of Hearing or Deaf in Rochester* (Rochester, NY: National Technical Institute for the Deaf, 2012), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Gerard and Dirmeyer, *Number*, 1.

### **iii. The Rochester School for the Deaf**

This is a journal article that was published in *Rochester History* in during the winter of 2002, volume LXIV and issue number 1. It was written by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck and is 23 pages long. It gives a detailed overview of the history of the Rochester School for the Deaf. It covers the events behind the efforts of its establishment up and its progression up to when its first deaf superintendent, Harold Mowl, was selected in 1990.<sup>17</sup>

### **iv. Origin and Establishment of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf**

This is the official report on the development of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID). The author, Ralph L. Hoag, was the head of the federal government's NTID Special Staff Office and played an active role in pushing for the development of NTID.<sup>18</sup>

This report provides a detailed overview of the events and circumstances leading up to NTID's development and its impact on higher deaf education at the national level. Prior to NTID's establishment, the only option for deaf people trying to access higher education was Gallaudet – which was more of a small liberal arts college at the time rather than the large university it is today. NTID provided a desperately needed opportunity that opened up far more career avenues through accessible programs that offered vocational and technical training.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rosenberg-Naparsteck, "The Rochester School for the Deaf," 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph L. Hoag, *Origin and Establishment of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf* (Rochester, NY: The National Technical Institute for the Deaf, 1989), v.

<sup>19</sup> Hoag, *Origin*, xi.

### **c. Videos**

#### **i. *Sign City* – DVD**

*Sign City* is a short documentary (circa 1980s-1990s) that was featured on television by CBS Sunday Morning. Reporter Martha Teichner “eavesdropped” on Rochester’s Deaf community for a year, visiting places where the Deaf congregated and taking interviews to find out how and why Rochester became considered to be “Deaf Capital of the United States,” as well as the nation’s “most Deaf-friendly city.”<sup>20</sup>

Through this video, it was revealed that the area is generally more accessible than most due to greater acceptance and general encouragement in learning sign language among the general population. It was learned that Starbucks offers free ASL courses to its employees, and first graders at Council Rock Elementary School (a mainstream school – meaning a public school that integrates Deaf and hearing students) both sign and say the Pledge of Allegiance. At the time of recording, Deaf Rochester News (also known as Silent News) was still an active newspaper. While Deaf Rochester News is no longer active, daily reporters, such as the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, still have specific sections dedicated to the Deaf community. It is also noted that Rochester has multiple agencies to allocate interpreters.<sup>21</sup>

An interview was given with Dr. Carolyn Stern, who moved to Rochester three years before this video was recorded. At the time, it was believed that she had the only medical practice in the United States that specifically catered to the Deaf community. Dr. Stern is Deaf herself, but able to communicate with both hearing and Deaf patients with

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<sup>20</sup> CBS Sunday Morning. “Sign City,” DVD, 2001.

<sup>21</sup> CBS Sunday Morning.

her cochlear implant. Ironically, her practice still attracted two hearing patients for every one Deaf patient. Her staff also included a full-time interpreter to enable to her communicate with hearing patients over the phone, and the practice was equipped with TTYs. TTY stands for Text Telephone and is a device that enables Deaf people to use a telephone to communicate by typing messages to each other back and forth.<sup>22</sup> Today, Dr. Stern is the Medical Director at the Rochester School for the Deaf, as well as a Student Health Physician at Gallaudet University. She also runs a health information website for the Deaf – deafdoc.org.<sup>23</sup>

It is explained that the Deaf population was mostly drawn to Rochester thanks to education – starting with the Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD), which opened over a hundred years ago. It is speculated that what truly landed Rochester on the map for its Deaf community would be the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), which opened the eyes of many Deaf students who previously did not have access to the community. Many individuals never learned sign language or even had any exposure to the Deaf community prior to college, especially since the act of Congress that created it occurred in 1968, just as American Sign Language (ASL) began to become more celebrated in public instead of stigmatized.<sup>24</sup>

## ***ii. Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox***

*The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* is a documentary directed by RIT/NTID interpreter Miriam Lerner and Don Feigel. It compiles a variety of archival footage related to Rochester's ASL Poetry scene of the 1970s and 1980s. It includes

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<sup>22</sup> CBS Sunday Morning.

