SEEING GRACE: RELIGIOUS RHETORIC IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY

by

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__________________________
Tracy Ann Morse
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DEDICATION

In memory of my friend, Murry.
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ABSTRACT

The author argues that religion has provided the deaf community with a powerful language to convey their authority in struggles to preserve sign language. Employing religious rhetoric, the American deaf community historically overcame the oppression of a dominant hearing community that suppressed the use of sign language. Grounding his arguments for educating deaf Americans in his Protestant theology, the Reverend Thomas Gallaudet garnered support for the school by appealing to the Christian convictions of the citizens of Hartford—intertwining Protestantism with the emerging American deaf community.

By exploring the school, sanctuary, and social activism of the American deaf community, the author provides evidence of deaf community rhetoric that includes religious themes and biblical references. For example, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, arguments for methods of how to teach deaf students divided on ideological grounds. Manualists who supported the use of sign language often grounded their arguments in Protestant theology, while oralists who were influenced by Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* grounded arguments in evolutionary thinking.

The influence of biblical teachings was evident in the schools for the deaf. The chapel services perpetuated the use of sign language even in times when sign language was under attack. From these chapel services came a social purpose for the church sanctuary in the lives of deaf Americans in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. The sanctuary also provided the deaf community with a political platform advocating sign language use. The social activism of the deaf community has taken on
many forms. In the early twentieth century, the National Association of the Deaf president, George Veditz, used film to capture his fiery *Preservation of the Sign Language*, which is filled with religious rhetoric advocating the deaf community’s use of sign language. More recently, Deaf West Theatre’s production of *Big River* is an example of how artful expression is used to support the values of the deaf community.

This dissertation concludes with the suggestion that technology has replaced many of the functions of religion in the lives of deaf Americans and the author encourages further research in specific areas.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

When I was a child growing up in the 1970s, Sunday mornings in my house had a routine. My brother and I would watch Popeye cartoons for as long as we could until we had to get ready for church. While we were cleaning up and changing, my mother or father would change the TV channel to a televised church service. When I was ready to go to church, I would go back and sit in front of the TV until it was time to leave. I didn’t watch the preacher standing behind the pulpit, but I did watch the sign language interpreter sharing the screen. My first exposure to the deaf community in America was through a sign language interpreter in the little bubble on the right side of the screen interpreting a sermon delivered by a Baptist minister.

I continued to be exposed to the deaf community at the schools I attended. As a hearing student in public school during the 1970s and 1980s, I sat in classes experiencing the results of Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act, now called Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]). In 1975, PL 94-142 was passed by Congress. In order for schools to receive federal funding, the law stated that they must develop and implement policies that assure a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all children with disabilities. For many deaf and hard of hearing students this

1 Throughout this dissertation the phrase “deaf community” refers to not only Deaf people—those who use American Sign Language and share common cultural values, traditions, and social patterns—but also hearing participants, such as friends or relatives, and deaf people—those who have a physical hearing loss but may not subscribe to the values of Deaf culture—who are active in the community.
meant attempts at mainstreaming that were often unsuccessful. In the well-known *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*, Carol A. Padden and Tom Humphries note that “[t]he idea of ‘integrating the handicapped’ with the larger population has an inherent attraction, but the mainstreaming movement has caused disruptions in the education of deaf children” (115). At its inception (and even today), mainstreaming took on a variety of appearances in public schools. For some schools, one deaf student sitting in the front row of a classroom trying to read the lips of the teacher was considered a mainstreaming program. For other public schools, more elaborate systems were created to include multiple deaf students in classes with an interpreter sitting in the front of the classroom signing all verbal communication.

I went to mainstreamed schools. The schools I attended housed the programs for all deaf and hearing impaired students in the entire southeast Los Angeles county area (the program was typically referred to as SELACO, usually pronounced as one word). At the schools I attended, deaf students, often in clusters of threes, sat in the front rows of math, science, and occasionally history or geography classes. One interpreter sat off to the side in the front of the class signing for the teacher and voicing for the deaf students. I never saw deaf students in English classes, which I assumed were held separately from the classes of hearing students. In the case at the schools I attended, mainstreaming did not mean deaf and hearing students were together in every class in every subject. Deaf students may have had language and English classes separate from hearing English classes. On the campuses of the schools I attended, there were temporary buildings that housed the SELACO program. Offices, classrooms, and open areas were in these
“trailers.” Because I attended mainstreamed schools, I had the chance to take sign language classes as elective credits as early as the sixth grade (the other schools in our district did not offer sign language classes). A few of my friends and I took sign language classes in junior high school so we could better communicate with the SELACO students in our classes (and talk with each other in class without making noise and getting in trouble). As part of the sign language classes, we often visited the “trailers” to “perform” songs in sign language for the deaf students and their teachers and interpreters. I didn’t know about or understand then all the educational and sociological complexities involved in mainstreaming. I just knew that through junior high school and high school that I could communicate with the deaf students in my math classes with the little bit of sign language I learned in the sixth grade.

Mainstreaming is criticized for many reasons. For example, some argued that when PL 94-142 was passed, money and students were taken away from residential schools that served deaf students. Padden and Humphries claim, “[w]ithin a decade under this law, residential schools that had once enrolled as many as five hundred children found themselves with as few as one hundred and fifty” (116). Fewer state funds supporting residential programs of course meant fewer students attending residential schools. Besides having an economic impact, mainstreaming has been criticized for having a sociological impact on the deaf community. Deaf students attending public schools may not have interaction with any other deaf individuals, especially deaf adults who could become role models or mentors. Mainstreamed deaf students may never learn anything about Deaf culture, including American Sign
Language (ASL), a key marker identifying American Deaf culture. As theories of educating deaf children have evolved, many mainstreaming programs have changed to incorporate an introduction to Deaf culture. A bilingual-bicultural approach to educating deaf children does not ignore the language and culture of Deaf people as many mainstreaming programs do. In *Language Choice Reflects Identity Choice: A Sociolinguistic Study of Deaf College Students*, Barbara Kannapell argues that schools should reinforce a positive deaf identity by offering students an educational system that is both bilingual and bicultural (302). Such a program would require more involvement from the deaf community in the role of educating deaf children. As Kannapell points out, “at present, its role [. . .] is minimal” (306). This is in contrast to historical evidence demonstrating that it was through the involvement of deaf educators, ministers, and leaders that a deaf community emerged.

My early introduction to the deaf community in America connected religious rhetoric with sign language. Little did I know that many years later I would examine the use of religious rhetoric by members of the deaf community to preserve and support sign language, and thus the deaf community. In this dissertation, I argue that religion has provided the deaf community with a powerful language to convey their authority in struggles to preserve sign language. For this dissertation, I define “rhetoric” as the use of language to influence thoughts and behaviors. Religious rhetoric is then the use of language that has the features of religious themes, metaphors, and biblical references, to influence the thoughts and behaviors of audiences. The examples of religious rhetoric explored in this project are products of an evangelical Protestant belief system, or
Christian theology, grounded in the gospels. The main works I will analyze are sermons and speeches of deaf community leaders and narratives of deaf community members. These works are historical and contemporary, sacred and secular, collected from Gallaudet University’s archives, and published sources. I borrow from Norman Fairclough aspects of a method of discourse analysis. In *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, Fairclough claims that critical discourse analysis is “an analytical framework [. . .] for studying language in its relation to power and ideology” (1). I show that the American deaf community has employed religious rhetoric to overcome the oppression of a dominant hearing community that suppressed the use of sign language or that continues to not recognize the value of sign language to the deaf community.

To offer a foundation for the use of religious rhetoric by the deaf community, in this chapter I present an analysis of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet’s use of religious rhetoric in the 1817 opening address of the first American school for deaf students in Connecticut. Through this analysis, I show the intersection of education for deaf Americans and Protestant missionary efforts to convert the deaf. Through religious rhetoric, Gallaudet constructed arguments for the education of a group of people who would later be identified as a deaf community, most recognizable by their use of sign language. Before examining Gallaudet’s sermon, I review contemporary scholarship in deaf studies that alludes to the connection the American deaf community has with Protestantism, mainly through education. My work builds on this scholarship by exploring the continued use of religious rhetoric by the deaf community to support sign language. I also review some
recent scholarship in rhetoric that focuses on other contexts for religious rhetoric such as works by Mountford, Daniell, and Mattingly. My work participates in this new scholarship by locating religious rhetoric, which is often disregarded, within the deaf community.

**The Disregarded Intersections of Deafness, Religion, and Rhetoric**

Many contemporary scholars have explored the history of deaf education in America (Lane; Van Cleve and Crouch; Baynton; Burch). While some works focus more on the inception of deaf education, others have focused on the debates over the use of sign language (Winefield; Baynton). However, the analysis of the religious rhetoric used by members of the deaf community to argue for the preservation of sign language is not prominently featured in these works and does not offer any contemporary examples of where this still occurs. Much of the recent scholarship that has focused on contemporary issues in the deaf community usually examines the debates regarding methods of educating deaf students such as, mainstreaming, immersion, and bilingual-bicultural teaching environments; most noted is Ramsey’s work, *Deaf Children in Public Schools: Placement, Context, and Consequences*. Some well-known works like *How You Gonna Get to Heaven if You Can’t Talk with Jesus: On Depathologizing Deafness* by James Woodward, imply a connection between religion and deaf education, but mainly explore why “[h]earing society in the U.S. has been slow to give up the idea of Deaf people as pathological handicapped individuals” (1).
The historical intersection of faith and deaf education has been alluded to in some works in deaf studies. In *Benedictine Roots in the Development of Deaf Education: Listening with the Heart*, Marilyn Daniels claims that “the nature and quality of instruction for the education of deaf individuals has been shaped by common behavioral attitudes and ideals” and that those attitudes and ideals are “in harmony with Benedictine ideals” (97). While Daniels claims Gallaudet saw the intelligence of deaf people, she does not explain how his role as a Protestant minister influenced his role as educator. Her claim is that like many educators of deaf students who came before him—Pedro Ponce de León, Juan Pablo Bonet, and Charles Michael de l’Epée—Gallaudet was a man of faith who valued the language and needs of deaf people. However, it was Gallaudet’s Congregational, not Catholic, convictions that shaped him as a benevolent educator. Gallaudet’s support of the deaf to be educated and learn their own language was directly related to his evangelical Protestant theology. In *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, historian of Christian theology, Mark A. Noll provides this explanation of “evangelicalism”:

> The most serviceable general definition for this modern evangelicalism has been provided by the British historian David W. Bebbington. It stresses four characteristics: biblicalism (or reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), conversionism (or an emphasis on the new birth), activism (or energetic, individualistic engagement in personal and social duties), and crucicentrism (or focus on Christ’s redeeming work as the heart of true religion). (5)

Gallaudet subscribed to this evangelicalism by believing that the gospels of the Bible were true and that it was his duty as a servant of God to teach and convert others. Gallaudet’s education at Andover Theological Seminary stressed the importance of
“spreading the gospel” (Noll A History 186). For Gallaudet, the deaf were lost souls who needed to be taught the importance of the Bible and the gospel message of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. Gallaudet wanted to convert deaf Americans through a common language of signs that they would learn at the first permanent school for the Deaf.

Like Daniels, many scholars acknowledge the presence of Protestant religion at the 1817 inception of the American School for the Deaf in Connecticut, but they do not examine in depth the impact this presence has had and continues to have, on the deaf community. One significant impact that is highlighted in some studies is the historical role of religion, through deaf church leaders and ministries, in the survival of sign language. In her dissertation “Biding the Time: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II,” historian Susan Burch mentions that religious leaders were effective in the deaf community. Burch notes, “Deaf religious organizations commanded attention at conferences and in Deaf periodicals, and provided a source of considerable cultural pride for Deaf people” (“Biding” 32). I expand on Burch’s work by specifically exploring the religious rhetoric that played a major part in sustaining sign language.

At Deaf churches or state school chapels, the sanctuary became a place where signing flourished even in the middle of debates on oralism. Historian Douglas C. Baynton contends that religion played a significant role in these debates. In Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language, Baynton claims that while there were similarities between the oralists and manualists’ views of deaf people as outsiders, they divided by secular and Christian beliefs ideologically. For oralists, the

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2 The oral method of teaching encompassed the use of speech and lip reading to communicate without the use of sign language.
deaf community threatened a unified national identity. Baynton notes, “[o]ralists likened
the deaf community to a community of immigrants. They charged that the use of sign
language encouraged deaf people to associate principally with each other and to avoid the
hard work of learning to communicate in spoken English” (16). Oralists charged that “no
gesturer [could] become an American” (27). Deaf people could not become full citizens
because they would not have evolved beyond gestural language, according to oralists.
Oralists could not conceive of a deaf American who uses sign language as fully
integrated into American society. For oralists, sign language use equated to a lower
stature, a lower class, or an outsider status.

On the other hand, manualists often argued that gestural language came before
speech. For some evangelical Protestants, the biblical account of the creation of man was
interpreted to suggest

that God had originally given humans the capacity for language and had left them to develop that capacity themselves over time. Of those who believed that language developed over time, many argued that some form of gesture or sign language must have been used before spoken language.[. . .] To the manualist generation, “original language” meant “closer to
the Creation.” (Baynton 39-40)

According to Baynton, manualists viewed the use of sign language as a way of
demonstrating a deaf person’s closeness to God. Baynton’s work, like Burch’s, is
important because it highlights the role religion had in an aspect of life for the deaf
community of early America. Specifically, Baynton’s work demonstrates that religious
rhetoric was used among manualists to debate their stance on deaf education. Baynton’s
work is invaluable for understanding the ideological differences between the manualists
and oralists. His work suggests the importance of focusing on the role of religion in
advocacy for sign language and studying the continued role of religious rhetoric in the deaf community.

Since founding the American School for the Deaf, Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc are often referred to as the fathers of deaf education in America. Gallaudet, a hearing minister, influenced Clerc, a deaf Catholic, who later converted to Protestantism. Gallaudet and Clerc’s strong religious examples influenced many deaf community leaders who came after them. Like Gallaudet and Clerc, superintendents and teachers at residential schools typically were educated for the ministry or in some cases left the school to become ministers. For example, Olof Hanson, a deaf leader and community activist in the early twentieth century, became an Episcopal minister after careers in architecture and deaf education. For many students at these residential schools, the ministers who delivered the chapel services in sign language were the only deaf role models they had, and these ministers strongly shaped the moral behavior of the students. As deaf community leaders emerged in the twentieth century, many were either ministers or strongly involved in churches that ministered to the deaf community. These leaders would have a strong impact on the intertwining of Protestantism and the deaf community’s advocacy for sign language.

Burch’s assessment of religious influences in the deaf community examines the early twentieth century. I build on Burch’s work by extending my examination of the deaf community to include contemporary examples of where religious themes or references are used by the deaf community to advocate sign language use. I also embrace the three specific areas she uses for examination: the school, the sanctuary, and the social
activism of the deaf community. I examine how these areas have been and are locations where religious rhetoric has been employed to advocate the use and preservation of sign language. I build on Baynton and Burch’s works to include the experience and rhetoric of contemporary deaf Americans.

Religion plays an important part in the history of all Americans. But, for the most part, religion has been widely ignored in the scholarship of the humanities. In *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, Roxanne Mountford suggests that “[a]voidance of religious subjects, no matter how important to cultural history, has prevailed in the humanities for much of the twentieth century” (12). In the field of rhetoric, there have been few significant publications that remind us that the importance of religion and spiritual matters in general are tied to the life experiences of many Americans. In her work, Mountford explores contemporary women preachers in the context of traditionally masculine, Protestant rhetorical space. Mountford shows how these women preachers connect with their congregations through the delivery of sermons that reconfigure the space of the pulpit and the expectations of their gender. The location of Mountford’s work is the sanctuary and much of the evidence Mountford analyzes are sermons and other religious rhetoric. Recognizing the significance of religion to studies in rhetoric, I would like to add to the tradition of Mountford’s scholarship by exploring the cultural connection religion has held with the American deaf community’s discourse related to the advocacy of sign language.

For many communities, religion or spirituality is a significant bond holding the members together. In *A Communion of Friendship: Literacy, Spiritual Practice, and*
Women of Recovery, Beth Daniell explores an often overlooked population that reads and writes for spiritual development. Daniell reminds her readers that spiritual experiences are significant to many individuals, like the five Mountain City women highlighted in her project. For the women in Daniell’s book, experiences with Al-Anon, “a self-help organization for families and friends of alcoholics,” provided them with opportunities to engage in reading and writing (3). Their engagement with language led them to grow spiritually and emotionally and to form a community (1). Daniell’s work explores the intersection of religion and literacy. In her first chapter, Daniell recounts an experience she had at the Conference on College Composition. She heard Ann Berthoff explain “that Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed comes not just from his Marxism but from his Catholicism as well” (19). Influenced by the connection of Freire’s work with theology, Daniell offers rhetoric and composition the idea that literacy work can tap into something beyond the student, the teacher, or the reader (19). Like the women in Daniell’s study, the early deaf Americans of the nineteenth century formed a community through their use of language and their literacy practices. For the American deaf community, their gained literacy in the early nineteenth century was directly tied to Gallaudet’s Protestant theology.

Like Mountford and Daniell’s works, Carol Mattingly in Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Rhetoric explores an often overlooked population’s use of religious rhetoric. Mattingly claims:

In our secular age, scholars tend to disregard women associated with evangelical or religious causes not considered progressive by today’s standards. However, because of the large participatory role women took within church organizations and reform causes, a vast number of women
prepared for further involvement in public life through positions in such organizations. Numerous leaders credited their early activity within the church as providing initial interest and continuing preparation for their later public leadership roles. In addition, evangelical women created their own standards for Christianity, which they deliberately delineated from orthodox patriarchal religious organizations. Their own interpretation of Christian principles and their appeal to a “higher authority” justified their defiance of patriarchal authority and enabled them to demand greater rights for women. (8)

Mattingly points out that despite their presence as the largest group of women rhetors and orators of the nineteenth century, temperance women have lacked critical attention from contemporary rhetorical scholars (1). Through critical analysis of the rhetoric of temperance women that she gathered from personal writings, fiction, newspapers, and meeting minutes, Mattingly offers a voice for a religious population that has been ignored in the field of rhetoric. Like Mattingly’s project, in my dissertation I too offer the field of rhetoric a study of a disregarded population.

Deafness presents silence in rhetoric in two ways. First, the lack of rhetorical scholarship on the deaf community’s use of rhetoric presents a silence in our field. Second, because among the varied definitions of rhetoric is the idea that a rhetor uses speech to persuade a listening audience, deaf audiences’ lack of hearing and deaf rhetors’ lack of oral performance creates silenced rhetoric. In Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness, Brenda Jo Brueggemann refers to deafness as “a thorn in rhetoric’s side” because of the silence deafness creates (2). Brueggemann’s work examines how rhetoric is used to construct deafness. I build on Brueggemann’s work by focusing on the deaf community’s use of religious rhetoric to support the use and preservation of sign language. Since rhetoric is about the power of language to change an
audience’s thoughts and behaviors, the deaf community was often disempowered by a dominant hearing community that was unfamiliar with sign language. As the deaf community struggled to maintain and preserve their language, they engaged the rich sources of Protestant rhetoric. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American deaf community’s use of religious rhetoric empowered their arguments by connecting with a dominant hearing community of like-minded believers. More recently, religious rhetoric used in the deaf community has been fostered to bolster the resolve of deaf community members to continue to preserve sign language and to convince audiences in secular settings to sympathize with the plight of the deaf community and support the use and recognition of sign language.

**Men of Faith and Education of the Deaf**

As a minister, Gallaudet garnered support for the American School for the Deaf by emotionally persuading his audience that the souls of the deaf needed to be saved, the core of his evangelical Protestant theology. In the process, he employed religious themes to argue for the teaching of sign language. He argued that sign language should be taught to deaf students, that deaf students should be taught in sign language, and that sign language would give the deaf students understanding of “the influences of the Spirit” and “understanding of the Author of [their] being” (“Opening Address” 9). Gallaudet’s Protestant beliefs, combined with Clerc’s strong Catholic background, became cornerstones for the American School for the Deaf. Gallaudet wanted to save souls, while Clerc’s faith inspired him to educate the deaf because of “the needs of the state,”
“the temporal needs of the individual,” for “justice,” and for “the fraternity of man
(which includes education)” (Lane When Mind 201, 204). Clerc was motivated to give
the deaf a language so they could “illuminate their lives” on their own (204). Gallaudet
wanted to enlighten the lives of deaf students himself. Both men worked together to
provide deaf Americans a place to learn sign language and gain an education with a
curriculum grounded in Gallaudet’s Protestant beliefs.

