

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Articles

Faculty & Staff Scholarship

11-1976

The Deaf in America: Two Hundred Years of Progress

Robert Panara

Rochester Institute of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/article>

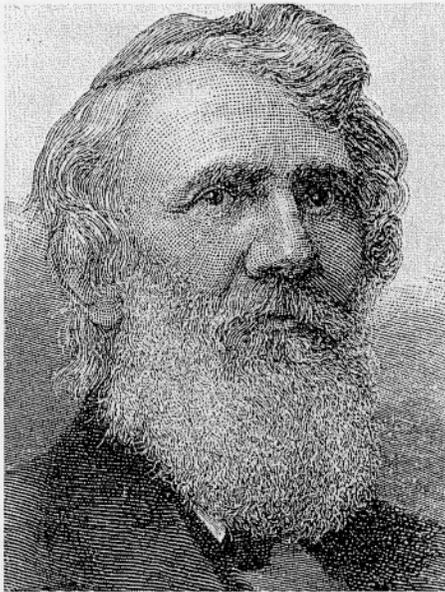
Recommended Citation

Panara, Robert, "The Deaf in America: Two Hundred Years of Progress" (1976). *NTID Focus*, pg. 4-7.

Accessed from

<https://repository.rit.edu/article/318>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.



John Carlin, an outstanding deaf painter and poet of the early 1800's.



Laura C. Redden, a famed deaf writer of the late 1800's.

Undoubtedly, human judgement was still influenced by Aristotle, and America's deaf might have continued to dwell in the dungeons of despair had there not occurred in 1776 a revolution of wholesome dissent which strove to bring about a new understanding of the dignity of man.

A young clergyman possessed such faith in the human spirit. **Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet** of Hartford, Conn., founded the first free school for the deaf in America in 1817 in Hartford. In this, his life's work, he was assisted by a deaf teacher named **Laurent Clerc**.

Gallaudet had gone to Paris to learn the most advanced method of instructing the deaf at the Royal Institute for Deaf-Mutes, founded in 1769 by the Abbé de l'Epée. While there, Gallaudet met the brilliant deaf teacher, Laurent Clerc, who taught him sign language and methods of teaching the deaf. Gallaudet realized that Clerc had the expertise and "the deaf experience" to help him fulfill his mission of teaching the deaf in America, and he offered Clerc the opportunity to become his assistant.

The story of how Laurent Clerc journeyed to the land of promises where he became the first deaf teacher of the deaf still serves as a model for countless others who have followed the American dream of fulfillment through opportunity. Their struggle to overcome the realities of deafness and contribute to the development of America is an affirmation of the faith of our forefathers in the American promise of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In many diverse areas of life, the deaf American has left an imprint in the arts and sciences, in education and industry, in law and government, in sports and entertainment. Quite often, too, these success stories follow the same pattern as that of their normal hearing counterparts.

A brief sampling of some notable achievements may illustrate the diversity of achievements by deaf Americans.

Painting and Sculpture

Deaf from birth in 1813, **John Carlin** graduated from the Mt. Airy School for the Deaf (Philadelphia) at the age of 12. Beginning as a sign and house painter, he studied every night at home, mastering art history, English and five foreign languages. After saving enough money, he went to Europe to study art. Eventually he became an outstanding painter of portraits of such celebrities as William Seward, Horace Greeley, Hamilton Fish, and Jefferson Davis. The first known deaf person to

The Deaf in America: Two Hundred Years of Progress

by Robert F. Panara

In 1943, Dr. Harry Best published *Deafness and the Deaf in the United States*, a definitive study of the handicap of deafness and the achievements of the deaf in America. In this comprehensive work, the noted sociologist concluded with a genuine tribute "to the most misunderstood among the sons of men and the gamest of them all."

There was an historical basis for such an evaluation inasmuch as, more than 2,500 years earlier, Aristotle wrote that "the ear is the organ of education" and that the deaf lacked the ability to reason, much less to learn to read and write. It proved to be a damaging assessment which was echoed by many later writers, among them Lucretius of Rome whose classic couplet summed up the judgement of antiquity:

"To instruct the deaf no art could ever reach,
No care improve them and no wisdom teach."

These attitudes even influenced the popular belief throughout the succeeding ages of Christianity and the Renaissance, despite occasional evidences of "a success story"—of a deaf-mute, usually from the wealthy aristocracy, who was educated by intensive private tutoring and eventually "restored to society."

However, people generally greeted achievements by deaf individuals with skepticism or else regarded the phenomena as the work of charlatans.