<sup>23</sup> "The Deaf Doc Is In," Hands & Voices, accessed April, 30, 2015, [http://handsandvoices.org/articles/deafpersp/V10-4\\_deafDoc.htm](http://handsandvoices.org/articles/deafpersp/V10-4_deafDoc.htm)

<sup>24</sup> CBS Sunday Morning.

various performances, interviews, and commentary with involved individuals (including Bob Panara and Bernard Bragg). The film provides evidence that Rochester was the only city in the nation with a culture of deaf and hearing poetry occurring side by side as interpreters became involved for equal access to both audiences. Many Deaf Poetry nights were hosted at a café called Jazzberry's in downtown Rochester, which is to be featured in the application.<sup>25</sup>

#### **IV. *Albany: Then and Now* as the Model**

*Albany: Then and Now* is the mobile application upon which my tour is modeled after. *Albany: Then and Now* is currently available for download on any mobile device through both Google Play and the iTunes Store.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the application for Rochester, which would have multiple tours due to its size and history, *Albany: Then and Now* consists of one tour that focuses solely on downtown Albany. The application provides a map with red arrows pinpointing the locations of where over 130 photographs were taken. Users can use the map as a guide to walk to the marked locations, and then they can stand in the spot where the photograph was taken to directly compare the present with the past.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox*, directed by Miriam Lerner and Don Feigel (Rochester, NY: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2009), DVD.

<sup>26</sup> "Albany: Then and Now," Google Play, accessed April 6, 2015, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.troyweb.albanyhistory&hl=en>

<sup>27</sup> "Albany: Then and Now."

## **V. Locations of Significance to the Deaf Community: Historical Context**

### **a. Educational Centers**

#### **i. The Rochester School for the Deaf**

The Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD) can be considered the roots of the Rochester Deaf Community, as it is the first designated site for the deaf in the Rochester's history, and is still in operation today. This will be the first site to be presented for the historical tour of Rochester's deaf community sites for the Rochester: Then & Now mobile application.

Many American deaf children of the 19th century had little to no opportunity to learn or lead productive lives, as schools for the deaf were only available to about half of them. Uneducated deaf children were often sent to county poor houses or kept at home without language or education.<sup>28</sup>

It was the birth of Carolyn Erickson Perkins, born to parents Gilman and Caroline Perkins, in Rochester on July 24th, 1868, that set in motion the events that would change the history of Western New York and deaf history. While Carolyn was not the first deaf child to be born in Rochester, her mother Caroline was the daughter of Aaron Erickson, founder of the Union Trust Company. She had a reputation as a visionary that was unafraid of confronting challenges.<sup>29</sup>

The closest school at the time was the New York School for the Deaf, known as "Fanwood" and located just north of New York City. Concerned for the future of her child and not wanting to send her away, Caroline was determined to find a way for her child to be educated in Rochester. She decided to visit a school for the deaf in Frederick,

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<sup>28</sup> Rosenberg-Naparsteck, "The Rochester School for the Deaf," 6.

<sup>29</sup> Rosenberg-Naparsteck, "The Rochester School for the Deaf," 4-5.

Maryland while visiting relatives. It was there that she met Mary Hart Nodine, a young teacher. Admiring her warmth and talent, she invited Miss Nodine to go back with them to Rochester as a private teacher for Carolyn. Miss Nodine was engaged to Zenas Freeman Westervelt, a teacher at the Maryland school who became a frequent visitor of the Perkins household. Westervelt had been gathering the names of deaf children in Western New York who were not in school, and felt that Rochester would be a great location for a new school. The Perkins family encouraged him to move to Rochester, and the Rochester School for the Deaf was born on Saint Paul Street – originally named the Western New York Institute for Deaf Mutes until 1920.<sup>30</sup>

After his second year teaching in Rochester, Westervelt became concerned about the ability of his students to make proper use of the English language, and discouraged students from signing. Instead, he urged them to use the manual alphabet with speech. This became widely known as the "Rochester Method," a method that would be adopted by other deaf schools throughout the country.<sup>31</sup>

## **ii. National Technical Institute for the Deaf**

The proposal for the establishment of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) was first brought up in the 1930s. As previously mentioned, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf was finally created by an act of Congress and approved by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 – which is why the main building at NTID is named after him. A select group of individuals affiliated or part of the deaf community worked in conjunction with the National Advisory Board (NAB) to ensure a successful establishment.