Protestant leaders in the deaf community have been instrumental in the
preservation of sign language. To study elements of the American deaf community one
must acknowledge the history of the education of deaf students. It is because of schools
like the American School for the Deaf that deaf Americans began to socialize with one
another, forming relationships, clubs, organizations, and churches. In A Place of Their
Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America, John Vickery Van Cleve and Barry A.
Crouch note, “[u]ltimately, schools brought deaf people together, forming a context
within which they would develop their own cultural communities” (10). Schools were a
location where deaf students learned and used sign language. Once schools opened up
for deaf students, they became a location where deaf individuals could meet other deaf
individuals, often for the first time. In A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf
American Writing 1816-1864, editor Christopher Kr entz records that “[i]n 1818, Clerc
wrote that of forty-two students at the American Asylum, only ‘four or six’ had met other
deaf people before coming to Hartford” (xvii). Education of the deaf in America offered
opportunities for deaf individuals to bond, forming a community based on a common
language. Because the first school for the deaf in America was grounded in Gallaudet’s
Protestant theology, to examine the history of deaf education is to clearly see an intertwining of religious and general instruction.

Before Gallaudet, there were many educators of the deaf. Like Gallaudet, many of these men saw their work as their service to God. One of the earliest records of a sign system used for communicating with deaf people is from a sixteenth-century Spanish monk, Fray Melchor de Yebra (Van Cleve and Crouch 10; Benderly 109; Lane 69; Daniels 11,14). By the seventeenth century, Europe was influenced by Spain’s success with educating the deaf children of noble families (Van Cleve and Crouch 15; Benderly 109; Lane 91-94; Daniels 29). In England, books were published on how to educate the deaf, and soon educators began to cater to the deaf children of wealthy parents (Benderly 110; Lane 106). But it is in the eighteenth century when European schools for deaf children emerged using a strictly oralist approach. Van Cleve and Crouch note, “[f]oremost among these were German schools that followed the oralist pattern established by an eighteenth-century teacher, Samuel Heinicke. In the nineteenth century oralism [. . .] was usually called the German method” (107). These early European schools as well as the Braidwood Academy in Scotland and the Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris influenced the deaf educational system in America. These two philosophies of how to educate deaf students—manually versus orally—opposed one another and set the stage for a long debate that continues today.

The Braidwood Academy was an oral school that attempted to teach deaf students mastery of speech, and thus in their view mastery of reason (Lane 106). Many wealthy American parents sent their deaf children to the Academy hoping they would return home
able to speak, understand, and reason in English. The success of the Braidwood Academy allowed for more schools to open up throughout England, but they were unsuccessful in establishing a school in America. John Braidwood, the grandson of the founder of Braidwood Academy, was plagued with personal problems—due to his drinking, gambling, and personal debt, Braidwood ended up in jail rather than opening a school in America (Van Cleve and Crouch 25-26).

In contrast to the Braidwood Academy, the Abbé Charles-Michel de l’Epée at the Institution for Deaf-Mutes in France taught deaf students using a sign system. As an educator, Epée was “[u]nlike anyone before him, he took as his goal to give many deaf children some knowledge of language, albeit silent, rather than giving a small number a mastery of speech” (Benderly 113). Through encouraging deaf students to use their own language, Epée was perhaps allowing an emergence of a deaf community with its own language, unlike the Braidwood Academy, that tried to convert deaf students to act hearing using speech and lip reading. Epée’s successful teaching methods were passed to his successor, the Abbé Roch Ambrose Sicard. Sicard set up a school in his own diocese, and in 1815, as the head of the Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris, he took former students to London where they demonstrated their accomplishments for many, including Gallaudet.

Suffering from a physical condition that impeded his stamina, Gallaudet became a minister after a career in business. After graduating from Yale in 1805, for a little time he studied law and English literature and composition before returning to Yale to receive a master of arts degree in 1810 (Daniels 42). While attending Andover Seminary from
1812-1814 to study theology, Gallaudet took breaks from his studies to visit home. On one visit home he met Alice Cogswell, the deaf daughter of his family’s neighbor. Because of his physical condition, Gallaudet did not run and play much with his siblings while they were growing up. Gallaudet may have identified with Alice, whom he saw playing alone. He tried communicating with her by writing in the dirt. Alice did not know written English, so Gallaudet taught her “hat” by laying his hat down and then spelling “h-a-t” in the dirt below his hat. Motivated by this interaction, Gallaudet wanted to make sure Alice had a language.

Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, Alice’s father, solicited a group of Congregational clergymen to take a census of deaf children in Connecticut (Daniels 43). Cogswell did not want to send Alice to school in Europe, which at the time was the only educational option for Alice since there were no schools for the deaf in America. The census taken by Cogswell and the group of clergymen justified the need for a school to educate deaf individuals in the United States: They deduced from their census that there were more than 2,000 deaf individuals of educable age living in America (43). Cogswell, leading businessmen, and clergymen of Hartford, gathered on April 13, 1815, to discuss the establishment of an American school for the deaf.

The group of men believed they met with a divine purpose. In his dissertation The Gate to Heaven: T. H. Gallaudet and the Rhetoric of the Deaf Education Movement, James Fernandes notes that the men sought the blessing of God by opening the meeting with a prayer: “The first meeting of the initial group of subscribers to the fund for the Hartford school for the deaf on April 13, 1815, began with an invocation of God’s
blessing on the undertaking by Rev. Strong, minister of the first church of Hartford” (34). Gallaudet was asked to go to Europe and learn techniques to educate the deaf and met Laurent Clerc during his travels. Clerc was a student of and teacher for Sicard, whose work on educating the deaf Gallaudet was familiar with. Gallaudet returned to the United States with Clerc. On the trip home, Gallaudet began teaching Clerc English, and Clerc began teaching Gallaudet sign language. Both men were embarking on what they thought of as a mission to do God’s will. Sicard referred to Clerc as “the Apostle of the Deaf-Mutes of the New World,” and Clerc accepted his journey to the United States as fulfillment of a calling by God (Lane 203).

At the heart of Gallaudet’s efforts to educate and give a language to the deaf in America was his mission to proselytize to the deaf in America so they too might be converted to Protestantism. As a graduate of Andover Seminary, “with a curriculum of biblical, systematic, historical, and practical theology designed for students who had completed a collegiate course in the liberal arts,” Gallaudet was in a class of students who pursued mission fields around the world to spread their faith (Noll America’s God 254). Andover Seminary was founded in 1808 as a Congregational seminary in response to the prevalence of Unitarianism. Andover was a Trinitarian seminary, teaching evangelical theology grounded in the belief in the trinity (254, 260).

Andover emerged during the Second Great Awakening, which was from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century and left “permanent organizations designed to evangelize and reform America” (Noll A History 169). In 1810, Andover Seminary student Samuel J. Mills, Jr. established the American Board of Commissioners for
Foreign Missions (186). These traveling evangelists were called missionaries, those who “took the gospel abroad,” and the first American missionaries were sent to India and the Far East (185). However, for many Protestant ministers “the work done by those who stayed at home to evangelize and civilize America was the truly great missionary story of the century” (185). For Gallaudet, the deaf community was a mission field and education through sign language was a method for proselytizing the deaf. Protestantism influenced Gallaudet’s motives of educating deaf Americans. Part of Gallaudet’s theological grounding was rooted in his evangelical Protestantism. Noll explains this theology when he states:

> Evangelicals called people to acknowledge their sin before God, to look upon Jesus Christ (crucified—dead—resurrected) as God’s means of redemption, and to exercise faith in this Redeemer as the way of reconciliation with God and orientation for life in the world. To evangelicals, the message was validated by their own experience of God’s grace, but even more by its centrality in the Bible, which they held to be a unique revelation from God. (*America’s God* 171)

Gallaudet sought to give sign language to deaf Americans so they would have a way of understanding the gospels and come to know God’s grace. He served the function of minister to the unbelieving deaf students and of father, or savior, in the image of Christ whom he emulated. Religion was thus forced on oppressed outsiders, who later as a group embraced and grew with religious influences.

Gallaudet’s decision to proselytize unbelievers came before he discovered deaf people as his mission work. His decision, at the urging of Cogswell, to proselytize deaf Americans provided him a mission field in his homeland. In “Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet: Benevolent Paternalism and the Origins of the American Asylum,” Phyllis
Valentine explains the setting that influenced Gallaudet’s desire to do mission work when she states:

At Andover Seminary—a seedbed of evangelical Christian activity—Gallaudet had been fired with a desire to preach Christianity to the heathen. Many of his fellow seminarians established foreign missions in Hawaii, Africa, and Asia, and Reverend Gallaudet sometimes officiated at ceremonies marking their leave-taking, while he himself chose to stay closer to home. Nonetheless, he believed he was bound by the same injunction from Christ as his far-flung colleagues to convey the news of salvation to every creature on earth. As principal of the American Asylum, Gallaudet envisioned himself a missionary to “heathen” deaf people who had never before heard the Christian message of salvation. (58-59)

Once Gallaudet discovered deaf Americans as his mission work, he had to garner support from the citizens of Connecticut.

Through the use of religious rhetoric, Gallaudet effectively conveyed the ideology of the community who was his audience. In May 1815, on the eve of his departure to Europe, Gallaudet delivered an address to an audience of Hartford citizens. In his address he persuaded his audience that his mission work was significant and had been neglected by America. Referring to the deaf in America, Gallaudet argued, “[t]heir numbers; their condition; and the practicability of affording them relief address loud claims to every feeling heart” (“Address to the Benevolent” 14). Gallaudet supported his argument by citing the numbers found from the census Cogswell had completed by the clergymen in Connecticut. The benefits that the deaf would receive from gaining a language and education were great, Gallaudet claimed. In his address, Gallaudet asserted that deaf Europeans had been taught “to not only read and write and understand written language with accuracy, but, in some cases, to understand spoken language, and to speak...
themselves audibly and intelligibly” (14). Gallaudet tried to persuade his audience that deaf Americans could also be instructed to read and write; but more importantly, they could come to know God. He stated:

Now if the deaf and dumb in our country can by a proper course of instruction be fitted for useful and respectable employments in life; if they can have their minds opened to the reception of such intellectual and moral improvement as will render them comfortable and happy on this side of the grave, above all if they can be made acquainted with the revelation of God’s mercy through Jesus Christ, who can hesitate to promote an object which is pregnant with so much good, and which addresses itself to the most enlarged views of Christian benevolence. (14)

Gallaudet preached to an audience of predominantly like-minded Christians for “Protestant evangelicals [. . .] came to dominate religious life in the early Unites States [sharing] an emphasis on conversions, the supreme religious authority of the Bible, and an active life of personal holiness” (Noll America’s God 11). Gallaudet’s goals for educating deaf Americans were centered on his effort to provide them with the knowledge to lead them to spiritual salvation, echoing the value of middle-class Hartford who would offer their financial and prayerful support.

Gallaudet took the podium on April 20, 1817 at the opening assembly for the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons (later the American School for the Deaf). He proceeded to deliver a sermon. Gallaudet’s central text for the sermon was Isaiah 35:5-6: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and
streams in the desert” (KJV⁴). Gallaudet began his sermon acknowledging the power of
God to open the ears of the deaf and loosen the tongues of the dumb (“Opening Address”
4). He quickly moved to the justification for the school that he would be leading,
assuming his own power to give the deaf and dumb, or “lower creation,” a language of
their own and with such language a knowledge of Christ so they could be converted (4).
Gallaudet’s position as principal in the new Connecticut Asylum for Deaf and Dumb
Persons was one he saw as a ministry, a calling, and a practice of his Christian
benevolence—reaching down to help those less fortunate than he.

As a Congregationalist, Gallaudet subscribed to the evangelical tenet of
benevolence. Noll points out that for formalist Congregationalists, benevolence was a
central theological tenet (America’s God 178). Gallaudet’s Protestant faith played a
significant role in deaf education in nineteenth-century America and thus in the emerging
deaf community and their use of sign language. It was through Gallaudet’s evangelical
convictions that the emerging American deaf community gained a religious belief system
that would provide them with “personal empowerment” (174). Explaining how this sense
of empowerment is derived from American evangelical theology, Noll states:

American evangeliicals also shared a conviction that true religion required
an active experience of God, one leading necessarily to discipline. […] Those principles embodied a common evangelical conviction that the
gospel entailed a search for public godliness as well as personal holiness. In sum they believed that the Bible taught a message of rescue and
delivrance, and that this message provided moral guidance, personal
empowerment, and direction for self and society. (174)

⁴ Here I am quoting from the King James Version of the Bible, the same translation Gallaudet used for his sermon.
Through Gallaudet’s Protestant influences, the early American deaf community gained an education and advocacy for sign language that was intertwined with American evangelical theology.

Along with Clerc and with the influence of Sicard, who was influenced by Epée, Gallaudet devised a curriculum that would introduce many deaf students to Christianity, which would allow them to reap the benefits of speech and hearing when they reached “the Redeemer’s Kingdom” (“Opening Address” 12). Citizens of Hartford along with deaf students and relatives were in the audience as Gallaudet delivered his sermon at the opening of the American School for the Deaf. Gallaudet claimed that the greatest advantage to educating the deaf would be benefits difficult for the hearing to understand: “The most important advantages, however, in the education of the deaf and dumb, accrue to those who are the subjects of it, and these are advantages, which it is extremely difficult for those of us, who are in possession of all our faculties, duly to appreciate” (“Opening Address” 7). According to Gallaudet, the hearing members of the audience, who already had a language and religious conviction of their own, would not be able to understand the significance of gaining sign language and through it an introduction to evangelical Protestant theology, as the deaf students would. In his address, Gallaudet continued to compare the silence, and thus ignorance, the deaf live in to the dreariness of a dungeon: “He, who has always trod the soil, and breathed the air, of freedom, cannot sympathize with the feelings of ecstasy, which glow in the breast of him, who, having long been the tenant of some dreary dungeon is brought forth to the cheering influence of light and liberty” (8). Gallaudet emphasized the “ecstasy” felt once removed from the
bondage of ignorance. In his rhetoric, Gallaudet appealed to the emotions of the audience. He wanted them to sponsor the school and help those less fortunate than they. The deaf students were less fortunate because they had not engaged with language to learn about any religious doctrine. Through teaching the deaf students a sign language, Gallaudet claimed he could lead them to understand “how [their] offences may be pardoned through the blood of the Saviour; how [their] affections may be purified through the influences of the Spirit; how [they] may at last gain victory over death, and triumph over the horrors of the grave” (9). Gallaudet offered to teach the deaf students sign language and to conduct their religious and general instruction in sign language. Persuasively appealing to his audience’s awareness of the Bible, Gallaudet claims that the “light and liberty” the deaf students would be brought into is not necessarily freedom from silence or freedom through language; however, it is the freedom found in belief in God.⁴

Gallaudet preached to an audience of mostly like-minded Christians. He claimed that the freedoms found in his Protestant beliefs were foreign to a deaf person who did not have the language or intellect to comprehend the freedom available through the Protestant faith. Continuing the theme of imprisonment and freedom, Gallaudet stated:

There are chains more galling than those of the dungeon—the immortal mind preying upon itself, and so imprisoned as not to be able to unfold its intellectual and moral powers, and to attain to the comprehension and enjoyment of those objects, which the Creator has designed as the sources

⁴ Here Gallaudet is referring to 2 Corinthians 3:17, which states liberty is found in God: “Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (KJV). Since deaf Americans did not have language, Gallaudet believed they did not have the ability to know Jesus and experience the liberty he refers to. Gallaudet’s subscription to evangelical Protestantism is apparent in that he finds freedom through his Christianity—or that “God has provided [. . .] salvation by grace” (Noll A History 46).
of its highest expectations and hopes. Such must often be the condition of the uninstructed deaf and dumb! (“Opening Address” 8)

According to Gallaudet, the path to a better life for the deaf would be a path including religious training. The ultimate benefit the deaf students would reap under Gallaudet’s direction would be to know “the Saviour of [their] souls”—moving from the darkness of their “dungeons” into the light of knowing God (13). For Gallaudet, sign language would become the light to deaf students in the dark. His use of religious rhetoric places a responsibility on the audience, a responsibility for the immortal “soul” of the deaf students in their presence.

Identifying himself as a servant of God who was created in the image of God, Gallaudet in the opening address for the American School for the Deaf challenged his audience. He declared:

> It is Jesus Christ whom we are *thus* bound to love, to imitate, and to obey. We are stewards, but of *his* vineyard. *Whatsoever* we do, should be done *in his* name. For it is by this *test*, that all our efforts to do good will be tried at the great day of his dread and awful retribution. (12)

Gallaudet called his audience to action and asserted that the standards he assumed for himself were to be found in his faith and relationship to God. As believers, the audience members had a part to play in Gallaudet’s mission. They too should do the work of God and help to promote the conversions of the deaf students. They too should proselytize the deaf through their support of the deaf education movement in America, as those who are not called to foreign lands are to support Christian missionaries with prayers and gifts. Gallaudet concluded his sermon with a call for humility. He reflected on all that his audience could do to help the deaf, but that it would be imperfect in comparison to what
Christ would do for them in return. He also claimed it was the reliance they had on Christ that would allow them to do anything at all to help the deaf students. By challenging the believers in his audience as he did earlier on the eve of his trip to Europe, Gallaudet expanded his mission field beyond the students he would witness to and train in religion to include the people of Hartford and potential supporters of the school. He reminded his audience to appreciate what they had been given and what deaf Americans were lacking. Appealing to the sympathy of the audience, Gallaudet urged them to be grateful to God for the very superior advantages which we enjoy; consider how imperfectly we improve [the deaf]; be mindful, that after all we do, we are but unprofitable servants; and thus, feeling the necessity of our continual reliance upon Jesus Christ, trust alone to his righteousness for acceptance with God. (“Open Address” 13)

At the close of his sermon, Gallaudet positioned himself (as well as the Christians in the audience) superior to the deaf students who would be under his instruction, and he noted that these advantages he enjoys come from God. Although there would be benefits to educating deaf Americans, Gallaudet’s efforts to “improve them” would be imperfect without his reliance on God, for it was through God he saw his work finished (13).

The need to educate, not only the deaf, but also all outsiders to the American Christian belief of the gospels, continued to be at the heart of Gallaudet’s sermons. A few years after the opening of the American School for the Deaf, on October 11, 1819, Gallaudet delivered “An Address, Delivered at a Meeting for Prayer, with Reference to the Sandwich Mission,” in Hartford. In his address Gallaudet claimed, “[i]f it was the duty of the primitive Christians, in compliance with the injunction of Christ, to send missionaries to enlighten our ancestors with the truths of the gospel, it is equally our duty
to convey a knowledge of the same truths to the present heathen world” (10). Gallaudet explained to the audience that the evangelical duties they adhere to as Christians have not changed over time. Andover reinforced Gallaudet’s conviction regarding missionary service. For Gallaudet, deaf individuals were outsiders to the flock and needed to be brought inside through learning sign language. By learning sign language, Gallaudet could lead them to knowledge of God. He would then be fulfilling a primary purpose of Andover—“a learned and evangelical ministry”: spreading the gospel to a population who had not heard it (Pearson 7).

“The Sandwich Mission Address” was delivered after a ceremony celebrating the marriage of a couple who had dedicated themselves to the Sandwich Mission (Gallaudet “The Sandwich Mission”). In this address, Gallaudet referred to Paul as a hero when he was taking his leave from Ephesus to begin his missionary work (5). Gallaudet respected and sympathized with the men and women who would leave their country to proselytize in another country, but saw their work, although emotionally straining, comforting by the fulfillment of an evangelical Protestant conviction to become more Christ-like. Gallaudet explained:

[The Christian Missionary] follows the example of Jesus Christ. In his last hours of agony, while he yet hung a bleeding victim on the cross; enduring the severest tokens of his Father’s displeasure against sin; his whole soul engaged in the completion of his mysterious work of love to our fallen race; and just ready to exclaim “it is finished;” his eye beheld the mother who bore him, and filial gratitude glowed in his breast. (7)

For Gallaudet, the Christian missionary endured hardships that came with being away from home and on the mission field, hardships he compared to the sacrifice of Christ; yet
he saw that the missionaries were comforted by the fact that their work answered a higher calling that paralleled the example of Christ.