Education

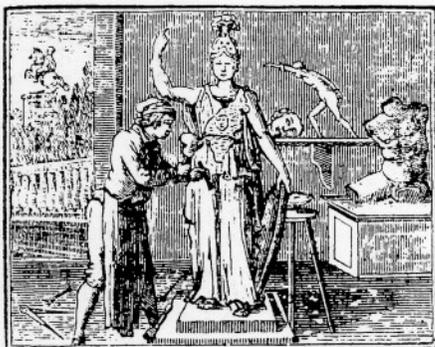
The first record in America of an attempt to teach the deaf was in Rowley, Mass., in 1699 when a man named **Philip Nelson** tried to teach the art of speech to a "deaf and dumb boy," Isaac Kilbourn. Quite naturally, Nelson's work "seemed such an extraordinary thing that the ministers of the community . . . made an investigation, fearing that witches might be involved in the affair."

compose excellent poetry, his work was praised by William Cullen Bryant. Mr. Carlin was also a prolific writer whose articles on architecture, geology



and ecology were published in leading newspapers: He was the first deaf person in America to be awarded with an honorary degree from Gallaudet College (1865), and, quite appropriately, he painted the first portrait of Laurent Clerc, one of his teachers.

Douglas Tilden was born in 1860 and became deaf at the age of five. Upon graduating from the California School for the Deaf (Berkeley), he taught art and sculpture at the school. Awarded a grant by the Board of Directors, he studied sculpture in Paris and soon attracted the attention of his peers. His famed *Bear Hunt*, now on the campus of the Berkeley School, was exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair (1893), after which he set up his own studio in San Francisco. His sculptures attracted the attention of Senator James D. Phelan, who became Mr. Tilden's patron. Among his famous pieces are three sculptures standing in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park



today, the famed *Football Players* on the campus of the University of California and the celebrated group figures, *The Mechanics*, in Market Street Plaza, San Francisco. Tilden also served as professor of sculpture at the University of California and at St. Mary's College, Oakland.

Cadwallader Washburn was born in 1866 and became totally deaf at age five, later attending the Minnesota School for the Deaf. He graduated from Gallaudet College and then studied architecture at M.I.T., after which he began a career of art under William H. Chase, New York City, and studied with Sorolla in Madrid and Besnard in Paris. An outstanding oil painter, he eventually became known as one of the world's best dry-point etchers. His etchings have been compared to the works of Rembrandt and Whistler. Critics claim his portraits illumine the eyes as "windows of the soul," such as characterized by his *Buddhist Priest*, Mexican and Indian portraits, and the Mallorca subjects such as *Introspection*, *The Smuggler*, and *The Matriarch*. *Who's Who* (1955) listed museums all over the world where Mr. Washburn's etchings are permanently exhibited, and when he died at the age of 99, the obituaries recognized him as "the dean of American etchers."



Hillis Arnold, born in 1910, became totally deaf at age 6, attended Minneapolis public schools and graduated from Minneapolis Central High School. He graduated from the University of Minnesota, "cum laude," attended the Minneapolis School of Art and the Cranbrook Academy of Art, where he studied under the famed Swedish sculptor, Carl Milles, whom he assisted with the renowned fountain display, *The Wedding of the Rivers*, located opposite Union Station, the St. Louis (Mo.) railroad terminal. Mr. Arnold has painted the 250-foot murals in the great hall of engineering, University of Minnesota; his World War II memorial is an impressive limestone shaft, 32 feet high, rising from the Aloe Plaza in downtown St. Louis; his *Manifest Destiny* is a giant wooden eagle, with a five-foot wing spread, in the museum of Westward Expansion under the St. Louis Gateway Arch. Arnold has also pioneered the use of plastic aluminum techniques in some of his sculptures. The United States Information Agency selected one of his angels made from

polyester resin for the exhibit "Plastics, USA" in Leningrad. Recognized as one of America's finest sculptors today, Arnold recently retired after teaching sculpture at Monticello College (Ill.) for more than 30 years.



Literature and Journalism

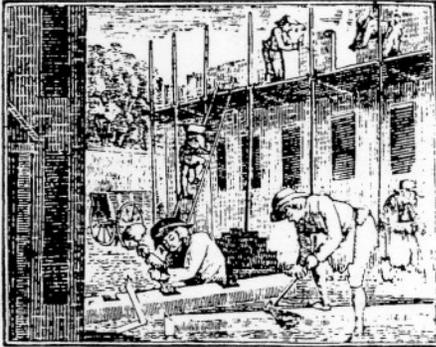
Laura C. Redden, born in 1840, became totally deaf at the age of eleven, after which she attended and graduated from the Missouri School for the Deaf. A self-made journalist, this first deaf "libber" received her opportunity to break into print from the *St. Louis Republican*. She served as a correspondent for that newspaper during the Civil War.