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<sup>30</sup> Rosenberg-Naparsteck, "The Rochester School for the Deaf," 5-7.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenberg-Naparsteck, "The Rochester School for the Deaf," 11-13.

Prior to the establishment of NTID, the only option that enabled Deaf Americans to pursue a higher education was to attend Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C. At the time, Gallaudet only enrolled 450 students. For the most part, it offered just a liberal arts program and had very limited offerings in other areas of study. While a small amount of Deaf individuals went on to conventional colleges and universities, secondary schools often did not prepare Deaf students for a postsecondary education. As a result, administrators and educators of deaf schools throughout the nation were dissatisfied with the lack of accessible advanced vocational and technical education for their graduates. Along with various Deaf advocacy organizations, such as the National Association for the Deaf, they were able to provide the government with enough evidence to agree that the establishment of the NTID was necessary to improve the career outlook of Deaf Americans.<sup>32</sup>

There will be two specific locations within NTID mentioned in the mobile application: the Joseph F. and Helen C. Dyer Arts Center and the Robert Panara Theatre.

The Joseph F. and Helen C. Dyer Arts Center resulted from a leadership gift from the two long-time supporters of NTID that it was named after in 2001. It is a beautiful modern art gallery that includes two floors and three gallery spaces. The Elizabeth W. Williams Gallery is the main gallery that is located on the first floor, while the Milton H. and Ray B. Ohringer Gallery shares the second floor with the small Sculpture Gallery. In addition to exhibitions, the Dyer Arts Center also hosts art-related educational activities

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<sup>32</sup> Ralph L. Hoag, “The Origin and Establishment of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf” (report on the Development of NTID, a Special Federal Project Sponsored and Authorized by the United States Congress, Rochester, New York, 1989).



and serves as a multi-use facility on the Rochester Institute of Technology campus.<sup>33</sup>

Prior to the existence of the Dyer Arts Center, the area was occupied instead by an open courtyard, which, according to Patti Durr and other longtime faculty members of NTID, was neglected by most people.

The Robert F. Panara Theatre was named after NTID's first Deaf professor and founder of the NTID Drama Club, Dr. Robert Panara. The theatre was opened in 1974, and has since hosted many culturally relevant and popular guest artists – including Jane Fonda, Marlee Matlin, the National Theatre of the Deaf, Bernard Bragg, Hartford Dance Ballet, and the American Deaf Dance Company, among many others. The theatre seats 466 people and produces work in a wide variety of theatre styles with works by both deaf and hearing authors – including (but not limited to) comedy, musical, dance, drama, classical, Kabuki, and puppets. The Panara Theatre also produced the first-ever “American Deaf Play Creators Festival,” and is continuing its growth and development.<sup>34</sup>

## **b. Mount Hope Cemetery Gravesites**

### **i. Mount Hope Cemetery**

Dedicated in 1838, Rochester's Mount Hope Cemetery is asserted by the Friends of Mount Hope organization's website to be “America's First Municipal Victorian Cemetery.” Located at 113 Mount Hope Avenue, the cemetery is situated on 196 acres of hills and valleys, which were formed by glaciers.<sup>35</sup> A veritable museum of funerary sculpture and mausoleums, it is also home to a diversified forest that forms an arboretum

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<sup>33</sup> “The Joseph F. and Helen C. Dyer Arts Center,” Rochester Institute of Technology, accessed April 8, 2015, <http://www.rit.edu/ntid/dyerarts/>

<sup>34</sup> “Robert F. Panara Theatre,” RIT: NTID Performing Arts, accessed April 8, 2015, <https://www.ntid.rit.edu/theatre/facilities/panara-theatre>