While Gallaudet acknowledged the work of missionaries to foreign lands, he also acknowledges the place of those staying home to help in the evangelical missions. In the “Sandwich Mission Address,” Gallaudet referred to those people who were not called to foreign lands:

And while most of us are not called to this arduous service, but permitted to remain at home in the bosom of civilized society, how grateful should we be to those who are willing to take their lives in their hands; to forsake friends and home and country, and to encounter the severest trials, that they may enable us, in some measure, to fulfill our obligations to our Saviour, while they only ask of us pour good wishes, and prayers, and a portion of our charity. (11)

Through these descriptions of Gallaudet’s feelings on missionary work, we see that the call to save the “heathen” was a duty he held as important. And despite not feeling called to foreign service, Gallaudet found his own mission work with “heathens” close to home. Gallaudet was motivated to teach the deaf so they would come to know God and be converted. The deaf provided him with a purpose to pursue his motivation to convert unbelievers, and in the context of mission work, deaf Americans were identified by Gallaudet as a group of people similar to the other non-Christians that evangelical missionaries were proselytizing abroad. It is important to note that missionary work is often viewed as colonizing communities and causing long-lasting changes to the culture, for example, the evangelizing and Americanization of many Native American tribes (see Noll A History 187). In the case of Gallaudet, his missionary work with the American deaf students near Hartford has left long-lasting effects. His work included invoking
religious rhetoric to influence a community to support an American school for the deaf and his efforts to minister to deaf Americans through the use of sign language.

Gallaudet had a profound impact on deaf education in America. His use of religious rhetoric lent power to the view that the emerging deaf community was made up of intelligent human beings who needed the opportunity to be educated through the use and acquisition of sign language in order to come to know God. Gallaudet’s two sons, Edward Miner Gallaudet and the Reverend Thomas Gallaudet, continued their father’s ministry by working with the deaf community in the areas of education and religion well into the early twentieth century. The religious rhetoric employed by the Gallaudets supported the use and preservation of sign language.

My project examines religious arguments for the preservation and use of sign language in historical documents and contemporary experiences related to deaf education, church ministries and congregations for the deaf, and activism in the deaf community. I view these areas of interest as locations where religious rhetoric empowers the deaf community to advocate for the use and recognition of sign language. The American deaf community historically has been oppressed by a dominant hearing community that sought control of deaf Americans’ use of language. It is through the influence of religion that we see the deaf community gain a language that influences others to support and encourage the use and recognition of sign language.

Historically, Protestant ministers impacted the lives and worship choices of the deaf students they served at residential school campuses. As chapel services became less frequent and less required at residential schools, students made their own choices about
religious beliefs and practices. For deaf students, this often meant choices based on language use and support for sign language. In the second chapter of this project, I explore the religious rhetoric found in the speeches of deaf educators, school curricula, and school brochures and the arguments of deaf community members on behalf of the use of sign language. By examining the religious rhetoric associated with residential schools of the past, I argue that the school is a significant location where Protestant theology was intertwined with arguments for sign language. Methods for how to teach deaf students divided manualists and oralists who both used evidence from their differing ideology to support their arguments. Manualists argued that sign language was a gift from God.

In chapter three, I extend the discussions of Baynton and Burch regarding the sanctuary as a foundation for the key qualities that identify the deaf community: sign language and social groups. The church was a place where sign language flourished and members of the deaf community formed relationships. This chapter explores the religious rhetoric of ministers to the deaf community who played a significant part in the preservation of sign language. This chapter builds on the previous chapter by examining the sanctuary as a location where religious rhetoric is used to advocate for the use and preservation of sign language by the American deaf community.

While the previous two chapters look at the school and the sanctuary as locations where religious rhetoric is used to argue for the use and preservation of sign language, the fourth chapter shifts to examine the social activism of the deaf community. I examine two examples of deaf activism: the use of films by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in the early twentieth century to advocate for the preservation of sign language
and Deaf West Theatre’s production of *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The NAD films use religious rhetoric to advocate for the preservation of sign language and Deaf West uses religion rhetorically to advocate for the recognition and acceptance of sign language and the deaf community. Historically, the deaf community used film to preserve their language and heritage: George Veditz lead the National Association of the Deaf in a political attempt to preserve sign language by recording signed speeches and stories to film (Burch “Capturing” 294). Producing films of master signers, Veditz intended to influence a new generation of signers who maintained the beauty and grace of the language. Usually containing religious themes and rhetoric, these films were also intended to influence the promotion of sign language among hearing Americans. More recently, one production blurring cultural boundaries is Deaf West Theatre’s production of *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This musical uses both hearing and deaf actors signing and singing together. Through the musical’s many spiritual references, the choices made of how to execute certain signs, and the impact the production has had on mainstream theater,¹ I show that the production is significant to the deaf community’s empowered offensive stance. Deaf West’s production intends to move audiences to accept and recognize the value of sign language. This chapter establishes the role religious rhetoric plays in sacred and secular contexts of activism in the deaf community.

¹ *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* received two 2003 Tony nominations for Best Revival of a Musical and Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical. The musical also began a national/international tour in 2004.
In the concluding chapter, I discuss the implications of the American deaf community’s use of religious rhetoric on a deaf identity that values sign language. Since sign language is one key marker of the deaf community, advancements in technology offering deaf individuals the opportunities to alleviate their deafness, and thus their need for sign language, has complicated what it means to be D/deaf. Because of assistive technology, more deaf and hard of hearing students enter the postsecondary composition classroom where they confront issues of identity through their use of language. I offer suggestions for further research and study in this area arguing for more work to be done with contemporary members of the deaf community, specifically with deaf and hard of hearing students in the predominantly hearing composition classroom.
PROTESTANT IDEOLOGY AND THE ARGUMENTS FOR SIGN LANGUAGE
IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF

I am proud to be a Deaf man, am very delighted with the
divine gift of ASL, and, indeed, enjoy reading texts in
English.

—Patrick A. Graybill “Another New Birth: Reflections of a Deaf Native Signer”
(emphasis added)

Deaf people often used biblical language to emphasize how
the schools converted them from ignorance to knowledge,
from isolation to community, from no language to ASL and
English, and from heathenism to Christian redemption.

—Christopher Krentz A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf American Writing 1816-1864

The American School for the Deaf opened in 1817 with the initial mission to
provide deaf students with a language and knowledge of God so they could be saved. As
the previous chapter shows, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet argued that teaching sign
language to students and delivering curriculum in sign language was the best pedagogy
for the deaf to become intellectual participants in society and believers in God.
Appealing to audiences with mainly Protestant beliefs, Gallaudet’s speeches supporting
sign language were often filled with biblical references and metaphors. Gallaudet’s
successes at the American School for the Deaf helped garner support for deaf education nationally and influenced many other area schools to open, using sign language to teach deaf students. This method of teaching deaf students was known as manualism, and was the primary means for teaching deaf students in America in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the last half of the nineteenth century, the teaching practices of manualists, like those of Gallaudet, were challenged by educators who argued for deaf American students to learn to speak and read speech only, a practice known as oralism. In late nineteenth-century America, pure oralists did not want to see any use of sign language in schools for deaf students, which would have the effect of eradicating the use of sign language completely. As the number of schools for the deaf in America increased to serve an ever growing population, the use of the oral method of instruction gained popularity. Discussions on language use crept into debates on deaf education causing deaf community leaders to argue for the protection and continued use of what they called “the natural language of the deaf”—sign language. The arguments of late nineteenth-century manualists continued to reflect a use of religious themes and references much as Gallaudet’s did in the early half of the nineteenth century.

In this chapter, I examine arguments used by educators of the deaf in the latter half of the nineteenth century to show how Protestant ideology was used by the practitioners and supporters of manualism. These arguments were often evident in the

*American Annals of the Deaf*, which was first published in 1847 and focused on

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6 This includes pure manual approaches as well as the combined method. Pure manualism was the use of sign language only without any instruction borrowed from oral approaches. However, many manual schools incorporated oral approaches to instruction for some students who would benefit from them—especially those students who recently became deaf and still had some or all ability of speech. This practice of using both the manual and oral approaches was known as the combined method.
education of the deaf. Both oralists and manualists subscribed to and published in the *Annals*. I will focus on publications by Edward Miner Gallaudet, son of T. H. Gallaudet, who argued in *the Annals* for support of a combined system of instruction that employed the best practices of oralism and manualism. E. M. Gallaudet maintained religious themes and references in his reasoning and support of sign language advocacy. He is also one of the most recognized leaders in the deaf community in the latter half of the nineteenth century because of his advocacy for the deaf community and the use of sign language.

In this chapter, I will also contend that the biblical language used in the arguments for sign language by deaf community leaders such as E. M. Gallaudet and Philip J. Hasenstab, an instructor in the Illinois Institution, reflects a worldview held by manualists that continued to find its way into deaf education. That is, Protestant ideology that began with T. H. Gallaudet’s curriculum and pedagogy at the first permanent school for the deaf in America, continued to surface in late nineteenth-century arguments for sign language use, and even emerged in early twentieth-century school publications.

**Late Nineteenth-Century Methods of Teaching Deaf Students**

While America saw more and more schools opening in the late nineteenth century to teach deaf students, the educators who ran the schools did not agree on teaching methods. These disagreements were significant to the preservation of the language of the deaf because some educators argued for the end of sign language use. It is in the latter half of the nineteenth century that more opponents to manualism emerged. Oralists,
those who believed the best means to teach deaf students was with no sign language, started making noise in the 1850s, suggesting at conferences, through presentations, and in publications that the oral method of instruction was superior to the manual method. Alexander Graham Bell appeared in America and began holding exhibitions at Boston School for Deaf Mutes in 1871 (Van Cleve A Place 114). As an opponent to sign language, Bell offered educators of the deaf another pedagogical option: Visible Speech. Taking the method his father had devised, Bell claimed he could teach deaf children how to perfectly position their mouths to produce clear sounds. Bell was an advocate for deaf students learning to speak and lip read rather than use sign language; Visible Speech was one way he proposed that could happen. Holding exhibitions, Bell asked deaf students to speak in front of audiences to demonstrate the successes of his method of oralism. In reality, many of Bell’s successful students were children who became deaf later in their childhoods, or post-lingually, and had retained some of their speaking abilities (Van Cleve Place 115). In spite of this issue, Bell’s oral arguments and ways of educating deaf students made an impact on schools for the deaf in late nineteenth-century America.

In 1891, the American Annals of the Deaf recorded a total of 62 public schools and 15 private schools for the deaf in America, serving 9,232 deaf students. These schools subscribed to one of three teaching methods: oralism, manualism, or a combined method. The Annals recorded that the majority of these private schools were oral schools; however, the majority of these public schools claimed to subscribe to a combined method of teaching. Ideally, the combined method took the best of oral and manual methods to offer all students the opportunity to learn sign language and written
English and to offer some students training in speech and/or lip reading. However, many of the schools that claimed to subscribe to the combined method favored oralism and little or no manualism was practiced (Gallaudet “Combined” 257). Proponents of the combined method recognized that not all students benefited from learning speech or lip reading, but some students, occasionally those who became deaf later in childhood, became skilled speakers and lip readers with practice. While the combined method continued to make use of sign language in the classrooms for deaf students, strictly oral schools removed sign language all together or relegated its use to religious training and chapel services. On this point, E. M. Gallaudet found common ground with oralists—he argued deaf students should continue to have religious training and chapel services in sign language regardless of the chosen method of instruction. Before examining E. M. Gallaudet’s arguments for a combined method that placed emphasis on sign language use, it is important to explore the shift in deaf education that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, placing greater emphasis on speech and lip reading.

**Oralism, Homogeneity, and Eugenics**

In America, late nineteenth-century arguments opposing sign language and viewing deafness as a deficit were grounded in a desire for a national identity recognized by spoken English, the theory of evolution, and scientific thinking—stark contrasts to the manualists’ arguments grounded in Protestant theology. The deaf community in the late nineteenth century came under threat by oralists who viewed the use of sign language as

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7 The role of the sanctuary, for example chapel services at residential schools for the deaf in America, in sustaining and advocating sign language is the subject of the following chapter.
evidence that deaf individuals were excluded from American society. Schools for deaf Americans became sites where these arguments played out. Oral schools based their teaching methods on bringing deaf students into American society and to a higher functioning intellect through the use of speech. For many who supported the oral method, speaking English was an important symbol of national unity.

In a country recovering from the effects of war, Americans began to place emphasis on a unified identity after 1865. Oralism became a product of this national climate. Seeking homogeneity through language and culture, oralists argued that deaf Americans needed to learn to speak English in order to assimilate. In 1867, shortly after the Civil War, one of the first oral schools for the deaf, a private school, opened in New York (Krentz 112; Van Cleve Place 112). The oral method offered deaf Americans the opportunity to learn to speak and lip read, skills that oralists argued would allow deaf Americans to interact and participate in society. In his chapter “Foreigners in Their Own Land,” historian Douglas C. Baynton thoroughly examines the context of the emergence of oralism in American schools for the deaf. Baynton points out that “[o]ralists likened the deaf community to a community of immigrants” because “the use of sign language encouraged deaf people to associate principally with each other and to avoid the hard work of learning to communicate in spoken English” (Forbidden 16). While the deaf community had been viewed as a collective group early on in the nineteenth century, it was in Christian terms. T. H. Gallaudet’s description of deaf Americans was that they were heathens, placing an emphasis on the salvation of an individual’s soul. The oralists offered a shift in thinking in the mid-nineteenth century that viewed deaf Americans
using sign language as outsiders to an American culture partially defined by spoken English. Oralists gained support as evolutionary thinking suggested that sign language was a primitive form of communication.

It is no coincidence that oralists gained ground in the latter half of the nineteenth century for it was in 1859 that Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was first published. Darwin’s theory of natural selection provided an ideology behind the arguments for oralism, while the manual arguments often sided with a Protestant ideology. In *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language*, Baynton explains that fueling the oral movement in the late nineteenth century was an American culture that “thought in terms of scientific naturalism, especially evolutionary theory” (9). Darwin’s theory was used to justify the oralists’ view that sign language was inferior to speech. It was common thinking in the nineteenth century that sign language was relied on by humans before they mastered speech (see Baynton “Savages” 98; Armstrong 16-18; Stokoe 55). For manualists, this view was interpreted in Protestant terms: sign language was an original language and meant “closer to the Creation,” not inferiority (Baynton “Savages” 98). However, for oralists, sign language was associated with lower evolution or “inferior races” (Baynton *Forbidden* 9). Oralists made arguments that deaf students needed to learn spoken English and lip reading or they would be viewed as animals or savages. Contradicting the Protestant lens of the manualists, post-Darwinian oralists of nineteenth-century America viewed sign language use through an evolutionary lens:

In an evolutionary age, language was no longer an inherent attribute of the human soul, one of an indivisible cluster of traits that included reason,
imagination, and the conscience, conferred by God at the Creation. It was, instead, a distinct ability achieved through a process of evolution from animal ancestors. Sign language came to be seen as a language low on the scale of evolutionary progress, preceding in history even the most “savage” of spoken languages, and supposedly forming a link between the animal and the human. (Baynton “Savages” 98)

Viewing sign language as a sign of a lower stage of evolution, oralists garnered support for the oral method of deaf education. Oralists’ arguments appealed to the desire to bring deaf people “up” to a human level with the use of spoken English.

One of the strongest proponents of the oral method was Alexander Graham Bell. For Bell, the value of speech reflected the value of being human (Baynton Forbidden 55). Although having a hard of hearing mother and a deaf wife, Bell wanted to see an end to sign language and deafness. Using his notoriety and wealth from inventing the telephone, Bell advocated for the oral method and an end of sign language (Van Cleve Place 117). It is in Bell’s adversarial role to manualism that we see the culmination of the oralists’ argument—deafness threatened a national identity, evolutionary thinking showed sign language to be inferior to speech, and advancement in scientific thinking demonstrated deafness was a deficit. Combining his interest in eugenics and deaf education, Bell argued that the nation would face a “great calamity” due to the high rate of intermarriage among the deaf (Baynton Forbidden 30). After conducting his own investigation of the records of several American schools for the deaf, Bell presented his findings to a meeting of the American Academy of Sciences at New Haven, Connecticut in 1883. Bell concluded from his study that the intermarriages between congenital deaf adults would result in “a deaf variety of the human race” that would be “a defective race of human beings” (qtd. in Van Cleve Place 146). His conclusion echoes both the concern
for a unified national identity and the evolutionary lens he used in his analysis. Bell saw problems with creating a law preventing deaf individuals from marrying each other; he claimed the result would be sexual promiscuity and illegitimate children. Instead, Bell proposed preventative measures that included the elimination of residential schools, of sign language use in schools for the deaf, and of deaf teachers in deaf schools (Van Cleve Place 147). Bell wanted to dismantle the American deaf community that had emerged from the schools where manualism and Protestant ideology were intertwined.

**Manualism Supported by Protestant Practice and Theology**

The change in national climate in late nineteenth-century America caused deaf community leaders to protect sign language use at the most fundamental levels—at the schools for the deaf. Carrying on his father’s mission, Edward Miner Gallaudet entered the field of deaf education and became an advocate for sign language use and a leader in the American deaf community most recognized as the president of the first college in America for deaf students. In 1850, E. M. Gallaudet was part of the opening of the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, which was funded by Amos Kendall, a prominent Washington philanthropist. In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill stating that the school may grant college degrees, changing the name of the school to National College for the Deaf and Dumb. In 1893 the name was changed again to Gallaudet College in honor of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (Gallaudet History 188). Since 1986, the school has been recognized as Gallaudet University. The long legacy of the Gallaudet family in deaf education in America is
preservation of the deaf community and sign language, despite the efforts of oralists like Bell. E. M. Gallaudet’s opinions on deaf education were valued by the deaf community just as much as his father’s before him. And with changing pedagogical philosophies, E. M. Gallaudet varied slightly from his father’s original teaching methods to offer another method to teach deaf students.

As E. M. Gallaudet’s experiences grew and exposure to oralists’ teachings persisted, he began to advocate a combined method for teaching deaf students. The combined method offered deaf students the benefit of teaching methods that best fit the individual student’s needs and abilities according to E. M. Gallaudet. He saw that students who were capable of speech should be allowed the benefit of techniques taught by oralists to gain better articulation abilities. He also saw the danger of enforcing this method of teaching on all students—many would never learn a language at all if oralism was the only method employed. He recognized that many deaf students would never be able to articulate speech and would best be served with instruction in sign language and written English. E. M. Gallaudet saw at the center of the combined method the goal of the deaf student to be a productive member of society and to have religious convictions (Gallaudet “Ideal School” 282). The only way this goal could be achieved, according to E. M. Gallaudet, was through the continuous use of sign language, even if it was in addition to oral practices.

The American deaf community faced oralists at home who found great support from their peers abroad. By the late nineteenth century, it became clear that manual practices were in the minority on an international front. Leaders in the education of deaf
students met in Milan in 1880 at the Milan Congress, an off-shoot of the two-year previous International Congress for the Improvement of the Condition of Deaf-Mutes. Brothers E. M. and Thomas Gallaudet were two of five American representatives at the Milan Congress. Among the five American representatives was the only deaf representative in attendance—James Denison, principal of Kendall School in Washington, D.C. At the Milan Congress, a motion was passed valuing speech over signs:

The Convention, considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signs, (1) for restoring deaf-mutes to social life, and (2) for giving them greater facility of language, declares that the method of articulation should have the preference over that of signs in the instruction and education of the deaf and dumb. (qtd. in Van Cleve and Crouch *Place* 110)

The delegates from America were five of the six votes against the motion. Although the American deaf community was being attacked by proponents of oralism at home and abroad, they were also becoming a community with leaders willing to fight for the preservation of sign language.

E. M. Gallaudet frequently presented and published on the combined method, arguing it was the best method to use in teaching deaf students. He frequently cited the significance sign language had in the deaf community, and also cited the benefits the oral method could have for some students. In a speech delivered before the Second Congress of the British Deaf and Dumb Association at Glasgow, Scotland in August, 1891 and published in the *Annals* in October, 1891, E. M. Gallaudet echoes his father’s use of religious themes, references, and reasoning to support his argument for the combined system of instruction for deaf students.
Speaking in front of a large assembly of educators of the deaf in Great Britain and Ireland, E. M. Gallaudet, like his father before him, acted as an ambassador for the American deaf community. It is also important to note the impetus for E. M. Gallaudet’s invitation to speak at the Congress. E. M. Gallaudet notes in his biographical account of Gallaudet College that

I made the address on the combined system of educating the deaf before a large assemblage on the evening of August 7th. My invitation to address the Congress was suggested by Mrs. Francis Maginn of Belfast who was a student in our college a few years earlier and, at the time of my visit to Glasgow, a missionary to the deaf-mutes of Belfast and vicinity. (History 184)

Once again the intertwining of Protestant theology and deaf education is evident in this student who went on to become a missionary to other deaf people, continuing T. H. Gallaudet’s work of saving the “deaf heathens.” E. M. Gallaudet’s speech was published in both the Annals and the Silent World to reach an even wider audience than he had at the Congress. Readers of these periodicals were involved in the American deaf community and held particular interest in the education of the deaf.