Writing under the pen name of "Howard Glyndon," she wrote in an easy, informal style about people, places, politics, and books. Her article, "Notable Men of the House of Representatives," was widely discussed, and some of her patrons for her first book of poems, *Idylls of Battle* (1865), included President Lincoln, Gen. Grant, and Gen. Garfield. After the Civil War, Ms. Redden toured Europe while still serving as a correspondent for the *Republican* and *N.Y. Times*—doing most of her reporting via pad and pencil communication.



Many of her articles appeared in leading magazines such as *Harper's* and *Galaxy*. In 1873, her second book of poems *Sounds From Secret Chambers* appeared, followed by an autobiographical novel, *Echoes of Other Days* (1878).

William W. Beadell, who attended the New Jersey School for the Deaf and graduated from Gallaudet College (1885), was also a successful journalist and publisher. He became editor and owner of *The Arlington* (N.J.) *Observer* which for many years was "a kingmaker of the state politics." Mr. Beadell was the first to develop the "Want Ad Page," which made many editors and publishers beat a pathway to his door to learn his techniques.



Architecture and Engineering

Thomas S. Marr, a graduate of the Tennessee School for the Deaf and Gallaudet College (1889), studied architecture at various schools but was mostly self-educated. He designed the largest hotel of his day in Nashville, as well as several other public buildings and numerous other edifices in the South. His "considerable works of excellence are now published in architectural handbooks that are required study in Southern colleges."

Robert Carr Wall graduated in 1885 from the Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf where he was considered "a mechanical genius." He developed "the first safe bicycle Philadelphia had ever seen." These bicycles featured two standard sized wheels instead of the "high wheelers" then in vogue, which were considered hazardous. In 1904, officials of the Packard Auto Co. asked Mr. Wall to build a rattle-proof windshield which proved so satisfactory that he later built all the windshields for Packard.

Kenneth L. Cobb graduated from the Malone School for the Deaf (N.Y.) and from Gallaudet College (1943). A self-made draftsman, he was employed as a machinist specialist in the giant IBM plant at Binghamton, N.Y., where he became an expert "trouble shooter," and he later advanced to supervisor.

A highly regarded consultant, his assignments carried him to Tokyo where he headed a task force in "locating suitable business sites and assembling complicated equipment," later doing the same in Australia and other Asian centers.

Business and Industry

Jean Wolverton graduated from Gallaudet College (1919) and eventually entered the business world as a marketing analyst. She became a highly valued expert in this field with Hearst Publications, and her "rare business judgement was instrumental in the expanding newspaper empire of William Randolph Hearst."

Samuel A. Block graduated from P.S. 47 and DeWitt Clinton High School in New York City and won a scholarship to City College of New York where he graduated in 1932 with a bachelor's degree in business administration. Mr. Block had a long and distinguished career in public service as a statistician and became chief of the retirement and analysis section of the Railroad Retirement Board, Office of Research, Chicago.



Anson R. Spear graduated from the Minnesota School for the Deaf (1878) and spent a year at Gallaudet College, leaving for financial reasons to become a post office clerk. He advanced to head clerk in Minneapolis and then left to go into business for himself through his invention and patenting of the "Spear Safety Envelope." His business, the Spear Safety Envelope Co., prospered for many years in Minneapolis and employed many deaf workers.

Bruce Clary attended the Rochester (N.Y.) School for the Deaf in the 1930's where he learned the machinist's trade. He took the long route through the "college of hard knocks" to become a master machinist. He founded the P & C Screw Machine Products in Los Angeles less than five years ago, starting in a garage with two machines.



P & C in 1974 had \$3.5 million in orders and 62 employees, the largest business ever founded, managed and operated by the deaf. Working under a management contract with the Department of Defense, Mr. Clary recently "took over a large production facility with more than 200 metal working machines, where he hopes to employ at least 1,000 people. Nine tenths of them, from janitors to vice presidents, will be deaf. If we can do it, others can."

Emergence

Deaf Americans have come a long way since they first began to learn "the three R's," less than 200 years ago. From the dungeon of darkness, they have emerged. However, like most minority groups, they still have the problem of integrating with the mainstream of society. Indeed, the problem goes even deeper because it involves the barrier of communication which isolates the deaf from the rest of society. This communication "wall" not only prevents the deaf from communicating freely with others, but it also blocks out those channels of popular communicating which characterize the life-blood and life-style of modern man—the telephone, the radio, television and "talking pictures" or movies.

The deaf, nevertheless, continue to be undaunted. They are proud of their American heritage, and they have implicit faith in the American promise of better tomorrows. Even now, on the bicentennial of our country's progress, there are hopeful signs that they may yet succeed in "breaking the sound barrier." This is the outcome of such recent technological breakthroughs as the TTY, the Vistaphone, and captioned TV programs.