<sup>35</sup> “History,” Friends of Mount Hope Cemetery, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.fomh.org/AboutUs/History/>

throughout the cemetery. There are more than 350,000 gravesites which span from beyond the past century and a half, as well as thousands of granite, marble, and bronze monuments.<sup>36</sup> It is the final resting place of many historically notable Rochesterians – including Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass.<sup>37</sup>

## **ii. Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes Gravesites**

The Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes plot (lot number 123) was purchased by Zenas F. Westervelt, the aforementioned first superintendent of the school. At least thirteen students are thought to be buried there, though Pat DeCaro at the Rochester School told me for the Deaf that there may be more or less than that. Information being lost over time and the fact that most of these graves are unmarked make it almost impossible to confirm the number. Some students that were buried there may no longer be there, as sometimes the bodies were later relocated by families who did not live near the school.

Records within the RSD Archives provide the names and dates of death for three students with marked graves: James McCabe (November 18, 1916), Frances Ipolito (October 18, 1922), and James Wright (June 3, 1929).

The names and dates of death are also provided for ten students with unmarked graves: Frank Barber (August, 1878), Louisa Meyer (August, 1879), Sophie Fister (February 24, 1883), Adelbert Era Chapman (June 18, 1885), Lewis Thorp (May 27, 1887), Ray Hall (between February and May, 1888), William Skidmore (November 7, 1889), Amelia Erickson (December 8, 1889 or 1890), and James Wright (May 31, 1927).

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<sup>36</sup> “Mount Hope Cemetery,” City of Rochester, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.cityofrochester.gov/mounthope/>

<sup>37</sup> “History.”

Records indicate that one of these unmarked graves belong to a student who was a Native American from a Seneca tribe, possibly named Boyuas (June 19, 1887).

The spelling of these names may not be accurate, as the hand-written records can be difficult to decipher and were not always meticulously recorded by the record keepers.

### **iii. Perkins Family Gravesites**

As previously mentioned, the Perkins family is notable for having initiated the effort to have a school for the deaf established in Rochester for their daughter, Carolyn Erickson Perkins. She is buried in the Erickson plot (lot number 166) along with other members of her family. While the father died in 1889 and the mother in 1919, the date of Carolyn Erickson Perkins' death is unknown.

The Erickson family members are buried in the front half of the plot, while the Perkins family members are buried in the back half. The plot is the site of the Aaron Erickson monument, which makes it an easy site for visitors to find.

### **c. Deaf Affiliated Businesses**

#### **i. Jazzberry's**

Jazzberry's was a lively café owned by Susan Plunkett, and opened in 1984 at its first location within the Genesse Co-Op building – which used to be an old firehouse.<sup>38</sup> It was the site of many ASL Poetry nights, as documented in the *Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox* DVD. Various entertainment acts had also been held there, such as musical acts – of which the noise caused Plunkett to lose her entertainment license in 1987, leading her to reopen Jazzberry's at a new location (50 East Avenue) in 1990. The new version

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<sup>38</sup> Alan Morrell, "Whatever Happened To...Jazzberry's?," Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, December 27, 2014, <http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/local/rocroots/2014/12/23/whatever-happened-jazzberrys/20837395/>

was called Jazzberry's uptown, and continued to host entertainment at the new location until debt and the tax department caused it to shut down in 1992. Now, Plunkett runs another business – Susan Plunkett's Fabulous Foods in Henrietta.<sup>39</sup>

## **ii. Deaf Roots and Wings**

Deaf Roots and Wings is a yoga practice owned by Dorothy M. Wilkins, who has been teaching yoga for more than 18 years and is Deaf herself.<sup>40</sup> While the location has been varied throughout the years, she is currently renting Molly's Yoga Studio within the Genesse Co-Op building from Molly Huff off of Monroe Avenue. Deaf Roots and Wings. It is located within the same building that Jazzberry's used to be.

In 2013, Dorothy was elected to be one of the Global Deaf Women Amazing Business Women. In addition to providing services locally, Wilkins organizes Deaf Yoga and Life Retreats around the nation with Deborah S. Mayer, who is the Founder and CEO of Crossroad Solutions Coach. By providing instruction in ASL, she has effectively provided these services and opportunities to many participants who would be unable to benefit from them otherwise.<sup>41</sup>

## **VI. Conclusion**

Rochester's vibrant deaf community is one of the many things that has shaped Rochester into the unique city it is today. Its educational institutions draw thousands of deaf and hard of hearing people every year, at least becoming residents for the duration of their education. However, many who find themselves with a strong sense

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<sup>39</sup> Morrell, "Whatever Happened To...Jazzberry's?"