In “The Combined System of Instruction,” E. M. Gallaudet explores the benefits of both the manual and oral methods of instruction, stressing the manual method alone affords more opportunities to the deaf both in education and religion than the oral method alone. E. M. Gallaudet claims “that by the practice of the manual method alone, with no aid from the oral, the entire body of the deaf can be so trained and educated as to become intelligent, happy, self-respecting, self-supporting, God-fearing members of society” (“Combined” 259). Like his father, E. M. Gallaudet’s argument for the manual method alludes to the ability of sign language to train deaf students in religion and come to know
God, thus becoming “God-fearing” citizens. He is also addressing the oralists’ concerns that sign language use would separate deaf individuals from a unified national identity. For E. M. Gallaudet, the deaf students’ religious beliefs and practices demonstrated their membership to an American society that still valued Protestant theology even with the advancement of evolutionary thinking. He goes on to write that “the gift to the deaf of the language of signs and the manual alphabet is of far greater value and comfort” than speech and lip reading (259). Early manualists like T. H. Gallaudet referred to sign language as a gift God gave the deaf. E. M. Gallaudet speaks of sign language in the terms of a gift as many manualists of his time did because for manualists sign language was a product of divine providence. Weighing the benefits of signs to speech and lip reading, E. M. Gallaudet continues to use religious references as his father did several decades earlier.

For example, a central theme in E. M. Gallaudet’s argument for the combined method of instruction is the importance of the moral life of deaf students and the role religious training plays in this. In support of his emphasis on manualism, he quotes oralists who claim that without sign language, deaf students’ moral states would be challenged. For E. M. Gallaudet then, part of the value of sign language is its significance in religious teaching. Appealing to the oralists in the audience, E. M. Gallaudet cites the work of a leading oralist who would be familiar to the audience—Moritz Hill. After a long career instructing deaf students in Germany, Hill compiled his reflections and views on the methods to teach deaf students. E. M. Gallaudet quotes Hill, in order to show the important advantages in the use of sign language, or the manual
method. In this quotation, Hill points out that it is important that sign language be used in the religious training of deaf students:

> But it is particularly in the teaching of religion that the language of pantomime plays an important part, especially when it is not only necessary to instruct, but to operate on sentiment and will, either because here this language is indispensable to express the moral state of man, his thoughts, and his actions, or that the word alone makes too little impression on the eyes of the mute to produce, without the aid of pantomime, the desired effect in a manner sure and sufficient. (qtd. in Gallaudet “Combined” 260)

Hill recognizes that in order to reach the souls of the deaf students in his care that sign language would have to be used because the spoken word is ineffective in religious teaching. While Hill’s explanation on the use of sign language in religious training is similar to T. H. Gallaudet’s early nineteenth-century mission to teach the deaf American students sign language, Hill did not view sign language the same way manualists in America did. To illustrate Hill’s stance on sign language, E. M. Gallaudet goes on to quote Hill’s more complete opinion of sign language when he states

> it must be remembered that in his school, as in other oral schools where his views prevail, the language of signs is nothing more, to quote his own words, than “a very imperfect natural production, because it remains for the most part abandoned to a limited sphere of haphazard culture”. (260)

Expressing disagreement with Hill on this latter view of sign language, E. M. Gallaudet reminds his audience that sign language has been carefully developed for many generations. He also has dissonance with Hill’s acknowledgment that sign language is needed to teach deaf students religion, but that Hill’s opinion of the use of sign language is similar to those oralists who align deafness and sign language use with lower evolved species like apes. E. M. Gallaudet presents evidence from oralists to show his audience
his thorough knowledge of the oral method, and that he doesn’t dismiss the oral method entirely. He appeals to oralists in the audience by citing a leading oralist whose teachings many oralists are familiar with. This strategy demonstrates E. M. Gallaudet’s attempt to persuade oralists in the audience that it is in the best interest of all deaf students for religious training to be conducted in sign language, thus insuring the preservation of sign language among deaf students at oral schools.

Like his father, E. M. Gallaudet subscribed to a Protestant theology that placed learning and teaching the gospels as a high priority. If sign language was viewed by all educators of the deaf, manualists and oralists, as the method to best teach religion to deaf students, then the early manualists’ arguments that sign language was a gift from God would continue to be sustained. Baynton points out that early manualists were Protestants who “believed [sign language] to be, a language closer to God and nature than speech, uncorrupted and pure, more honest because more direct as a means of emotional expression” (9). For E. M. Gallaudet, this view of sign language epitomized his view of education. Education was more than learning and preparing for a vocation. For him, education included a higher cause of shaping students’ moral character. If pure oral schools were to persist, deaf students would not learn sign language and as a result, many deaf individuals would not have a strong grasp of practical knowledge as well as a foundation in religious teachings. In addition, pure oral schools would produce a group of deaf individuals who would not be able to participate in American society or a deaf community. E. M. Gallaudet claimed, “[t]he most serious criticism which may justly be brought against the pure oral method is that it cannot be successfully applied to all the
deaf” (“Combined 261). Not all deaf students are capable of speaking and lip reading. These are skills that come easier to some than to others. For this reason, E. M. Gallaudet opposed pure oralism, but saw value in it when it was combined with manualism.

Maintaining that the best from both oralism and manualism could be combined to teach deaf students, E. M. Gallaudet argued, in “The Combined System of Instruction,” for pure oral schools (of which there were many in the late nineteenth century) to include sign language in their teaching methods. But E. M. Gallaudet’s article was just as much for pure manualists as it was for pure oralists. Persuaded by his counterparts in Europe, E. M. Gallaudet saw benefits from those deaf students capable of learning speech to do so. To provide an education that best fit the needs and capabilities of the individual student was at the core of the combined system as he defined it. Using both methods, for E. M. Gallaudet, would be for educators of the deaf to follow the example of Christ in the gospels. E. M. Gallaudet concludes his article by reflecting on the service of educating the deaf in Protestant religious terms:

It was said in proof of the divine beneficence of our Saviour’s mission upon the earth: “He hath done all things well, for he maketh the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.”

Following his benign examples, let us in his spirit go forward in the work we have to do, striving with singleness of purpose, and with every means coming to our hands, so to train those whom, “the finger of God hath touched” that they may at length, with ears indeed unstopped, hear the welcome, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and with tongues made musical for the melody of Heaven join in the harmonies of the life that knows no imperfection and no end. (“Combined” 266)

E. M. Gallaudet gives emphasis to his father’s work before him: to teach the deaf in sign language so they too could come to know God. At the heart of E. M. Gallaudet’s concern for the best method to teach the deaf is his concern for their religious state (salvation, in
Protestant terms). In order for the deaf to experience their ears becoming “unstopped,” as E. M. Gallaudet concludes his speech, would mean their arrival in Heaven. In Protestant theology, this would mean the deaf student would need to come to know God and repent of sin. According to E. M. Gallaudet’s emotional and ethical appeal, to deny the deaf students sign language would be analogous with denying them entrance to Heaven and the miracle of hearing and speaking.

Like E. M. Gallaudet, other educators expressed concern for the religious training of deaf students. In “The Religious Training of the Deaf Child” published in the *Annals* in 1892, the Reverend Philip J. Hasenstab argues for all teachers of deaf students to be knowledgeable in religion in order to help with the student’s spiritual development. Hasenstab claims “[i]t is not sufficient merely to teach a child to read and write, but he must be educated, *i. e.*, led forth out of the darkness into light. [. . .] This means to secure him the blessing of becoming an intelligent human creature in all possible ways, physical, mental, moral, and spiritual” (15-16). Hasenstab argues that it is the instructor’s duty to teach students the “truth as taught in the Bible” (18). Hasenstab represents many deaf educators who were also ministers. His personal religious beliefs, like those of T. H. Gallaudet’s and E. M. Gallaudet’s, influence his particular emphasis in deaf education: religious training. Hasenstab wants to insure that deaf students will know right from wrong and become followers of Christ’s teachings. As an advocate for the combined system of instruction, Hasenstab insists that instructors use what method is necessary for deaf students to receive religious training. Hasenstab states, “[b]y all means find some proper channel through which to pour new ideas into his soul. He should be so prepared
that he will minister as well as be ministered to” (21). The spiritual state of the deaf students was so important to Hasenstab that he supports whatever method—oral or manual—in order for students to learn the gospels and become practitioners of it. Like E. M. Gallaudet, Hasenstab advocates religious training for deaf students; however, unlike Hasenstab, E. M. Gallaudet supports sign language as the most sufficient conveyor of religious training to all deaf students.

To show how ingrained this idea of sign language use is to the saving of deaf souls as expressed by E. M. Gallaudet in the conclusion of “The Combined System of Instruction,” I offer snapshots from the American School for the Deaf reunion in 1850. Over two hundred former students joined together on September 26, 1850 to recognize and celebrate the work of Laurent Clerc and T. H. Gallaudet to teach sign language to deaf students in America. In expressing their gratitude to Clerc and T. H. Gallaudet, former students and teachers stood up and signed their appreciation for the work these men did to teach them about the gospels. One signer noted that

Thirty-three years ago, the deaf mutes in this country were in darkness of the grossest ignorance. They knew not God. They knew nothing of the maker of heaven and earth. They knew nothing of the mission of Jesus Christ into the world to pardon sin. They knew not that, after this life, God would reward the virtuous and punish the vicious. They knew no distinction between right and wrong. They were all in ignorance and poverty, with no means of conveying their ideas to others, waiting for instruction, as the sick for a physician to heal them. (Spofford 143)

Attributing the manual instruction Clerc and T. H. Gallaudet brought to those deaf students in the Hartford area with the saving of their souls, alumni in their presentations at the reunion overwhelmingly cited the instruction of and in sign language with their
journeys from “darkness” to “light.” In his address to T. H. Gallaudet, former student and teacher George H. Loring signed,

…it is fortunate and it was also by a kind dispensation of Divine Providence, that you adopted the best method of instruction of the deaf and dumb. By this method we have been instructed in the principles of language, morality and religion, and this education has qualified us to be useful members of society. (147)

Citing many of the arguments of manualists, Loring acknowledges that the use of sign language in the schools for the deaf was key to religious training. At the same time he expresses a common manual viewpoint that sign language use and advocacy is intertwined with the Protestant perspective that sign language was a gift from God.

Many years later, E. M. Gallaudet would argue that looking back at the first permanent school for the deaf his father led in Hartford, and so many of the alumni at the 1850 reunion admired, is a good starting point for determining the necessary conditions for a model school for the deaf. A year after “The Combined System of Instruction” was published in the Annals, in 1892 another article by E. M. Gallaudet appeared. “The Ideal School for the Deaf” repeated many of E. M. Gallaudet’s arguments in the previous article supporting the combined system of instruction for the deaf. The article also continued to emphasize the elevated importance E. M. Gallaudet placed on education. In his list of what the Hartford School did right, E. M. Gallaudet records the “careful undenominational training in religion, with interesting Sabbath services” among them (“Ideal” 282). He goes on to acknowledge that the Hartford School’s success is evident in its continued service to deaf students. The school helped to educate many deaf
Americans and preserve sign language under difficult times and maintained as part of its curriculum religious training.

E. M. Gallaudet concludes this short article by listing what he argues is necessary for a model school for the deaf in the late nineteenth century. Three of the twelve items E. M. Gallaudet lists include references to religion. E. M. Gallaudet argues that the leader of the school should have religious convictions and be “prepared to inspire and develop veneration for God and the highest moral aims” (284). Later in the list, he claims that in the true nature of a combined system, those students who are taught orally should have the benefit of religious services in sign language (285). Concluding his list, E. M. Gallaudet reiterates the importance of religious teachings in a model school for the deaf by stating,

[r]eligious instruction of an undenominational character should occupy a prominent and honored place, and this instruction should be given in the language through which alone the mind and heart of the deaf can be moved and impressed as the mind and heart of the hearing are through audible speech. (285)

E. M. Gallaudet’s argument for a model school for the deaf continued to link sign language use to religious teaching and training. Specifically, sign language advocacy by manualists reflected the worldview they taught to the deaf students in their schools. Even though E. M. Gallaudet makes references to non-denominational religious instruction, the God he hopes deaf students come to fear is a personal God based on Protestant theology.
Epistemology and Deaf Education: *The Arizona Cactus*

Oralists and manualists differed ideologically in their arguments about deaf education. In late nineteenth-century arguments for oralism, speech was indicative of intellect. A deaf student exhibited a halted intellect or even the lack of an intellect if she was unable to speak, according to oralists’ arguments. Despite oralists’ arguments grounded in new scientific thinking, deaf individuals prospered from their educations at manual and combined method schools. One reason why deaf students who used sign language went on to do well in society was because of the training they received in a trade while in school. These vocational classes increased after the Civil War, as much of the education in America shifted to emphasize industrial education and the number of trades taught (Baynton *Forbidden* 97). As the turn of the century saw an increase in state schools across America, more focused vocational training afforded deaf students experience with printing presses. These experiences resulted in school publications that often reflected a connection the American deaf community continued to have with Protestant theology in the site of the school even after an increase in secularism and non-sectarian practices in education. To give an indication of what this looked like, I will examine one such publication titled *The Arizona Cactus* from the Arizona School for the Deaf and Blind (ASDB).

ASDB opened in 1912 in Tucson. Initially the state school was a department of the University of Arizona and its first location was a converted residence on the university’s campus in Tucson (Averitt 2). The major artifact of ASDB is its quarterly publication *The Arizona Cactus*. ASDB moved to 50 acres donated by the City of
Tucson in 1918 and purchased eighteen additional acres before *The Arizona Cactus* was first published in 1926. The publication served many purposes. Vocationally, the publication gave students experience with printing and training in the trade. *The Arizona Cactus* also served as a newsletter with announcements for school faculty and parents who sent their children to live at the residential school. Often included in each issue were historical pieces carried over several issues, as well as writing by students. A significant feature to my study of the school publication are the frequent poems or writings that contained religious references and themes. Before examining the examples from *The Arizona Cactus*, I provide some historical context to better understand the significance of ASDB’s religious writings in a time of secularization in education.

Religious tracts or teachings were forbidden at state schools at the turn of the century. In the *History of Public Education in Arizona*, Stephen Beauregard Weeks reported for the Department of the Interior Bureau of Education in 1918 when he cites the law of 1879 that declared that state schools should be secularized with no denominational quality:

> Another section of this law—an echo of the struggle in 1877 against the proposed union of the church and state—was the thirty-eighth, which declares:
> “No books, tracts, or papers of a sectarian or denominational character shall be used or introduced in any school established under the provisions of this act; nor shall sectarian or denominational doctrine be taught therein; nor shall any school whatever receive any of the public school funds which has not been taught in accordance with provisions of this act.” (Weeks 38)

ASDB was established after the law of 1879 and would thus fall under the law of 1879 requiring religious references of any denominational persuasion in school publications to
penalize the institution of state support. And after Arizona was admitted to the Union on February 14, 1912, federal grants awarded 100,000 acres “for schools and asylums for the deaf, dumb, and the blind” further solidifying the relationship between ASDB and the state (Weeks 88). To stress the separation of church and state, Weeks cites that

> [t]he new constitution provided that no sectarian instruction should ever be imparted in any school or state educational institution, and that no religious or political test of qualifications should be required as condition of admission to any public educational institution as teacher, student, or pupil. (89)

While there is no evidence to suggest that ASDB tested students on religious matters, there is evidence that Protestant theology found its place in the school despite the laws cited by Weeks.

Even in Weeks’ report about the history of education in Arizona where he clearly states the laws that called for secularization in education, he makes use of religious rhetoric to explain the leadership in Arizona that changed education for the better. Describing Governor Safford, Weeks writes, “[t]he new governor appeared in 1869. He was Anson P. K. Safford, and from California came this new Moses, destined to lead Arizona from darkness to educational light” (130). Echoing the metaphor frequently used by manualists about the effect of sign language to bring deaf students from the darkness of ignorance to the light of reason and knowledge of God, Weeks refers to Safford as the “new Moses.” As the leader of the Israelites enslaved in the desert, Moses brought the people through the wilderness to a closer relationship with God. For Weeks, Safford’s development of the Arizona schools and the organization he applied to the public schools signified the equivalent result of Moses’ leadership of the Israelites.
Weeks’ use of this religious metaphor suggests that despite the laws he cites calling for a separation of Protestant theology and education in state supported schools like ASDB, this may not have been evident in widespread practice until much later in the twentieth century. In a mid-twentieth-century sermon published in *Sermons to the Deaf*, Superintendent of the Maryland State School for the Deaf, Ignatius Bjorlee points out that

> [t]he first schools of our land were religious schools. Pupils were taught to read in order that they might know the Bible. The divergent nature of our religious beliefs has made the pursuance of such course in our public schools impossible, hence the non sectarian. Moral and ethical principals are universal and through precept and example the way is paved and encouragement lent toward denominational teachings in accordance with the dictates of conscience and the word of God, as variously interpreted. (21)

Although non-sectarian and non-denominational teaching was stressed, Bjorlee points out that through moral guidance precepts and examples based on biblical teachings still found their way into the state schools for the deaf.

As evidence of the Protestant footprints in American schools for the deaf, religious references were often found in school writings relevant to deaf lives, even at a state funded school like ASDB. Themes that emerged in the religious pieces in *The Arizona Cactus* focused on morality, finding comfort in being a creation of God, and coming to knowledge through coming to know God. Like the arguments of manualists in the nineteenth century, the religious references in the early twentieth-century ASDB publication indicates a relationship between knowledge and Protestant theology. In May 1926, Howard Griffin explores what deaf schools should focus on in the article “What Shall We Teach?” Griffin reflects on what should be evident in schools when he writes,
[r]egards for the rights of others, adaptation to the environment in which he must live, order and discipline, simple rules of ethics, fundamental principals of religion, all these and more are lived daily, and these together with what comes through the mastery of English and a few allied subjects, the child is pretty well balanced. (7)

Griffin goes on to claim a background in religion is important for a student to “go forward in life” (7). For many educators in American schools for the deaf, teachings and training in morality were often synonymous with religious training. While some state schools may have practiced non-denominational religious teaching, ASDB’s *The Arizona Cactus* indicates belief in a God that could transcend worldly troubles and sorrows was at the core of their institution’s worldview.

Encouraging moral living and a belief in God, *The Arizona Cactus* published poems with strong Protestant themes. The first publication of the periodical offered readers the poem “Just This Minute.” The poem states, “Just this minute we are going/Toward right or toward wrong;/Just this minute we are sowing/Seeds of sorrow or of song./Just this minute we are thinking/On the ways that lead to God,/Or in idle dreams are sinking/To the level of the clod” (7). The poem stresses the importance of living a moral life, and in this poem moral is equivalent to thoughts and actions that follow in suit of Christian beliefs. The poem also alludes to what Protestant followers would find familiar: Galatians 6:7. Generally associated with sowing and reaping, the verse reads, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” The sentiment of the verse is echoed in the poem—whatever a person does or thinks about will bring about an appropriate consequence. In a Protestant lens, dwelling on how to serve God with thoughts and actions that are pleasing, would bring rewards in
Heaven. By publishing such a poem in the school publication, ASDB demonstrates a religious influence intertwined with deaf education, one that encouraged deaf students to come to know God.

Another theme that emerges in *The Arizona Cactus* is the comfort deaf students could find in knowing they were created by God. The poem “God Made Them All” is an example of this theme. Demonstrating the belief that all things come from God, the poem states, “All things bright and beautiful./All creatures great and small./All things wise and wonderful./The Lord God made them all” (4). Students who attended ASDB lived away from their parents and hearing siblings. While many stories testify to the comfort deaf students found in coming together and meeting other deaf people at deaf schools, they were frequently reminded that they were unlike hearing people. A poem such as “God Made Them All” reminded the students and students’ families that they were alike in that they shared the same creator—God. For some students, this Protestant belief may have brought comfort; for manualists it reinforced that deaf students were not only capable of learning, but worthy of religious teaching so they could come to know God.

In contrast, *The Tucsonian*, initially a weekly publication that later became the annual of Tucson High School, has very few, if any, references to religious teaching or religious practices among the students. Tucson High School was and still is a peer institution to ASDB. Just a few miles southeast of ASDB, Tucson High School historically served hearing students in the Tucson area. Students worked with faculty to publish *The Tucsonian*, which the June 1908 issue states on the cover is “devoted to high
school interests.” *The Tucsonian* served the purpose of school paper for at least the first ten years of its existence, and by 1920 *The Tucsonian* became an annual—a traditional high school yearbook with less and less writing and more and more pictures of students. Included in each issue of the earlier weekly periodical are “editorials; a joke department and local items; interscholastic sports are discussed; amusing and entertaining stories are given considerable space, and much advertising matter is printed, just as in a newspaper” (“Why” 1). Articles in the early editions of *The Tucsonian* are not unlike items found in school papers of today; however, *The Tucsonian* provides a stark contrast to ASDB’s *The Arizona Cactus*. Instead of including poems that reflected on Protestant beliefs, editors of *The Tucsonian* included poems that reflected on the surrounding desert landscape, such as “The Lone Outlaw” and “The Desert.” Leah Hamilton, a Tucson High sophomore who wrote both poems, describes the “lonely desert’s treeless plain” as “long lines of burning, barren, glittering sand” (5, 30). Other poems such as “To the Sun,” “The Coming of Autumn,” and “Westward Ho” reflect life experiences that come with living in the southwest. And, none of these poems have any biblical references or Protestant religious references, like those in *The Arizona Cactus*.