Fittingly, it was a deaf physicist, **Dr. Robert H. Weitbrecht**, who made possible direct telephone communication by the deaf through the use of discarded Western Union teletypewriters. Dr. Weitbrecht's invention of the Terminal Unit (TU) in 1964, an acoustic coupler which activated transmission of printed messages or communication via telephone linkage, might be likened to Bell's pioneering invention. The proliferation of TTY's soon followed with the organization of Teletypewriters for the Deaf, Inc. (TDI), spearheaded by two deaf leaders—**Dr. H. Latham Breunig**, its executive director since 1968 and past president of the Oral Deaf Adults Section of the Alexander Graham Bell Association of the Deaf, and **Jess M. Smith**, past president of the National Association of the Deaf and editor of its national magazine. The rapidly developing network of TTY's today includes an *International TTY Directory* and over 5,000 individual member users, plus an estimated 3,000 additional stations.

The Vistaphone (see *NTID Focus*, Sept.-Oct., 1973), offers still better possibilities for mass utilization of



telephone communication by the deaf, because it features spontaneous visual communication via television images. Manufactured by Stromberg-Carlson Co. of Rochester, N.Y., these "picture-telephones" have been used by the National Technical Institute for the Deaf on a trial basis since 1969. With 27 units in continuous operation over the huge campus shared jointly with Rochester Institute of Technology, they have added an entirely new dimension in business and personal communications for deaf persons. Better still, they can express themselves independently and relate more positively to the hearing world.

The implications of mass TV utilization by deaf viewers are tremendous. In Rochester, N.Y., Public Broadcasting Station WXXI (TV-21) initiated "News for the Deaf" in March, 1972, featuring live presentations of the nationally televised "ABC Evening News" via skilled interpreters from NTID. Eventually, this program was superseded by the "Captioned Evening News Program" of Boston's WGBH-TV which now captions and rebroadcasts at 11:00 p.m. the regular 6:00 p.m. program with Harry Reasoner and Barbara Walters.



The WGBH-TV "Captioned Evening News" and other special programs for the deaf are funded by Media Services and Captioned Films, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, the divisional chief of which is an outstanding deaf man, **Dr. Malcolm J. Norwood**.

In a continuing effort to provide deaf viewers with the same kind of input and pleasure derived by hearing consumers of popular and educational TV programs, Captioned Films has initiated experiments which make it possible for captions to be broadcast but only seen by viewers with TV sets equipped with a special decoder. This device, called the "NBS TV Time System" (National Bureau of Standards invention), may realize a low cost method of televising *all* videotaped programs. It may also prove "the be-all and the end-all" of the deaf American's quest of equal opportunity, of educational and cultural parity with hearing peers.

And, in this time of technological plenty, the promise of better tomorrows looks very bright indeed.



Robert F. Panara, professor of English and drama in NTID's Experimental Educational Theatre, was the first deaf person to join the professional staff of NTID in 1967.

An educator of wide experience, Mr. Panara earned his bachelor's degree from Gallaudet College; his master's at

New York University; and has done doctoral studies at Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Panara began his teaching career in 1945 at New York School for the Deaf in White Plains. He later served as associate professor of English at Gallaudet.

The methods of teaching literature and drama to the deaf have been the topics of his numerous published articles.

Materials quoted are from the following references:

Best, Harry. *The Deaf*, Crowell, N.Y., 1914.

Best, Harry. *Deafness & the Deaf in the U.S.*, Macmillan, N.Y., 1943.

Burnes, Byron B. "History of the Education of the Deaf to 1815," *A Handbook of Readings in Education of the Deaf* (Irving Fushfeld, ed.), Thomas Publ., Springfield, Ill., 1967.

Panara, Robert F. "The Deaf Writer in America," *American Annals of the Deaf*, Sept., 1970.

Runde, Winfield S. "Douglas Tilden, Sculptor," *Silent Worker*, Dec., 1952.

Kowalewski, Felix. "The Deaf in Art," *Silent Worker*, Oct., 1954.

Kowalewski, Felix. "Hillis Arnold: American Deaf Sculptor," *The Deaf American*, Nov., 1972.

Higgins, Francis. "The Pioneering Spirit of the Deaf," *O.A.D. News* (Ontario Assn. of the Deaf), Jan.-Feb., 1969.

Atwood, Albert W. *Gallaudet College: Its First One Hundred Years*, Gallaudet Press, Washington, 1964.

Braddock, Guilbert C. *Notable Deaf Persons* (Florence Crammatte, ed.), Gallaudet Press, Washington, 1975.

Schiller, Ronald. "The Lonely World of Silence," *Reader's Digest*, Aug., 1974.