<sup>40</sup> "About Me," Deaf Roots and Wings, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://deafrootsandwings.com/>

<sup>41</sup> "About Me."

of belonging ultimately find employment and stay – taking advantage of being among their own as much as possible. Not only are services (such as interpreting agencies or audiology clinics) abundant, but the existence of the deaf community is widely acknowledged as a fact of life in Rochester.

As evidenced by the locations I have curated and discussed, the deaf community has a prominent place in Rochester’s history – and the history of the deaf community itself is fascinating. I hope for users of this tour to take away a sense of the pride and significance of Rochester’s deaf community in American Deaf history.

## **VII. Tour Text**

### **a. Rochester School for the Deaf**

The Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD) can be considered the roots of the Rochester Deaf Community, as it is the first designated site for the deaf in the Rochester's history, and is still in operation today.

Originally founded as the Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes, the name was changed to the Rochester School for the Deaf in 1920. It is located on 1545 St. Paul Street. Because this is a private residential school, visitors should contact the school through email or videophone to arrange a visit. The RSD Museum and Archives are located within Perkins Hall.

In October, there is an annual “Adventures in Education” lecture series that draws hundreds of deaf and hearing individuals to the campus. For more information, visit the RSD website at [rsdeaf.org](http://rsdeaf.org).

## **b. National Technical Institute for the Deaf**

The National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) was created by an act of Congress and approved by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 – who also happens to be the man that the main building at NTID is named after. Prior to the existence of NTID, the only other college for the deaf in the nation was Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C.

Two places worth visiting within NTID are the Joseph F. and Helen C. Dyer Arts Center, plus the Robert F. Panara Theatre.

The Joseph F. and Helen C. Dyer Arts Center resulted from a leadership gift from the two long-time supporters of NTID that it was named after in 2001. It is a beautiful modern art gallery that includes two floors and three gallery spaces. In addition to exhibitions, the Dyer Arts Center also hosts art-related educational activities and serves as a multi-use facility on the Rochester Institute of Technology campus.

The Robert F. Panara Theatre was named after NTID's first Deaf professor and founder of the NTID Drama Club, Dr. Robert Panara. The theatre was opened in 1974, and has since hosted many culturally relevant and popular guest artists – including Jane Fonda, Marlee Matlin, the National Theatre of the Deaf, and Bernard Bragg.

The theatre seats 466 people and produces work in a wide variety of theatre styles with works by both deaf and hearing authors. The Panara Theatre also produced the first-ever “American Deaf Play Creators Festival.

**c. Mount Hope Cemetery**

Mount Hope Cemetery, dedicated in 1838, is located at 113 Mount Hope Avenue. It is situated on 196 acres of hills and valleys, which were formed by glaciers.

Mount Hope Cemetery is home to the gravesites of some children of the Rochester School for the Deaf, back when it was still called the Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes. The plot, purchased by Zenas F. Westervelt, is located at cemetery roads Oak Avenue and Woodland Avenue, lot number 123. Only three children have marked graves.

The cemetery is also home to the Perkins family gravesites, which is the wealthy family who pushed for the establishment of the Rochester School for the Deaf for the sake of their deaf daughter, Carolyn Erickson Perkins. It is called the Erickson plot (Erickson family members have the front of the plot, the Perkins family members have the back), and is located in lot 166.

**d. Jazzberry's**

Jazzberry's was a lively café owned by Susan Plunkett, and opened in 1984 at its first location within the Genesee Co-Op building on Monroe Avenue and near Rutgers – which used to be an old firehouse. It was the site of many ASL Poetry nights in the 1980s, enabling the local ASL Poetry scene to flourish. While Jazzberry's is no longer in business

Plunkett now has a catering service – Susan Plunkett’s Fabulous Foods in Henrietta.