Protestant references surfaced throughout the early editions of *The Arizona Cactus*. Seasonal greetings often included quotes of scriptures from the Bible and in an historical piece recounting the role of deaf people in history, Olivia Valentine starts with the story of Jesus performing a miracle: “One day while Jesus was preaching to a crowd of people on the shore of Galilee, some one brought to Him a man who was a deaf-mute. Jesus sorry for him and said [sic]: ‘Ephphata’ and his ear were [sic] opened and he could
“Ephphatha” or “be opened” is the command Christ gave to the ears of the deaf man in the story. Many members of the deaf community often aligned the command “be opened” with the mind of the deaf, thus the need to select the best method for education. This selection from *The Arizona Cactus* is also a reminder that deaf students were responsible for the printing of the publication. While there are some errors in the quote above, it is possible those errors were in the original manuscript submitted by the author. The author is not acknowledged as either a student or faculty member, but in all likelihood the article was a piece submitted by a student. The article titled “The Deaf in History” is a short piece of seven paragraphs that spans Jesus’ life, beginning with the healing of the deaf man, to the opening of a college for the deaf in the late nineteenth century, to what would be the current time for the author, 1936, when many schools for the deaf had opened all over the world (Valentine 13). It is a familiar account of the history of the deaf in America because the author cites the influence of T. H. Gallaudet on deaf education. Specifically, evident in this article are the influences of religious teachings in schools for the deaf and the legend of T. H. Gallaudet as the father of deaf education in America. “The Deaf History” demonstrates the ability of deaf students to gain knowledge and the ability to use written English while attending a school that valued the use of sign language among deaf students.
Conclusion

The teaching methods advocated by E. M. Gallaudet and Bell at the end of the nineteenth century had lasting impacts on the deaf community. Today, many have adapted Bell’s arguments to pursue scientific means to eliminate deafness. We see this with the advancement of technology and cochlear implants and with genetic testing to isolate the hereditary cause of hearing loss. This view of deafness as a deficit is contrasted by deaf community members who cite deaf people’s productivity in society and life in general as evidence they are not lacking. E. M. Gallaudet would not completely agree with this current viewpoint in the deaf community; however, he did support the use of sign language, especially to train deaf students in religion. For E. M. Gallaudet, non-denominational religious training was important for the American schools for the deaf to maintain, and he argued that this training needed to be conducted in sign language. What emerged from this practice was the site of the sanctuary in advocacy for sign language. Because many oralists and manualists agreed that chapel services in the schools for the deaf should be conducted in sign language for all students, sign language persevered. This meant that the sanctuary became a location where despite oralists’ motives to eliminate sign language, it flourished and was transmitted throughout the American deaf community.
Chapter 3

SAVED BY SIGNS: THE ROLE OF THE SANCTUARY IN THE
PRESERVATION OF SIGN LANGUAGE

Deaf rhetoric that asserted the divine root of sign language
thereby claimed for it divine sanction.

—Susan Burch Signs of Resistance:
American Deaf Cultural History, 1900-1942
(47)

O master of all languages, we thank Thee for the power
and the glory of the sign language [. . . .] Thou knowest
what is best for the deaf, Thou art just.

—Arthur G. Leisman in “Prayers of the
Deaf” (29)

As the previous chapters show, education for deaf students in America began with
a Protestant Christian influence. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, as a Congregationalist
minister, maintained a curriculum at the first American permanent school for the deaf that
provided students with religious training and chapel services conducted in sign language.
As more schools for the deaf opened in America, the chapel emerged as a common facet
in the lives of deaf students despite arguments among school leaders about manualism,
oralism, and the combined system that aligned with opposing ideologies. Since many
deaf schools were also residential schools, these institutions took on the tasks of not only
training students scholastically but also spiritually. Part of a student’s experience at a school for the deaf was attending religious services in chapels housed on the school’s property. With an increase in separation of religion and education in the early twentieth century, there is evidence in school publications, like the New Jersey School for the Deaf’s *The Silent Worker*, that the chapel services at deaf institutions played a significant role in the stabilization of sign language use. There are also school brochures and manuals throughout the first half of the twentieth century that suggest the importance of religious training at residential schools for the deaf in America.

Once students completed their education at residential schools, they often found the church playing a significant role in their lives. Some Protestant churches continued the work of the residential school chapels by offering services in sign language for deaf adults, while other Protestant churches emerged made up of only deaf congregations. The first deaf church was St. Ann’s Church for the Deaf, which held its first Sunday services in October 1852. The Reverend Thomas Gallaudet, the eldest son of T. H. Gallaudet, was the head minister of St. Ann’s. He was trained like his brother, E. M. Gallaudet, in education, but went on to become an Episcopal minister. T. Gallaudet ministered to the deaf in the eastern portion of America by delivering sermons in sign language, providing social opportunities for adult deaf individuals, and providing classes for deaf adults in the community. T. Gallaudet’s work in ministering to deaf Americans is an example of how the sanctuary became a location where literal and symbolic arguments to protect sign language appeared. These religious services also provided the American deaf community a social forum. As students went on to graduate and leave
schools, they often found themselves in communities with very few other deaf individuals like they were surrounded with at school. One way adult deaf Americans began to socialize was by attending weekly worship services at hearing churches that provided interpreted services or by attending one of the few churches for the deaf.

In this chapter I examine the importance of the church and the role of the chapel at deaf schools in the preservation of sign language. I argue that because the church sanctuary was a location where sign language was maintained, sign language use and religious instruction is intertwined in the history of the American deaf community. I show that the church became a location of where sign language flourished and stabilized an emerging deaf community. I provide evidence that shows that religious rhetoric of ministers to the deaf was only effective when delivered in sign language. The chapel services and Protestant churches deaf students and deaf community members participated in suggested a value system for the American deaf community that was grounded in Protestant theology.

**Chapel Services at Deaf Residential Schools**

From the inception of deaf education in America, religious training and instruction was an important component. As debates over teaching methods consumed the last half of the nineteenth century, mostly the chapel was maintained as a signing place. Arguments even among oralists supported the use of sign language in religious instruction and chapel services as I pointed out in chapter two. For most ministers who used sign language in residential school chapels, arguments supporting their choice of
communication were two-fold. The first reason was practical: Sign language was appropriate because more of the deaf audience could see signs made by a minister at a pulpit versus attempting to read the minister’s lips. The second reason was linked to the interpretive power of sign language. Many educators of and ministers to deaf students argued that sign language had the capability of conveying the abstract religious ideas that they were teaching deaf students better than the spoken English language. While the latter reasoning for sign language use is closely related to the arguments by manualists to support sign language use because it was understood to be a language closer to God, it was a significant reasoning for the continued use of sign language in the chapel and eventually to its preservation in the sanctuary.

Students who attended the early schools for the deaf in America spent a fair amount of their time in religious services and classes on religious instruction, more so than deaf students of the twentieth century. Historians Otto B. Berg and Henry L. Buzzard claim that the American School for the Deaf “became, in effect, a church, for the students were required to attend daily chapel exercises, they learned common Old Testament stories, were expected to be familiar with the parables, miracles, and principal events in the life of Christ as set down in the New Testament” (26). The nineteenth-century school practices including religious training is in contrast to twentieth-century practices. Writing in 1957 for the Indiana State School for the Deaf’s publication *The Hoosier*, Clint C. Sexton points out that [t]he early schools for the deaf were headed by ministers and other people with strong religious beliefs. In fact, the Bible was included as one of their important textbooks. The pupils of those days spent longer hours in religious instruction than do the pupils in the residential schools today.
T. H. Gallaudet approached the education of deaf students in America as his mission work—to lead the unsaved deaf to come to know Christ. This significant starting point of deaf education continued to find its way into curriculum or the social function of residential schools for the deaf many decades after the first permanent American school opened in 1817. Sexton’s quote above acknowledges that religious training was still occurring in state schools in the mid-twentieth century when he was writing. While students in twentieth-century residential schools did not spend as many hours in religious training, chapel services were still in existence and the chapel still functioned as a signing place.

Chapel services at twentieth-century residential schools maintained the role of linking religious teaching and sign language use. Like the earlier schools in the nineteenth century, twentieth-century schools offered sermons delivered in sign language. Ministers continued to argue that sign language was necessary in the chapel for students to effectively follow along with the sermon. In the second edition of his pivotal text, The Sign Language: A Man of Signs, J. Schuyler Long, a twentieth-century principal of the Iowa School for the Deaf and a Gallaudet College graduate, “recognizes the very great value of signs [. . .] and its necessity in the pulpit and on the platform” (20). He goes on to claim, “in spiritual matters, signs enable the minister to reach thousands where any other method of communication would reach the few” (Long 20). Long points out the obvious, that signs are more effective in the chapel than oral methods. More deaf students could read signs from pews several rows back from the pulpit than those skilled in lip reading could read the lips of the minister. Long also alludes to the power of sign
language to reach the conscience of the deaf student in a way spoken English cannot.

Long published the first edition of his text in 1909, a time when oralism was taking over as the chosen method of instruction at schools for the deaf. Because deaf leaders in education, like Long, continued to argue for its practical use in the chapel, sign language was maintained as a feature at oral schools, combined system schools, and of course manual schools.

While the practicality of using sign language from a pulpit to address a fairly large deaf audience seems obvious, it was not the method practiced by every minister at every school. In the May 1900 issue of *The Silent Worker*, one writer suggests a solution to the problem of whether to deliver a sermon in signs or orally. The writer suggests a large slate should be used to “write out much of a lecture occupying twenty minutes or a half hour, and this supplemented by a little manual spelling and a trifle of ‘acting out’ may be a solution of the chapel question” (“The Chapel” 136). Manual spelling is not a signed language; it is using fingerspelling to spell out words, one letter at a time. This suggestion assumes that schools would have slate board space large enough to write out an entire sermon and that students would be able to read it and follow along from several pews back. The writer claims it may take 100 square feet of slate board space to write out a twenty-minute sermon. Another problem that arises with this suggestion is the effect a written sermon would have on the emotions of the audience.

Part of the minister’s strength as a preacher is to appeal through common language to connect on some level with his audience and evoke a response. A written sermon for deaf students to read in a chapel setting with a minister speaking the sermon
in English changes the rhetorical situation and in essence makes the sermon ineffective and the minister’s purpose unfulfilled. In this situation, the minister has removed the important rhetorical element of delivery. Delivery is extremely important for a rhetor addressing a deaf audience whose first language is visual. In *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces*, rhetorician and ethnographer, Roxanne Mountford recognizes the importance of delivery in an oral setting: “An analysis of oral performance must begin with a recognition that the body is not only an instrument of expression but is also itself expressive of meaning” (7). In sign language, the body is instrumental in conveying meaning. Facial expressions and body positions are part of the delivery of signs. They not only provide emphasis and are the equivalent of intonation in oral performances, but they carry elements of grammar that clarify the signer’s message. Signs can also be exaggerated, made larger or smaller, to convey a particular point. One possible effect of delivering a sign smaller than usual would be to pull the audience closer to the minister—students would be on the edges of their seats focusing on the minister’s hands and body waiting for the delivery of the next point. This is similar to an oral performer lowering her voice to have the effect of the audience listening more carefully to hear what comes next. To change the minds and hearts of the deaf students sitting in the chapel, ministers needed their religious rhetoric to reach them through sign language, the deaf students’ natural language.

Many ministers and educators argued that sign language was not only a practical means to religious teaching of deaf students, but also that it was the only language that would connect to the conscience or soul of the individual. Long claimed that “[s]piritual
truths told and explained in the language of signs reach the understanding and conscience of the deaf child to a degree no other means can possibly accomplish” (20). Sign language was capable of expressing the minister’s appeals to the deaf students’ emotions and conveying the abstract Protestant theology of the sermons. Up until the mid-twentieth century, most ministers in the chapels were following in T. H. Gallaudet’s lead and teaching the Gospel to deaf students in residential schools. Protestant ministers wanted to see the deaf heathens saved and come to know God. In addition, the religious training of deaf students weighed heavily on older deaf community members at the turn of the twentieth century, who argued for the continued use of sign language in chapels.

In the June 1898 issue of *The Silent Worker*, one writer claims that sign language is the only means to touch the heart of the deaf. The writer claims, “you will find but one way in which their hearts may be touched, their souls stirred, and the great truths of the Christian religion brought home to them [. . .] not through soundless mouthing, not always through the printed page, are the spirits of these people stirred” (“Religion” 149). The writer argues that the deaf congregant or student will only be touched by a sermon delivered in sign language by a master signer. It is the gracefulness of the signs, the writer contends, that appeals to the soul of the deaf congregant or student in a way that spoken English cannot. The writer suggests that when a deaf person is taken to a Church where the same Gospel truths are presented in the distinct and graceful gestures of the sign-language. Behold how his eyes lighten, he is moved, he weeps, he prays. God speaks to him. It is music—the poetry of motion—a truly enlivening presentation of ideas. Spiritual force comes, kindling and enriching, through a happy medium that is to him what an eloquent voice or inspiring music is to his hearing brother. (149)
Like other members of the deaf community, this writer suggests that sign language was the only means to convey abstract religious theology to the deaf and the only medium that would lead to the conviction of the deaf. In order to be effective, a minister to deaf students at residential schools needed to reach the students’ hearts and eyes through a common language of signs.

The New Jersey School for the Deaf’s publication, *The Silent Worker*, often included editorials, articles, or stories reprinted from other newspapers on religious training of deaf students and adults. *The Silent Worker*, like other secular publications for the deaf community, frequently advertised ministers visiting state schools and church events in the surrounding community. Throughout the early twentieth century, educators and concerned deaf community members wrote of the power of sign language—and only sign language—to reach the conscience of deaf Americans. Arguments supporting sign language use in chapel services often cited the ability of a signed sermon to appeal to the deaf audience more effectively than any other means of delivery. In 1909 *The Silent Worker* reprinted an editorial from the *Arkansas Optic* by Superintendent Arthur G. Mashburn in which he states his support for sign language’s ability to appeal to the emotions of the deaf:

The Sign-language is the natural language of the deaf. It is beautiful, expressive, and graceful. It appeals to the heart of the deaf as no other language can. It is the language of the soul. It stirs the heart to the deepest depths of pathos; it convulses the frame with the merriest peals of laughter. I have seen again and again some mighty Demosthenes of the deaf carry his audience in the sweep of one fleeting moment from the agony of burning tears to the delight of conquered smiles. It appeals to the deaf as nothing else can. It is an easy means of communication. (83)
Mashburn points out the impact sign language has on delivery for a deaf audience. Through sign language, a minister can appeal to the emotions of the deaf audience.

Like many educators, Mashburn’s sentiments were echoed by the president of Gallaudet College, Percival Hall, in 1913. At the School for the Deaf in Jackson, Mississippi, Hall addressed celebrators of “Mississippi Day” referencing the ineffective use of manual spelling when he claimed,

> [m]any do not know the difference between signs and manual spelling. They do not realize that the language of signs is a powerful and beautiful language, capable of expressing joy, sadness, despair, hope, love, and a very wide range of ideas. They do not know that for ninety-five years thousands of deaf people in this country have been taught the laws of God and the lesson of Christ by means of the Sign-language so that they have lived clean and honorable lives. (15)

While expressing the cultural values of the deaf community aligned with Protestant teachings, Hall alludes to the value of sign language to convey the religious teachings of ministers to the deaf. In a simply stated claim that sign language can connect to the deaf, a 1919 article in *The Silent Worker* states that “there is and always will be more depth and soul and meaning brought their consciousness through the language of signs” (“Burden” 166). Those who supported sign language use in the chapels at residential schools not only saw the practical use of signs, but the effective use of sign language to fulfill the purpose of the ministers, which was to bring more deaf heathens to come to know God.

While residential schools for the deaf in the early twentieth century promoted religious services for students by requiring attendance, they were also promoting the use of sign language and providing deaf students with connections to a growing deaf
community. Deaf community leaders ministered to deaf students in chapels using sign language and took on the position of role models for many of the deaf students. In Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900-1942, historian Susan Burch points out that “signed religious instruction created a bridge between students and the outside Deaf community by introducing adult Deaf leaders to Deaf school children” (46). Chapel services provided deaf students with a deaf community larger than their peers at school and suggested a value system for the American deaf community that was grounded in Protestant theology.

There is evidence of this cultural value system in mid-twentieth-century school brochures and manuals. While sifting through materials in the archives at Gallaudet University, I came across a section of school brochures for the New York School for the Deaf. One brochure had a green cover and black and white photos inside. The brochure had no date but referenced a 1954 policy allowing girls again. One section of this school brochure titled, “Spiritual Needs Met,” laid out the school’s policy on meeting the religious needs of the students:

While the school is non-denominational, the spiritual needs of the pupils are met by a carefully planned program of religious instruction under the direction of a clergyman and lay workers of several faiths. Separate services are conducted one a week for each denomination, and this religious instruction carries over into the religious life of the family, in addition to the religious and social welfare activities of associations and societies for the adult deaf.

The inclusion of this policy is significant. The school clearly states that it is non-denominational, but that it will serve the deaf students by offering them religious training. The purpose for the religious instruction is not only to meet the desires of the
family of the deaf student, but to prepare students for their lives after school interacting with other members of the deaf community. The New York School for the Deaf identifies the place of chapel services and the value of religious training in the lives of older deaf community members, and its importance in the lives of their students.

Another publication for the New York School for the Deaf, the 1967 catalog, also suggests the school’s role in incorporating religious instruction with deaf education. Flipping through the black and white photographs, one stands out. The picture’s caption reads, “Lunchtime in the dining area of the building.” The subject of the picture is four children and two staff members sitting around a table with their heads bowed and hands pressed together in prayer. This picture is interesting for many reasons. While it suggests students and staff members prayed before eating meals, it is projecting an image that the school values religious practices and encourages them in the deaf students the school serves. This image also suggests that the religious practices are individualized or that the photograph was staged. For deaf students to pray together heads would not be bowed—eyes would be up to see a signer or read lips of a speaker leading the prayer. Whether this is a staged photo or a photo of individuals in silent prayer, it demonstrates a connection of religious values and deaf education well into the twentieth century at state schools for the deaf.

Chapel services at residential schools for the deaf continued to foster a relationship between sign language use and religious training and instruction. As schools used sign language in chapel services they not only supported the chosen means of communication by many deaf community members, but also supported religious values
of the community, mainly Protestant. As many students graduated they found themselves seeking places in ministry or as congregants in Protestant churches where they could continue to socialize with deaf peers and be ministered to in sign language.

Protestant Church Work to Sustain Sign Language

While Protestant churches offered ministries to the deaf, Episcopal ministries for the deaf have been recognized as the most visible and active. In the nineteenth century, “it should be noted that the religion work among the deaf was assumed initially by a remarkable succession of Episcopal clergymen” (Manson 388). By the mid-twentieth century, Baptist and Methodist as well as Episcopal churches were the most active ministering to the deaf (Sexton). The pivotal start of mission work to the deaf by Protestant churches began in the mid-nineteenth century. After teaching for six years in the New York School for the Deaf, Thomas Gallaudet decided to organize a Bible class for the adult deaf in New York. T. Gallaudet was ordained into the Episcopal Church, becoming a priest in 1851. In his master’s thesis for Gallaudet College, the Reverend Alexander MacLeod Manson claims that T. Gallaudet’s denominational choice for ministry was specific to the needs he claimed the church could fulfill for the deaf: T. Gallaudet “believed that [the Episcopal Church] embodied a form of worship which best suited the peculiar need in the ministry to the deaf” (394). The organization of the Episcopal Church would be able to fund a ministry for the deaf in New York and support T. Gallaudet’s vision of a church for the deaf.
T. Gallaudet’s plan for his ministry to the deaf was to serve the deaf through sign language and to provide them with a place that would become independently theirs. As noted by Manson, T. Gallaudet’s plan specifically included:

1. The church for the deaf was to adhere to the standards of the Protestant Episcopal Church.
2. It was to be kept free of debt.
3. It was to have a Parish House in which there would be provisions for a reading room and free lecture courses.
4. The language of signs was to be the official language.
5. There was to be an Assistant Minister, so that the Rector could be free to establish missions in other cities.
6. The church was to sponsor a Home for the disabled and the superannuated deaf.
7. The church was to be self-supporting. (394)

After a few years of Bible classes and signed sermons offered at other sanctuaries, the first services of St. Ann’s Church for Deaf-Mutes was held on October 2, 1852 in the chapel of New York University. In 1858, T. Gallaudet resigned from the New York School for the Deaf and entered full-time ministry at St. Ann’s.

T. Gallaudet spent the rest of his life in full-time ministry serving the religious interests of deaf Americans of all races. Through his leadership, T. Gallaudet organized All Soul’s in Philadelphia as a mission for the deaf in 1859, which was then consecrated as a church for the deaf in 1888. Over the next decade, nine other churches were erected as the work of the Episcopal mission to the deaf. These Protestant churches, like St. Ann’s, took over the role of chapel services in the lives of deaf adults. The church sanctuary was maintained as a signing place that provided a social life for adult deaf community members as well as classes to help with continued learning after their school experiences. Through the use of sign language, the social functions it played in the lives
of deaf adults, the advocacy shown for members of the deaf community, and the emergence of deaf community leaders from it, the Protestant church is a significant component in the history of Deaf culture and the preservation of sign language.

Because the churches for the deaf provided services in sign language, they were advocating its use and creating a site where it would continue to be used insuring its preservation. The sanctuary Protestant churches provided deaf adults in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America by ministering to them in sign language was significant to the stabilization of an emerging deaf community recognized by its use of sign language. Because the use of sign language brought many deaf people to church, even Episcopal churches ministered to deaf individuals of different faiths. In a 1930 Washington Evening Star feature about Gallaudet College graduates who went into ministry, St. Ann’s Church minister, Guilbert Campbell Braddock, states “St. Ann’s opens its services to all the deaf irrespective of religious affiliations, and it is said the influence of the church thus reaches some 4,000 deaf-mutes in the metropolis” (“Gallaudet”). Sign language use and socializing with other sign language users was a priority in selecting a place of worship, not denomination affiliation. As historian Susan Burch notes, “independent Deaf churches provided a constant and growing place of sanctuary for religiously minded Deaf people. They helped preserve and transmit sign language as well” (Signs 46). Deaf adults found themselves a safe signing place in Protestant churches.

The first churches for the deaf were significant in providing deaf adults opportunities to socialize. This factor of signing churches is consistent throughout their
history. Because of the importance to be around other signers, “deaf people’s social life revolves about the church” (Knight). In a 1965 newspaper article, one minister explains how some churches even recruit congregants based on the social function a signed church can provide deaf adults: “We recruit our church members from graduates of the state schools for the deaf—those who find themselves unable to go to regular churches for worship, and who fall back upon the sign language for social contacts” (Braddock qtd. in Knight). The social factor a church plays in the life of a deaf adult cannot be overlooked. In another article published in 1961, the writer notes that “[c]hurches for the deaf usually serve as a social center as well as a spiritual center, for deaf persons in widely scattered areas do not often have the chance to get together” (Martin 5). While the church provides the deaf congregants and attendees with religious teaching, it is an important signing place in their lives that some writers have compared to recreational activity such as attending movies or signed lectures. One writer for The Silent Worker notes that “[t]he minister in the pulpit who expounds the Gospel in impressive gestures, while his homilies may not be classed as recreation, brings solace and comfort to the deaf wayfarers along the road of life” (“Burden of Deafness” 166). The preacher may provide the deaf congregant or attendee with comfort by what is signed in the sermon, but more than likely the cultural identification a signing preacher presents for a deaf congregant provides far greater comfort, so much so that the commonality of the signed language is greater than the denominational differences that may exist among a deaf congregation. In a 1994 article for News Leader a writer notes that this is evident at one non-denominational church: “At this nondenominational church, the deaf culture ties
members together and is stronger than any denominational differences. It’s as much a
social network for the deaf as it is a place for worship” (“Deaf Worship”). Through the
interaction of deaf individuals, sign language has been preserved and one site where this
has occurred has been the church.

From its inception, St. Ann’s Church also served as an advocate for the deaf
community, as did many other Protestant churches. Dating back to 1880, the Conference
of Church Workers among the Deaf worked to coordinate, promote, and publicize the
Episcopal Church’s work for the deaf. The Church Workers among the Deaf served as
advocates for the American Deaf community and stated their objectives to be:

To preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Deaf.
To promote the training of men for the work of ministering to the Deaf.
To organize and advance the work in the new missionary fields.
To join workers for the deaf in a common fellowship for the cause of
Christ.
To promote publicity and disseminate information about the missions to
the deaf.
To advance the Deaf in all matters religious, educational and social, to
their benefit as a class.
To establish an endowment fund for the stabilization and extension of the
missionary work of the Protestant Episcopal Church among the Deaf in
the United States. (qtd. in Manson 399)

In advocating for the Deaf in America, the Church Workers among the Deaf published
letters in their magazine *The Deaf Churchman* addressing their objectives. In one such
letter from January 24, 1949, the Reverend Arthur G. Leisman, Secretary to the
Conference, wrote

[w]e encourage Sunday School work in the state schools for the deaf. We
endorse the language of signs as the only effective means of conveying the
Word of God in a church service. We support projects aimed at protecting
the rights of the deaf and increasing their sense of security and happiness.
(emphasis added [qtd. in Manson 398])
As advocates of sign language use in the church and chapel services in the schools for the deaf, the Episcopal ministers to the deaf helped to not only preserve the language of the deaf but see to a better life for the deaf community after residential school.

Protestant churches helped the deaf by serving as centers of welfare and other vital support; Deaf leaders perhaps recognized the need to maintain positive relations with philanthropic organizations that offered such services. [...] Various organizations crossed denominational boundaries, establishing joint effort in Deaf outreach programs and civil rights campaigns. (Burch Signs 48)

Churches became sites where meetings were held on subjects relating to the deaf community. One example is the use of St. Ann’s Church in 1974 for a meeting regarding captioned television. In an April 1974 St. Ann’s Church bulletin, there is a report about the estimated 300 people representing the political interests of the deaf community who met with representatives from NBC, CBS, ABC, MetroMedia, PBS, and WNYC. The bulletin reported that the meeting showed promise by stating that “[a]ll in all, it appeared to be a very successful beginning” but that more work needed to be done: “What is needed now is for everyone to write to all the various networks supporting the idea of captioning programs, especially news broadcasts.” St. Ann’s Church played a role in advocating for captioned television so deaf individuals could be included in what mainstream America took for granted—access to televised news programs and shows.

The effectiveness of the Protestant church’s advocacy for sign language use and for the deaf community in general was due to the leaders who emerged from the ministries to the deaf. Manson notes,
[t]hrough the Episcopal Church, [.] a succession of men were produced, strong in that they were eminently qualified as leaders among the deaf. These priests and religious workers were notable for the extent to which they participated in the entire social life of the deaf. Not only did they inaugurate the usual social programs in connection with the church (literary societies, men’s clubs, guilds) but these clergymen were called into all the organizations that aimed to promote the welfare of the deaf. They, along with the teachers of the deaf seemed to be the natural leaders—if not the only leaders. (388)

As leaders, these deaf and hearing ministers intertwined their religious callings with the will to serve the deaf community’s political interests. The pulpit not only became a place to advocate sign language use through teaching the word of God in the visual language, but also to appeal to the interests of the deaf congregants and address the concerns of the deaf community. Burch notes:

Deaf churches served as bridges between communities and ideas. It is clear from remarks made by both leaders and followers that the spiritual elite used their pulpits to link religious values with Deaf political issues. Often, Deaf ministers and supportive hearing ones took leading roles in major social and political organizations, including the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf. (Signs 49)

The impact of Protestant churches on the deaf community was significant in their twentieth-century efforts to preserve sign language and protect the rights of the deaf community. The link of deaf clergy to leadership in secular deaf organizations is significant. Manson cites that “[i]n 1909, for instance, it was stated that in the thirty years existence of the National Association of the Deaf, 6% of its elective officers had been ministers, and that one clergyman had been president” (388). With religious leaders taking leadership roles in the deaf community, the ties of the deaf community to religion continued to intertwine. Whether it was a sense of their religious duty or the benevolent
roots of the American deaf community, the deaf ministers served the deaf community in more than ministerial capacities.

**Conclusion**

Protestant chapel and church services were important factors in the preservation of sign language. Ministers and many deaf educators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries argued for the practical use of sign language in the chapel at residential schools for the deaf. They believed that sign language was more effective than spoken language in reaching the deaf, and that was the reason that sign language was the preferred method of delivering religious rhetoric. As students graduated and left residential schools, it became important for their social lives to continue interacting with other deaf individuals. The church offered this opportunity to the deaf community. Protestant churches became a sanctuary for sign language and the deaf community. The work of Protestant churches not only helped in stabilizing the use of sign language but also provided the deaf community with leaders and advocates that looked after their political interests as well as their spiritual well-being. According to some observers of the role religion played in the deaf community in mid-twentieth-century America,

> [a] moral and spiritual sense has been developed in them which offsets the lost senses of sight and hearing and which makes a full life and a glorious life possible for these persons. Not only the special schools for the deaf but also the special religious ministrations to the deaf, are responsible for this change in the social status of a once handicapped section of the populace. The deaf have indeed been brought before the Lord. (Braddock)
While the above quote expresses the problematic perspective that the deaf are disabled, the importance of the observation is that church ministries and deaf Americans’ participation in them played a role in changing the social status of the deaf community. Protestant churches for the deaf ushered in leaders of the deaf community who were empowered by their sense of morality and loyalty to their cultural values, particularly the use of sign language.
Chapter 4

RELIGIOUS RHETORIC IN DEAF COMMUNITY

ACTIVISM AND ADVOCACY

We’d rather promote the notion of the deaf community as being a language-based culture rather than medically limited community.

—Bill O’Brien, Producing Director for Big River, “Heart Music in Big River”

As seen in the previous chapters, residential schools and church sanctuaries provided the deaf community with opportunities to bring deaf individuals closer, to form social groups, and to preserve sign language. Emerging from these interactions is a discourse heavily ingrained with an evangelical Protestant influence. The American deaf community has employed religious rhetoric to empower their arguments for the use and advocacy of sign language. Historically, T. H. Gallaudet argued deaf Americans needed sign language so they would gain knowledge of God. Today, deaf activists advocate for the use of sign language to be recognized and respected as an identifier of the deaf community. While not all deaf Americans are religious, or subscribe to a religion, religious rhetoric is significant in the discourse of deaf community activists.

In this chapter, I argue that the American deaf community employs religious references, themes, and metaphors in sacred and secular contexts to gain support for the deaf community and its use of sign language. In a historical context, this meant that the
deaf portrayed themselves to share moral convictions and the religious beliefs (Protestant beliefs and practices) of the dominant late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American hearing community. This convention in the discourse of the early American deaf community, demonstrated deaf Americans’ similarities with the hearing dominant community, while simultaneously encouraging strength in the members of the deaf community. In a contemporary example I offer, religious rhetoric is used in the content of a larger secular theatre production. In this contemporary context, the deaf community activists use a musical with Protestant themes as a vehicle to persuade hearing audiences to change their ideas about sign language and the deaf community.

Deaf activism, or political activity vigilantly supporting the deaf community that promotes the values of Deaf culture, takes on different forms and uses various media. In Psychological, Social, and Educational Dimensions to Deafness, Barbara Schirmer points out “Political activity [...] is part of the [Deaf] culture” (93). Many facets of the deaf community’s activism, often neglected by both rhetoricians and deaf studies scholars, are sites that need to be explored:

Art forms are also part of the culture. Storytelling has a long tradition in the community. Poetry in the community is performed rather than read. Deaf artists often make their connection with the Deaf community clear in their work, and when they do, it is considered Deaf art [...] Deaf theater has a long rich history. [...] Members of the community come together in community social groups, organizations, churches, synagogues, fraternal orders, and sororities. (Schirmer 93)

I contend that the deaf community’s historical use of film and contemporary use of theatre are rich artful expressions of deaf activism. These examples illustrate the use of religious rhetoric by deaf community leaders to preserve sign language and persuade both
hearing and deaf audiences of its value to Deaf Americans. Historically, the films made by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) to promote and preserve the values of the American Deaf culture use religion rhetorically to promote a deaf identity of morally grounded, educated deaf men and women who value sign language. Recently, Deaf West Theatre’s *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* explicitly empowers a deaf identity built on overcoming strife and persuades audiences to change their beliefs and attitudes about the deaf community and its use of sign language. I contend that both this historical and contemporary form of deaf activism is evidence of a link between an oppressed community and their use of religious rhetoric to overcome the stereotypes of a dominant hearing community while advocating for the preservation and use of sign language.

**Religious Rhetoric in Deaf Activists’ Films**

As the number of educated deaf individuals grew, so grew the support for a national organization to promote the best interests of deaf Americans. In 1880 the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was established. The formation of the NAD was a deaf community response to the assault on deaf people by oralists, like Alexander Graham Bell, and the need to bring deaf people together who had been living in different parts of the United States to discuss and address the needs of deaf Americans. With its long history of advocacy for deaf Americans, the NAD has effectively sought methods to preserve and promote the values of Deaf culture. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the NAD fought for the right of deaf people to drive, they
investigated and battled discriminatory hiring practices, they condemned deaf beggars for giving the deaf community a bad reputation, and they resisted the banishment of sign language (Jankowski 28). In response to the oralists’ attempts to banish sign language, the NAD began its moving picture campaign in 1910 (Burch Signs 57). George W. Veditz is mainly responsible for the NAD’s filming of master signers. Veditz, highly respected in the deaf community, was an activist for Deaf rights: “After graduating from Gallaudet in 1884 with record-setting high grades, [Veditz] became an outspoken advocate for the rights of Deaf people” (Fernandes and Kelleher 182). As president of the NAD from 1904-1910, Veditz campaigned for the NAD Moving Picture Fund to “record, preserve, and promote the use of Sign Language during a period when the domination of a strictly oralist approach to instruction threatened the use of sign language in schools for Deaf students” (182). To protect the deaf community against the oralists’ threats, both hearing and deaf leaders in the deaf community turned to film as a means of deaf activism.

Popular moving pictures reached both hearing and deaf audiences because the films were silent and produced with captions and simple plots. The deaf community used this same technology to record on film poems, lectures, and stories delivered by master signers to preserve sign language (Van Cleve and Crouch Place 141). One such film is “Memories of Old Hartford” by John Burton Hotchkiss, a graduate of the American School for the Deaf and Gallaudet College. Hotchkiss went on to become the first deaf teacher at Gallaudet College (Van Cleve and Crouch Place 74). In his signed story of the

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8 Master signers are deaf or hearing members of the deaf community who are highly skilled at the use of sign language.
history of the founding of the first permanent American school for the deaf, Hotchkiss
describes in great detail his mentor Laurent Clerc (Burch *Signs* 58). The technology of
film became a vehicle to capture and distribute the history, folklore, and discourse of the
American deaf community to both hearing and deaf audiences. The NAD’s films were
circulated throughout the deaf community through residential schools, social clubs, and
churches (Jankowski 61; Burch *Signs* 52; Padden “Translating” 251). Recognizing the
value in the means to reach both hearing and deaf audiences, the NAD raised funds from
1910-1920 to create films that captured their language, persuaded audiences to support
their community, and to garner support for the use of sign language.

One of the first master signers to be filmed was Edward Miner Gallaudet, who
“enjoyed national recognition as the most recognized advocate for Deaf rights” (Burch
*Signs* 57-58). As a hearing child of a deaf mother, and son of T. H. Gallaudet, E. M.
Gallaudet learned sign language early in life and used it throughout his career as the
superintendent of the elite Gallaudet College. E. M. Gallaudet was heavily influenced by
the benevolence of his Protestant father, and like T. H. Gallaudet, he served the deaf
community in his leadership. As mentioned in chapter two, E. M. Gallaudet advocated
for and led the charge for deaf Americans to have a college all their own where they
could achieve certificates and degrees in higher learning. As a hearing leader in the deaf
community, E. M. Gallaudet’s contributions included advocating for and educating others
of the value sign language held in the deaf community. E. M. Gallaudet also argued on
an international level for the preservation of sign language, as well as performed signed
stories and speeches for the NAD’s film project.
Like E. M. Gallaudet, other hearing deaf community leaders joined deaf role models including “Gallaudet professors John B. Hotchkiss and Amos G. Draper; [. . .]; the deaf principal of the New York School for the Deaf at Fanwood, Thomas F. Fox; Robert P. McGregor, first president of the NAD; George T. Dougherty, a deaf chemist; and a deaf Episcopal priest, James H. Cloud” as filmed signers of speeches, stories, or histories (Van Cleve and Crouch Place 141). Among both hearing and deaf signers, the themes for these presentations were often nationalism, religion, or stories (“oral” histories) (Burch Signs 58). The use of religion rhetorically, such as the filming of master signers signing “The Lord’s Prayer,” was a convention in American deaf community discourse to persuade audiences that the deaf community could be identified by their religious practices. Religious rhetoric also reinforced the similarities the deaf community had with the dominant Protestant society of the early twentieth century. In her book Signs of Resistance, historian Susan Burch points out that “The Lord’s Prayer” was frequently signed on film by master signers (59). A reason for this selection was partially because of its familiarity to the hearing and deaf audiences. The master signers could count on their audiences knowing the prayer by heart so attaching the words they knew with the signs they saw in the film would result in more people understanding how signs conveyed meaning and were used to construct a language. These religious themes also presented a value of the emerging Deaf culture: morality. To deliver sermons in sign language and have them filmed showed a broader audience of both deaf and hearing people throughout the United States that the deaf community was not without God and not without morals; they were civilized men and women, often of elite standing, and
highly educated (usually at Gallaudet College). Appealing to an audience who shared religious ideology, the discourse of the deaf community included evangelical Protestant rhetoric to convicit audiences to support the values of the deaf community, mainly the place of sign language in the education and lives of deaf Americans.

The use of religious topics, as captured on the NAD films that were propelled by Veditz, served to promote an American deaf identity that was educated, moral, and willing to serve the community by educating others of its values. This emerging deaf identity presented in the NAD’s films was in contrast to the deaf identity assigned by opponents of sign language who argued for all deaf students to be educated using the methods of oralism.\(^9\) These films of master signers served the deaf community by promoting, with the use of religious themes and metaphors, the value of sign language as the subject matter in their lectures and stories.

Veditz especially employed religion rhetorically to advocate for the preservation of sign language. Veditz’s famous filmed speech, *Preservation of the Sign Language* was made in 1913, when oralists were gaining ground. The film was viewed at churches and social halls by both deaf and hearing audiences (Padden “Translating” 251). As a powerful signer and rhetor, Veditz carefully analyzed his audience, who also valued religion, before he selected signs to convey his passionate message. Veditz, in front of a curtained background, evokes biblical rhetoric to condemn the oralists. He cites the movement among oralists to ban sign language from every facet of the deaf community. Veditz signs, “[t]hey have tried to banish signs from the schoolroom, from the churches, \(^9\) Nineteenth-century oralists were influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution and viewed deaf people as lower evolved and sign language as kin to the gestures of animals.
and from the earth” (Veditz). By naming the oralists “false prophets’ who proclaim ‘that the American way of teaching the deaf is a mistake,’” Veditz depicts the oralists as heartless and truly uninformed of sign language and the lives of deaf people (Padden “Translating” 247). Veditz claims the oralists, “‘A new race of pharaohs that knew not Joseph’ are now taking over the land and many of our American schools” (Veditz). Referring to the oralists as “pharaohs that knew not Joseph,” Veditz cites their lack of benevolence, a striking contrast to the Gallaudets who served the deaf community through their Protestant kindness advocating for the use and recognition of sign language in the school, the sanctuary, and the social lives of the deaf community. Veditz evokes the struggles of the Israelites who lost protection from their more compassionate ruler after Joseph died. The Israelites went on to face slavery under the new rulers or pharaohs. According to Veditz, the oralists would enslave deaf students by forcing them to learn speech and forbidding the use of sign language.

Just as the fiery biblical rhetoric used by Veditz separates the oralists from the manualists, those who use sign language, Veditz incites the deaf community through religious rhetoric. Veditz concludes his passionate presentation by signing, “[i]t is my hope that we all will love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to deaf people” (Veditz). The reference Veditz makes to sign language being “a gift from God” invokes a responsibility on the part of deaf Americans to preserve and promote sign language, and to even maintain its beauty through proper use. Veditz argued the graciousness of deaf Americans should be visible in their signs. The implication is that God created sign language; therefore, continuing to sign would be
putting God’s creation to good use. If God created sign language, it would also mean that those who opposed sign language would be enemies or even doing the Devil’s work. Veditz’s filmed presentation is an example of graceful signing and a vigorous defense of the values of the deaf community. These values included the belief that the use of sign language demonstrated their moral identity: they would use God’s creation of sign language to gain salvation, thus sharing a Protestant ideology with the dominant hearing society.