**e. Deaf Roots and Wings**

Deaf Roots and Wings is a yoga practice owned by Dorothy M. Wilkins, who has been teaching yoga for more than 18 years and is Deaf herself.<sup>42</sup> While the location has been varied throughout the years, she is currently renting Molly’s Yoga Studio within the Genesse Co-Op building from Molly Huff off of Monroe Avenue. Deaf Roots and Wings. It is located within the same building that Jazzberry’s used to be.

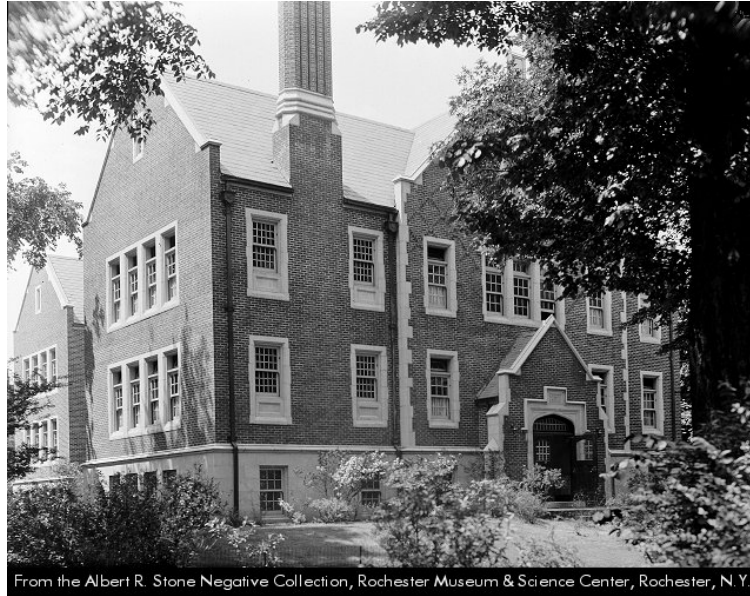
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<sup>42</sup> “Deaf Roots and Wings,” Deaf Roots and Wings, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://deafrootsandwings.com/>



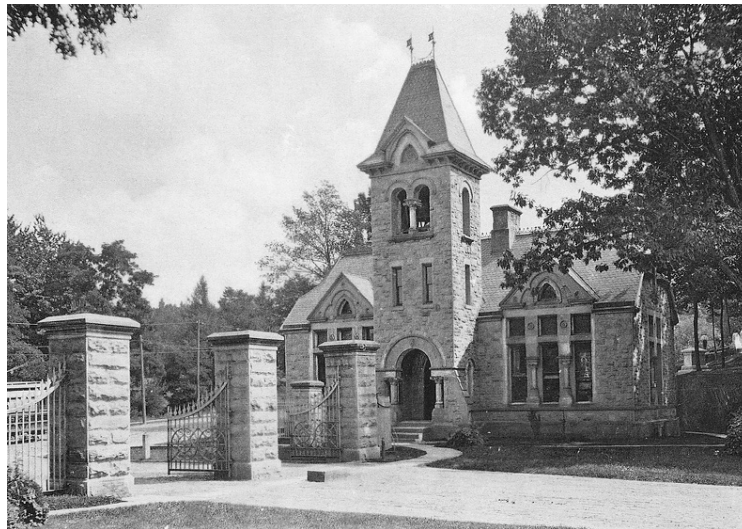
## VIII. List of images

### Rochester School for the Deaf – Circa 1930



*Image Source:* Albert R. Stone Negative Collection, Rochester Museum & Science Center

### Mount Hope Cemetery - 1896



*Image source:* <http://mcnygenealogy.com/pics/index.php?/category/69>

**a. The National Technical Institute for the Deaf - 1974**



*Image source:* The RIT Archives & Special Collections

**b. Jazzberry's (with owner Susan Plunkett) – Circa 1980s**



*Image source:*

<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/story/news/local/rocroots/2014/12/23/whatever-happened-jazzberrys/20837395/>

**c. Deaf Roots and Wings (and Jazzberry's) – Circa 1900s**



*Image source:*

The City Government of Rochester, N.Y. /Municipal Archives

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