The NAD’s use of film to advocate the preservation of sign language demonstrates the religious rhetoric used in the American deaf community’s discourse to advocate sign language use. For the early twentieth-century deaf community leaders, religious rhetoric was deaf activists’ rhetoric. The use of biblical references and metaphors by master signers captured on the NAD’s moving pictures tied sign language use, and thus a deaf identity, to Protestantism.

**The Empowerment of the Deaf Community through Theater**

In addition to the advocacy of the NAD, the deaf community has gained attention through other public events and forms of expression serving to promote the values of the community. One example is the recent Deaf West Theatre production of *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is a musical based on Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and contains religious themes and references. With *Big River*, Deaf West has educated audiences about the struggles faced by the American deaf community while promoting a deaf identity that values sign language. Along with many of the
performances on the national tour, Deaf West held information sessions and lectures on
the making of *Big River*. Deaf West also provided to teachers online materials about *Big
River* and the deaf community to encourage classroom discussions about sign language
and deaf people. Like the early deaf community leaders who preserved and promoted
community values, such as sign language use, on film, Deaf West Theatre’s production of
*Big River* uses a familiar American story with Protestant themes to highlight the plight
and transformation of deaf Americans. Before examining the Protestant themes of the
production, I offer some background of Deaf West and the making of *Big River*.

It is important to remember that the deaf community of the late nineteenth and
eyearly twentieth centuries faced the attempts of oralists to banish sign language and
defended their right to sign language while under attack. I argue that since that time the
American deaf community has transformed from being in a defensive stance to an
offensive one where sign language is used as artful expression to appeal to both deaf and
hearing audiences. Using both deaf and hearing actors simultaneously, Deaf West
Theatre’s *Big River* is an example of new activism among the deaf community and an
effective means of conveying the empowerment of the deaf community in a secular
context.

Deaf community leaders use different forms of expression to advocate for the
values of the deaf community. Ed Waterstreet and his wife Linda Bove\(^{10}\), both Deaf,\(^{11}\)
established Deaf West Theatre in California in 1991. Waterstreet and Bove see Deaf

\(^{10}\) Most known for her work on *Sesame Street*.
\(^{11}\) Deaf here is capitalized to signify these individuals’ physical deafness as well as their cultural
identification with the Deaf culture.
West Theatre as having a mission to spread the message that Deaf culture has overcome
the threat of not coming into existence to becoming a thriving community that includes as
part of it culturally enriching theatre experiences. According to Waterstreet,

[t]he mission of Deaf West Theatre is to improve and enrich the cultural lives of Los Angeles’ two million deaf and hard of hearing citizens, and to produce quality theatre for hearing and deaf audiences. . . . Deaf West seeks to create, share, and preserve a ‘legacy of deaf culture’ through its Sign Language theatre programs. (qtd. in P.L.A.Y. “Instructor’s Guide”

With Big River, Deaf West has created a bi-cultural (hearing and deaf) theater experience
that serves to educate audiences who may have been unfamiliar with Deaf culture
(primarily hearing audiences) or with musical theatre (primarily deaf audiences). Both
deaf and hearing audiences are provided access to this theatrical experience. Waterstreet
claims, “[n]ow, deaf and hard of hearing audiences can fully identify with characters who
break into song or, in our case, sign, where normal dialogue cannot contain emotions, and
the language becomes more heightened and poetic. This is the kind of access that we
have been heretofore denied” (qtd. in Garfield 15). Deaf West advocates for full
inclusion by offering entertainment to both hearing and deaf audiences simultaneously.

Deaf West Theatre’s production of Big River is an adaptation of an adaptation.
Based on Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the musical Big River was first
presented in 1984 at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On
April 25, 1985 it opened on Broadway and won that year’s Tony award for Best Musical.
Los Angeles’ Deaf West Theatre reinvented Big River in fall 2001 using American Sign
Language (ASL) and deaf and hearing actors. A year later, it was presented again as a
co-production between Deaf West Theatre and Mark Taper Forum before opening on
Broadway in summer 2003. The last show on Broadway to include hearing and deaf actors was the play *Children of a Lesser God*, which ran from 1980-1982 (“*Big River”"). In summer 2004, Deaf West Theatre launched their national tour of *Big River*.

Deaf West Theatre’s production of *Big River* is unique because it combines deaf and hearing actors to tell a story with many levels of significance. Both hearing and deaf actors share the stage in *Big River*. Hearing actors speak and sing while signing. Deaf actors sign their dialogue and songs while hearing actors are used to speak and sing signed parts of deaf actors. For example, the character Huck Finn is played by a deaf actor who uses sign language. His dialogue and songs are narrated and sung by the character Mark Twain played by a hearing actor. The hearing actor speaking and singing the signed part of a deaf actor is always on stage, in full costume, and is visible, but does not distract from the performance of the deaf actor. When referring to directing a cast of hearing and deaf actors signing and singing, director and choreographer Jeff Calhoun claims that “[i]f a Broadway show is a jigsaw puzzle with 20 pieces, this is a jigsaw puzzle with 350 pieces” (qtd. in P.L.A.Y. 15). As a hearing director, Calhoun had to adapt staging, direction, and costuming to work with the actors signing. To see visual cues, deaf actors needed to be spaced on the stage unobstructed by staging or other actors, props and costuming needed to allow actors to sign uninhibitedly, and all signing needed to be readable by deaf audiences. *Big River* is a work advocating the promotion of Deaf culture and like Veditz’s activism with the NAD it promotes the use of sign language through biblical references and themes.
Deaf West’s *Big River* is an example of how deaf community activists employ rhetorical strategies to convey the value of sign language with the purpose of changing the thoughts and behaviors of audience members who are unfamiliar with or think little of the deaf community. Deaf West offers a theatre experience that is an art form reaching an audience that may be unfamiliar with the values (specifically the recognition of sign language and use of it) of the American deaf community. Sign language is used in a theatrical way in *Big River* to achieve a translation that conveys Twain’s humor to a deaf audience. Bill O’Brien is the Producing Director for *Big River* and actively participated in the sign language translation of the production. The hearing actors cast in *Big River* studied with “sign masters” to train in ASL. O’Brien claims that all of the sign language translations are very meticulously done. . . . It isn’t just signed English. We try to exploit sign language to its fullest. . . . That means the humor of Twain is going to be communicated and understood by the deaf actor and by the deaf audience and by the hearing audience and the hearing actors. We’re all laughing at the same joke, we’re all understanding and learning the same thing about the characters and the relationships. It’s a very involved process. (qtd. in P.L.A.Y. 14)

Some audience members may be skeptical of the ability of ASL to function as a language and convey the same messages of spoken language. O’Brien articulates the effort that was put into creating a performance that would convey equivalent messages to deaf and hearing audiences in two different languages simultaneously providing full inclusion. This method of performance makes Deaf West’s production different from typical theatre performances.
Deaf West’s theater experience is different from most hearing theaters that offer a set number of performances that will be interpreted for deaf individuals in the audience. At such performances, often the interpreters are standing on the floor off to one side of the stage. The deaf members of the audience then must go back and forth from watching the interpreter off the stage to watching the performance on the stage. When performances are interpreted for a deaf audience, the interpreters lag behind what is being performed. First the interpreter listens to what is being voiced then translates the information into sign language. Often the deaf audience receives the information a few seconds or more after the hearing members of the audience.

Deaf West provides a theater experience that allows both deaf and hearing audiences to enjoy the same performance without interpreters. The deaf and hearing actors of Deaf West collaborate to communicate the story and effectively convey a deeper message about bi-cultural understanding—not just between the black slaves and white characters, but also between the deaf and hearing characters. One critic states that “Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* is elevated in this stunning revival to an almost holy plane. Blending hearing and deaf actors into the most responsive ensemble you can imagine, the show becomes a celebration of human communication and the striving together to achieve it” (Cohen 56). The use of both signed and spoken language is a rhetorical strategy that Deaf West uses to demonstrate the complimentary way deaf and hearing people can work together to achieve a specific purpose, or in the case of *Big River*, multiple purposes. Deaf West entertains an audience, but they also serve to appeal to the most numbers through a combination of language use.
Through the performance of *Big River*, Deaf West serves the deaf community by educating others of its battle to preserve sign language. Waterstreet and Bove take their mission seriously. Deaf West’s website made available for teachers supplemental materials to educate students on both the themes in *Big River* and the history of deaf Americans. Also, included with some of the dates of the national tour, were opportunities for audiences to learn about Deaf West Theatre’s history and the making of *Big River*. Waterstreet and Bove offered presentations and question-and-answer sessions for audiences. In doing so, they exhibit an ideology that suggests that there is still a need to educate others about the deaf community, specifically about their historic experiences as outcasts oppressed by oralists and more recent experiences as professionals offering entertainment to both the deaf and hearing communities through the use of sign language. The production of *Big River*, the outreach of Waterstreet and Bove, and the supplemental materials suggest that Deaf West recognizes that there is still a dominant hearing society that may still view the deaf community as outsiders who are not complete people because they cannot hear. Deaf West Theatre is also educating audience members of the value of sign language to the deaf community by offering entire productions in sign language combined with voicing. For many hearing audience members this may be their first exposure to seeing sign language performed by deaf people. As discussed in previous chapters, the American deaf community has struggled to have sign language recognized and accepted as their common language. Deaf Americans share a history of their community being often viewed and treated as outcasts. In contrast, Deaf West’s *Big River* successfully blends Twain’s theme of outsiders with the historic struggles of the
deaf community to advocate for full inclusion, echoing the current arguments in deaf education, such as those focused on the bilingual-bicultural approach versus mainstreaming that I mentioned in chapter one. The theme of outsider is significant because in Deaf West’s production Huck is not only an outsider because his way of thinking does not always align with the Protestant society surrounding him, but because he is also deaf.

**Protestant Themes in Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

Because *Big River* is an adaptation of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* it is important to briefly look at Twain’s original work where influences of Protestantism are demonstrated. Many Twain scholars have written about the role religion has played in Twain’s life—from his attendance at Sunday school as a child to the long friendship he had with Congregational minister, Joe Twichell (see Buechner; Holland; Sattlemeyer and Crowley; Hays). Most of these scholars note that throughout Twain’s life he battled with his own theology and often these struggles were played out in his writing (see Brodwin; Hays; Holland). For Twain, his writings were sermons working through his own beliefs and observations. In “Mark Twain in the Pulpit: The Theological Comedy of *Huckleberry Finn,*” Twain scholar Stanley Brodwin writes, “at the heart of his comic imagination there dwelt the impulses of a preacher, a ‘preacher-manqué,’ to be sure, because or in spite of a radical predilection to test his own theological and cultural values against the entrenched contradictions he encountered in everyday experience” (371).
Though a “frustrated preacher,” Twain intertwined his Christian “countertheology”\textsuperscript{12} with his comic stories quite effectively. Twain maintained it was a balance of teaching and preaching that would sustain his success as a writer:

Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years. [. . .] I have always preached. That is the reason I have lasted thirty years. If the humor came of its own accord and uninvited, I have allowed it a place in my sermon, but I was not writing the sermon for the sake of the humor. I would have written the sermon just the same, whether any humor applied for admission or not. (Twain qtd. in Brodwin 371)

While his sermon is not typical of a Protestant minister, Twain’s conflict with his own conscience and the Protestant teachings surrounding him are demonstrated in \textit{Huckleberry Finn}. Twain challenges Protestant beliefs rather than trying to convert audiences to them.

As a self-described preacher, Twain wrote the story of Huck Finn, an orphaned boy who struggles with the conflict posed by his own conscience and that of the society who has taken him in. Huck learns from his guardians Widow Douglas and Miss Watson about the Protestant faith. The widow shows Huck Christian benevolence by taking care of him and Miss Watson ministers to Huck by encouraging him to choose the path of salvation and stop swearing and smoking. Pap Finn abandons Huck only to come back to him when he hears that Huck has found a substantial sum of money. Pap abuses Huck while in drunken stupors to the point that Huck fakes his own death to runaway. Pap is the antithesis to Huck’s innocence. Pap symbolizes the darkness in the society surrounding Huck. Huck sees his path with Miss Watson as restricted and his path with

\textsuperscript{12} A term used by Stanley Brodwin referring to the transformation of Christian principles made by Twain.
Pap as controlling. Huck is most free when he runs away and is on the river with Jim, Miss Watson’s slave. As Huck travels down the Mississippi River with Jim, their encounters test Huck’s beliefs and their friendship. Jim’s superstitious readings offer Huck another way of viewing the world—one that contradicts Miss Watson’s Protestant beliefs and even those of his abusive father. As Huck is challenged to make decisions based on what is right and wrong, he considers the teachings of the society that has taken him in and struggles with an inner conflict. In the end Huck is transformed only in the sense that he is redeemed by his own true beliefs that counter those of the Protestant America he exists in: Huck resists the sins of society and listens to his conscience that tells him to help free Jim, Miss Watson’s property. Huck makes a decision for himself.

Through Huck Finn, Twain offers readers a character who questions deep-rooted assumptions about “America’s providential mission”—freedom through choosing the path of salvation—and offers in their place “a dynamically subversive comic ‘theology’” (Brodwin 385). This is a theology that asks readers to ponder what it means to be free by examining their own conscience when it comes to ingrained assumptions of our culture and society. Huck’s dilemma is found in his battle to reconcile Jim’s status as property belonging to Miss Watson with his view of him as a friend and protector. Huck is taught a theology based on the Protestant conviction that sinning is wrong. In this society Huck would be sinning if he did not turn Jim in as a runaway slave. However, Huck recognizes the duplicity of Jim as an outsider to society and as a man, a human being with thoughts, feelings, and goals the same as himself. For Huck to make the right choice and do the right thing means he must do what is considered by the society he lives in to be wrong—
he will try to protect Jim. Huck finds his personal freedom in his choice to follow his conscience that is in opposition to the Protestant society that has raised him, but because of his orphaned status he remained an outsider to.

Educating Others of the Deaf Community

In Deaf West Theatre’s *Big River* Huck’s outsider status is heightened because of the explicit significance of his deafness, not just his orphaned status. While the musical maintains Twain’s challenge to Protestantism, Huck’s deafness introduces another aspect of what it means to be free. Historically, deaf Americans faced a hearing community that often made decisions effecting deaf people. Just as there are benevolent examples of hearing people making decisions based on the best interest of the deaf community, there have been many hearing individuals who have hurt the deaf community. One example, of course, would be oralists who sought to banish sign language such as Alexander Graham Bell who went so far as to propose that deaf individuals should be banned from marrying one another. This historical oppression of the American deaf community is a lens through which audiences can view *Big River* and understand the significance of Huck’s action to make his own decision—an expression of his freedom.

Deaf West’s *Big River* is an example of a secular art form containing religious themes and references being used as a tool of deaf activism—to support and project a successful deaf community. The ingrained Protestant influence on Twain as evident in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is also present in Deaf West’s *Big River*. Deaf West employs a theatrical approach as a rhetorical strategy to reach many audiences with their
advocacy for the recognition and use of sign language. Intertwining with Twain’s Protestant themes, Deaf West tells the story of not only Huck who is on a spiritual journey, but the story of the deaf community who was once placed into a defensive position and is now educating others of their skills and values in an offensive position.

Deaf West’s production of *Big River* is not intended to be a religious exploration of the Protestant influence in the deaf community. However, in the foreground of the musical is the text heavily influenced with Twain’s “countertheology” so religious themes are evident. Through lyrics and dialogue reflecting religious references to benevolence, redemption, and freedom, Deaf West’s *Big River* appeals to the audience’s knowledge of early America and the struggles for equality. *Big River*’s content appeals to the audience’s emotions and moves the audience to not only identify with the conflict in Huck, but to also recognize the struggles the deaf community has endured as outsiders. Deaf West’s *Big River* can be interpreted in not only the context of early American struggles with slavery, but also in the context of an American deaf community that employs religious rhetoric in their discourse as evident in the deaf characters.

When Deaf West Theatre decided to create a production of *Big River*, they were given an opportunity to examine the story’s themes in the context of the American deaf community. Twain sets up a story that looks at personal, physical, and political struggles of two different individuals, both outsiders, as told from the perspective of Huck. Twain uses everyday speech of Southern rural whites and blacks to tell Huck’s story. Deaf West’s production of *Big River* uses the sign language of the American deaf community to convey the important themes in Twain’s original work. Linguist Carol A. Padden, a
Deaf ASL signer and professor of Communications at the University of California, at San Diego, claims that

*Big River* teaches us about the struggle for equality in the U.S. Likewise ASL on the stage reminds deaf people of their long struggle for acceptance of their language. [ . . .] For years until the middle of the century, many educators believed that sign languages were “primitive” and “backwards,” and that deaf children should learn only through the “oral method,” or through speech alone. Many deaf adults today tell stories about being punished for signing secretly with their friends, or being put in classes for the less gifted because they struggled to learn to speak. (“The People” 10)

Padden wrote this for an article that was included in the playbill for the 2002, Los Angeles performances of *Big River* allowing the audience some perspective from the deaf community for which to view the production through. This written information combined with the deaf-hearing theatre experience allows audiences to gain a better understanding of the challenges the deaf community has endured to preserve sign language. The question-and-answer sessions sometimes offered after performances also provided evidence of audiences being educated through *Big River* of the importance sign language has for the deaf community. At one such session I attended in New York, a hearing member of the audience stood up to ask the deaf actors “Do you really understand everything done on the hands like that? It is incredible.” Unfamiliar with sign language and the deaf community, this audience member gained an appreciation for ASL and its use as a language. Deaf West Theatre serves the deaf community by educating others of the strife the deaf community has endured to retain their language and identity. Because of the early deaf community leaders’ activism, sign language survived and in works like Deaf West’s *Big River* we see it flourish.
Underlying Protestant Themes in *Big River*

Deaf West’s *Big River* serves as a testimony to audiences of successes in the American deaf community. To look back and see what the deaf community has come through is to acknowledge and appreciate where they are now. We must also acknowledge the means through which Deaf West has chosen to convey their mission. As a whole, the production demonstrates that the use of sign language does not impede social development and it does not prevent someone from being “normal,” as many oralists argued (and probably many audience members believe). Deafness is still often viewed as a deficit—the lack of hearing. However, the use of sign language in *Big River* symbolizes the positive view of deafness as an equal counterpart to hearing.

The use of sign language by Deaf West combined with Twain’s reference to deafness in his original work\(^{13}\) open up possible analyses that are from a Deaf perspective. By analyzing Deaf West’s *Big River* using a Deaf lens, significant layers of meaning are added to the overall themes of benevolence, redemption, and freedom found in the musical. References to the intertwining of deaf education and the spiritual status of deaf students, the hold oralists had over sign language and the deaf community, and the empowerment the deaf community found in their own experiences surface when examining Deaf West’s *Big River* through a Deaf lens. The Protestant themes and references of *Big River* then present a Deaf activist’s rhetoric that is clearly religious.

\(^{13}\) In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the reader learns from Jim, the slave, that his daughter is deaf. Jim tells Huck the emotional story of when he first learns his daughter is deaf.
Benevolence: Salvation through Literacy

As outsiders, Huck and Jim’s adventures take them through challenges that highlight the original Christian themes of benevolence, redemption, and freedom that Twain wrote about in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *Big River* opens with Huck, an uneducated orphan without a home, encountering the benevolence of a Protestant society when he is welcomed into the home of the Widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson, who represent civilized society. They encourage Huck to go to school and to read his Bible, but Huck would rather go on adventures and seek freedom away from the structure of society, not within the Protestant belief system surrounding him. *Big River* opens with the cast signing and singing to Huck the song “Do Ya Wanna Go to Heaven.” The characters, Miss Watson and Judge Thatcher scold Huck with signs jetting towards him: “You better learn to read and you better learn your writin'/Or you'll never get to heaven cause you won't know how” (“Do Ya Wanna Go to Heaven” Soundtrack). In *Big River*, Huck is admonished by the society that has adopted him and shown him kindness by offering what they perceive is a better life. Huck better change and learn to read and write or he will go down the path of damnation, according to his Protestant caregivers.

*In Big River*, Huck struggles to believe in something and is surrounded by Widow Douglas and Miss Watson signing and singing: “You may think that the whole thing is silly/But it ain't silly really and I'll tell you right now/If you don't learn to read then you can't read your Bible/And you'll never get to heaven cause you won't know how” (“Do Ya Wanna Go to Heaven” Soundtrack). The structured society represented in these lyrics and firm signs teach Huck he has two choices in life: to follow the path of damnation or
the path of salvation. Huck struggles with which path to take acting ambivalent yet conflicted. While the actions of Miss Watson and Widow Douglas may be interpreted as benevolent—trying to help an orphan boy who is less fortunate than they—Huck does not make any definitive decision in their presence.

Huck, portrayed as a deaf boy, battles the conflicts he has with the Protestant faith surrounding him. Miss Watson and Judge Thatcher’s concern for Huck’s eternal well-being echoes the work of T. H. Gallaudet among deaf Americans. As mentioned in chapter one, part of the reason why the first American school for the deaf opened in 1817 was because Hartford community leaders believed that the deaf needed to be educated and learn a language so they could become Christians. These leaders, including T. H. Gallaudet, saw their actions as a ministry to deaf individuals in America. T. H. Gallaudet thought his actions were benevolent; as part of his Protestant beliefs, he was commissioned to help those less fortunate than he. Like Miss Watson and Judge Thatcher’s encouragement of Huck to learn to read and write, T. H. Gallaudet felt compelled to teach deaf students a language so they too could come to know God and not suffer eternal damnation. In Big River, the theme of benevolence echoes the work of early deaf community leaders. The activism of the Gallaudets and Veditz to secure schools and preserve a language for the deaf came from the Protestant practice of benevolence or serving to protect the good of deaf individuals or the emerging deaf community. These deaf activists used a distinct method of discourse employing religious motives, metaphors, and biblical references to advocate the use of sign language.
Despite the efforts of deaf community leaders like the Gallaudets and Veditz, the deaf community fell under the oppression of oralists. Educators, parents, and even politicians declared sign language showed ignorance and that oral methods were far superior to manualists’ methods of education. Some deaf students did not have a choice but to learn under oralist conditions, but many other deaf community members questioned the authority of the oralists and older community members rebelled against this oppression empowering their cause with religious rhetoric. Deaf community activists like Veditz disagreed with oralists’ arguments and responded with “[a]s long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs” (Veditz). Like Veditz, many deaf community members believed their language was a “gift from God” and that T. H. Gallaudet was used by God to help give deaf Americans that language and through it a way to salvation.

Widow Douglas and Miss Watson encourage Huck to gain literacy so he can learn their Protestant theology and come to know God. While Huck has not claimed to be converted to Protestantism, he shows signs of influence from Widow Douglas and Miss Watson’s benevolence. Huck’s version of benevolence is evident when he befriends Jim, Miss Watson’s slave. As a slave of Miss Watson’s, Jim seeks freedom from bondage. The values and teachings of the society Jim lives in have physically constrained him. Huck and Jim differ in that Huck is perceived as free while Jim is a slave. Through the course of the musical, we see Huck struggle with his relationship to Jim. In breaking the rules of his Protestant society, Huck befriends Jim, a runaway slave. In doing so, Huck

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14 See Mark A. Noll’s chapter “The Bible and Slavery” in America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln for a discussion on how American Protestants of the nineteenth century used scriptures from the bible to both argue for slavery and against slavery, as well as present arguments mediating between the two extremes.
demonstrates his own version of benevolence by helping Jim, whom he sees as worse off than himself.

**Redemption: Acceptance of Differences and Forgiveness of Self**

Part of the Protestant influence in *Big River* is the recognition of all human beings to be equal and of worth—or to all be “children of God.” Huck struggles to reconcile his relationship with Jim and Jim’s status as outsider to Huck’s community. There are scenes in the musical that highlight not only Huck’s transformation, but also the argument that like the slaves in *Big River*, the American deaf community is equal to members of the hearing community and worthy of recognition as intellectual members of society. While searching for freedom, Jim and Huck find themselves aboard a raft traveling down the Mississippi. Huck and Jim’s differences are apparent: “Now, with *Big River*, Huck Finn and Jim, the Slave, find themselves being ‘worlds apart,’ not only in terms of being black and white, but also in terms of being hearing and deaf” (Garfield 15). Huck is deaf while Jim is hearing. Towards the beginning of Act II, Huck and Jim realize how different they are, yet how strong they are working together. Jim signs and sings,

> And I see the same skies through brown eyes  
> That you see through blue  
> But we’re worlds apart  
> Worlds apart  
> Just like the earth, just like the sun  
> Two worlds together are better than one  
> I see the sunrise in your eyes  
> That you see in mine  
> But we’re worlds apart
and concludes the song with “[a]nd the mocking bird sings/From the ole yonder
tree/Twad-dle-ee ah dee dee dum dee dee dee” (“Worlds Apart” Soundtrack). Huck joins
Jim in this song, but as their skin color denotes them as two individuals of two different
communities, Jim’s ability to hear distinguishes him from Huck as he concludes the song
with a reference to the bird he hears singing. Huck does not respond to Jim’s last lines.
Huck does not hear the bird, yet he has gained an understanding that Jim is like him in
that he is human with a life perspective all his own.

*Big River* continues to reinforce the differences of characters—both deaf and
hearing and black and white. However, in one critical scene, a gospel-filled song invokes
the conviction that all humans are equal because they are “children of God.” In a funeral
scene, the slave Alice sings while both hearing and deaf cast members who are black and
white join her in signing “How Blest We Are.” The song conveys the evangelical
theology of redemption through God’s son, Jesus and the demonstration of this
redemption through faith in this Redeemer. The slave characters reconcile their captured
orientation in this world, and the implication is the deaf community reconciles their fight
to preserve sign language, through the belief that God’s loving hand controls their
experiences. On a candle-lit stage the cast signs and sings:

    How blest we are
    As children of a God so good and true
    To understand his moving hand
    And, love for me and you
    How blest we are
    As children of a God
    Whose love is real
    Enough to touch each one of us
    Is part of him I feel
    I honor thee
I honor thee
To whom my love is vowed
How blessed be
Forever we are bound to him as now. ("How Blest We Are" Soundtrack)

Because Deaf West staged this song with both hearing and deaf actors signing the song, they have emphasized the lyrics that all people are “children of God.” The evangelical theology expressed in these lyrics suggests that not only is the black slave singing the song as valuable as the white characters standing behind her, but that the deaf characters are equal to the hearing characters. Every character on the stage in this scene signs the song. Since the life experiences of deaf Americans include battles to retain sign language, which is used in this scene to heighten the emotional appeal of the lyrics, the value of sign language to convey deeply religious and emotional sentiments is emphasized.

Another important reference in this song is the religious metaphor of God’s moving hand. The metaphor is used in these lyrics to convey the belief that God is in control of the life experiences of these believers. In the context of a Deaf perspective, God’s hand is not only controlling but symbolic of a conveyor of meaning since sign language expresses meaning on the hands of a signer.

As the musical progresses, Huck begins to feel conflicted. While Jim is worse off than Huck in terms of the societal structure of slavery, Jim shares with Huck a journey to freedom. Huck begins to transform his convictions by questioning the societal structure of slavery, recognizing Jim as his equal, and even a father figure. In doing so, he is moving closer to obtaining freedom.
Huck’s growing acceptance of Jim, an outsider because of his status as a slave, teaches hearing audiences that despite differences all people should be respected. Within the struggles of the deaf community, are the frequent encounters with hearing individuals or a hearing society that does not respect deaf values. Historically, sign language was challenged—and by extension, the very core of the deaf community was thought to be invalid and symbolic of deficits. Deaf Americans have been stereotyped as slow or impaired because of their deafness. For years, and even more recently with the debates regarding cochlear implants, the deaf community has been subjected to the ignorance of people who view deafness as equivalent to mental or intellectual deficiencies. Historically, this is reflected in oralists’ arguments and educational policies. It was through the work of Protestant deaf community leaders that sign language has been secured; through its use in sanctuaries it was preserved; and in the production of Deaf West’s *Big River* its use symbolizes the freedom the deaf community gained from the grips of oralists.

The clearest moment in *Big River* that symbolizes the challenges the deaf community faced to stabilize and maintain their language is when the young slave girl (who we learn is Jim’s deaf daughter) signs the spiritual “The Crossing” with her hands in chains while her mother, Alice, sings:

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Crossing to the other side
We are pilgrims
On a journey through the darkness of the night
We are bound for other places
Crossing to the other side
I will worry ’bout tomorrow
When tomorrow comes in sight
Until then, Lord, I’m just a Pilgrim
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Crossing to the other side
Jesus will be there to meet me
He will reach his hand in mine
I will no more be a stranger
When I reach the other side.  (Soundtrack)

The impact of seeing a deaf character (and actor) signing in chains is strong (see picture below). Through a Deaf perspective, the chained hands symbolize the hold oralists had on the deaf community by restricting sign language and promoting the use of speech. With chained hands, movements are restricted so language and meaning is not easily expressed. However, this deaf actor in Big River effectively enriches the production by Deaf West Theatre with the ability to use sign language to express the deeply Protestant lyrics sung by the hearing actress portraying her mother.

Left to Right: Alice (Gwen Stewart) and Alice’s daughter (Michelle A. Banks) (P.L.A.Y. 8).
Visually expressing the strife of the American deaf community, Deaf West employs a dramatic staging convention to relate the imprisoned stronghold the oralist had on the deaf in the first half of the twentieth century. The result is that *Big River* is a work that raises the awareness of the audience, who may gain an appreciation for sign language and its purpose to convey meaning for the deaf. Deaf West’s *Big River* may even encourage audience members to accept the differences they may have with deaf people, and become supporters of Deaf culture through attending more productions by Deaf West Theatre, supporting captioning at their local movie theatre, or sharing with their friends what they experienced at *Big River*. In audiences spreading the word that the deaf community achieved a masterful performance that was enlightening and entertaining, the mission of both Deaf West and the early activists in the deaf community is fulfilled. The religious rhetoric in this case of the deaf slave girl provides strength to a character—she finds power in a belief that is greater than the society keeping her in chains.

The spiritual “The Crossing” is an example of how religious themes in *Big River* intertwine with the purpose of Deaf West’s mission. As a deaf girl, the young slave signs about finding a better place beyond this world. She passionately conveys the act of “crossing to another side” with the sign implying going from one place to another. Because the sign is executed at a location higher than typical, the meaning signified is crossing to heaven. In Twain’s original work, slaves are clearly portrayed as outsiders to the Protestant American community they are surrounded by. In Deaf West’s *Big River*, deaf Americans play the role of outsiders as well. “The Crossing” poignantly points to the hope both groups of outsiders may have found in their religious faiths: that
something better lied beyond this earth. This belief is common in American evangelical
Protestantism that believes that “Jesus Christ (crucified—dead—resurrected) [is] God’s
means of redemption” (Noll America’s God 171). In Big River, as Alice sings and her
daughter signs, “Jesus will be there to meet me/He will reach his hand in mine” one is
reminded of not only evangelical Protestant theology, but also the importance hands have
to the deaf community (“The Crossing” Soundtrack). As a community that identifies
itself by a visual language that is conveyed through the hands, body, and face of the
signer, it is Jesus’ hand that will touch the deaf slave girl when she reaches heaven—the
ultimate redeemer in Protestant theology. The song continues with “I will no more be a
stranger” referring to the outsider status assigned to both slaves and deaf Americans
(“The Crossing” Soundtrack). The song this deaf slave girl signs implies that through
salvation freedom is found in death when she is no longer a slave. For many deaf
Americans freedom was gained with more rights from changed laws and policies
advocating the values of deaf Americans as fought for by deaf activists.

Before Huck can gain personal freedom, he must experience redemption. While
both Huck and Jim are on a river taking them to freedom, physically for Jim and
personally for Huck, they are seeking redemption for different reasons. In Big River like
in Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the audience learns that Jim has a deaf
daughter. For Big River audiences this may explain why Jim knows sign language and is
able to communicate with Huck. Jim voices and signs the story of when he learned his
daughter was deaf:

Before I could hit her again, long come the wind and slam the door to,
blam! And my Lord, the child never move. My breath hopped right out of
me. Oh, Huck! I burst out cryin’ and grab her. Lord God Almighty forgive Jim, I says, ‘cause he ain’t never going to forgive himself as long as he live! That fever left her deaf and dumb, Huck. Plumb deaf and dumb. And I’d been treating her so. (Hauptman 77)

In telling this story, Jim shares a need for redemption—he mistreated his daughter without realizing there was an explanation for her not following his instructions. Jim conveys that his guilt is insurmountable, yet he asks for God’s forgiveness. Jim demonstrates the Protestant belief that God’s grace redeems him. Jim also shows his trust in Huck by sharing this story and demonstrates that it is through the shared language of signs that they can connect—one hearing, one deaf, and one searching for physical freedom, one searching for personal freedom.

Huck’s road to redemption is challenging and complicated. When Jim first tells Huck of his plans to buy his wife and children, Huck reacts with conflicting emotions. Facing the audience, Huck signs “[t]hen my conscience got to troubling me. This thing I was doing was coming home. Thinks I: Jim’s going to get free. [. . .] And who’s to blame for it? Me. [. . .] My conscience was stirring me up, hotter than ever” (Hauptman 51). Huck feels convicted by the Protestant beliefs ingrained in him by the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Helping Jim steal another person’s property would surely send him down the path of damnation. But Huck’s instinct is to help Jim; Huck thinks it isn’t right that the society he lives in would support separating a man from his family, and make women and men property.

Huck decides to do wrong by doing right. Huck addresses the audience when he signs:
I knewed very well I’d done wrong. Then I says to myself, hold on—suppose you done right and give Jim up. Would you feel better than what you do right now? No, says I—I’d feel worse. Well, then? What’s the use in learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? (53)

Huck helps Jim, but struggles with the desire to do what is right by the Protestant standards of Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. In the end he determines going to hell and feeling like hell would be the results of either decision to help Jim or not to help him. Jim is captured by a family down river and Huck once again debates what to do. Huck turns to the audience and signs:

Human beings can be so cruel to each other. It hit me all of a sudden that here was the hand of God, letting me know I’d been watched all along from above . . . and people who helped a nigger like I’d done were the ones who went to the everlasting fire. I decided to pray and see if I could stop being the kind of boy I was. But you can’t pray a lie, I found that out. I’ll write a letter—then see if I can pray. […] “Miss Watson. Your runaway nigger Jim is down here two miles South of Hillsboro and Mr. Phelps will give him up for the reward if you send. Huck Finn.” I felt light as a feather, washed clean of sin for the first time in my whole life! But then I got to thinking about our trip down the river and I seen Jim before me all the time, and we afloating along, talking, singing and laughing. And him saying I was his only friend in the world. . . . (Suddenly he tears up the letter and flings the pieces away.) All right, then, I’ll go to hell! I’ll take up wickedness again, which is in my line, being brought up to it. And for a starter, I’ll steal Jim out of slavery again. And if I can think of something worse, I’ll do that too: because as long as I’m in, and in for good, I might as well go whole hog! (Hauptman 94)

Huck believes God is watching him and that he will be punished for his decision to go against the Protestant ethics of his society. After Huck confesses his sin, he feels redeemed—“washed clean of sin” (94). However, Huck’s true redemption is not through Protestant salvation but through his decision to be true to himself and his own beliefs.
For Huck, he chooses what is right for him and Jim as outsiders rather than following the entrenched assumptions of the society they are in.

**Freedom: The Shining Light**

Through a Deaf lens, Huck comes to symbolize the struggles the deaf community must have encountered with a growing oralism supporting society that saw them as separate from the rest of the hearing world. In *Big River*, Deaf West Theatre exploits the differences of Jim and Huck to advocate for full inclusion—two different cultures working together. In doing so, Deaf West Theatre become deaf activists, vigilantly advocating for recognition of a deaf identity that includes the struggle to use and preserve sign language. In “Worlds Apart” Huck and Jim sign and sing that “[t]wo worlds together are better than one” (Soundtrack). In *Big River*, Deaf West Theatre has chosen to symbolize this with the use of a spoken and signed performance. The bi-cultural experience combining the two worlds of hearing and deaf people does make for a unique theatre experience while adding significance to the themes of *Big River* based on Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

As Huck and Jim travel down the Mississippi River, they both face challenges that change them, yet they both gain freedom. For Huck he questions the societal and political beliefs of slavery. He begins to see Jim as a friend or father figure. Huck has no loyalty to the rules and laws of the church or state, and begins to follow his heart; in doing so he obtains a personal freedom. He helps Jim escape even if it means he will go to Hell. However, Jim gains his physical freedom through the wishes of Miss Watson—
she grants his freedom. Huck recognizes that he has believed what he has been told to
believe, and has done little to think for himself. Reflecting on his confusion, Huck signs:

    I have lived in the darkness for so long
    I am waitin’ for the light to shine
    Far beyond horizons I have seen
    Beyond the things I’ve been
    Beyond the dreams I’ve dreamed
    Are the things I’ve done
    In fact each and every one
    Are the way that I was taught to run
    I am waitin’ for the light to shine
    I am waitin’ for the light to shine
    I have lived in the darkness for so long
    I’m waitin’ for the light to shine. (“Waitin’ for the Light to Shine”
    Soundtrack)

For Huck the light shining may be the ideas and beliefs that he develops on his own,
independent from that of the society surrounding him. For the deaf community these
lyrics have far greater significance.

    Towards the end of Big River, Huck, Alice, Alice’s daughter, Jim, and the
company take the stage and sing and sign “Waitin’ for the Light to Shine.” At one point
in the performance of the song, the singers stop singing and the instruments stop playing.
The stage is filled with deaf and hearing actors signing the lyrics in silence—“I have
lived in the darkness for so long/I’m waitin’ for the light to shine”—hands dancing in
rhythm, conveying a message in unison (Soundtrack). The audience is reminded of the
bi-cultural experience they are having and of the significance of a deaf-hearing theater
experience. The deaf members of the audience fully understand what is being conveyed;
but I argue the choice of Deaf West to perform this song this way is a political one. Deaf
West makes the hearing audience “deaf” if only for the duration of this song. Hearing
audience members sit in silence watching sign language conveying meaning that many of them do not understand. This moment allows a slight glimpse into the deaf community and a deaf identity that values the use of sign language. The lyrics of the song have many interpretations when examined through a Deaf perspective. The deaf community was kept in the dark in the sense of rights to education, to marriage, and even to their own language. When analyzing these lyrics in the context of the struggle of the deaf community, many important topics emerge. The importance of light for deaf people is literal: Since sign language is a visual language, light is needed for signs to be read and understood. Another interpretation is based on the Protestant themes evident in the lyrics in the context of the American deaf community’s history of the intertwining of education, advocacy for sign language, and religion.

Historically, deaf Americans were referred to as living in darkness when they were without language and religion. As mentioned in chapter one, in his opening address at the American School for the Deaf, T. H. Gallaudet uses the metaphor of darkness and light. He refers to the deaf as imprisoned in dungeons, thus in darkness (“Opening Address” 8). Gallaudet preached that sign language would light paths to understanding and knowledge of the Protestant faith for the deaf. For Huck in *Big River*, he is struggling with what path to take. He has been taught that there are only two paths to choose from: the path of salvation taught to him by Miss Watson and the path of damnation demonstrated to him by his pap. Pap symbolizes the darkness in the society surrounding Huck, while within Huck is the light he needs to make his decision of what path to take.
Jim and Huck work together to accomplish their adventure. They gain respect for each other and learn to trust the other. They go against the norms of their separate societies and accept one another. As hearing and deaf actor work together to convey through sign language and spoken English the emotion of their characters and the bi-cultural emphasis of the musical, they symbolically float on a river of mainstreaming advocating the use of and recognition for the value of sign language. They blend speaking and singing with signing and reach both deaf and hearing audiences. During “Muddy Water” the two actors literally collaborate to create signs (see picture on next page). While riding their raft down the river, Huck and Jim travel together—one deaf and one hearing. One man relies on the other for safety, for camaraderie, and for the conveyance of meaning. Huck learns that like the Mississippi he must continue to move forward learning from and trusting in friends, and that freedom does not come in isolation. He gains redemption by trusting his conscience, not the ingrained assumptions of the society surrounding him.
For deaf Americans, the value of a community bonded by a common language is significant. Deaf West Theatre has created a production that advocates for the use and recognition of sign language. In doing so, religious subject matter is used rhetorically to convince audiences of the value of sign language and the merging of both deaf and hearing cultures. While both speaking and sign language is used in Deaf West’s *Big River*, the audience is presented a clear and graceful art form empowering the deaf community. The American deaf community’s respect for sign language echoes the early manualists’ claim that it is “a gift from God” that should be valued.
As audience members, we learn that we need to rethink many of our society’s assumptions—from our ideas of theater to our preconceptions of the deaf community. Deaf West’s production of *Big River* really is a simple story of one boy’s voyage of spiritual awakening; however, with the added context of the deaf community’s struggles, the production is a significant achievement of advocacy for the deaf community. Audiences are shown the ability of deaf community members to use sign language effectively—from Jim’s deaf slave daughter signing in chains, to a deaf lead actor—to command the attention of an audience of both deaf and hearing people hanging on every sign.

**Conclusion**

The message of Deaf West Theatre’s production of *Big River* echoes the early motives of Veditz and the Gallaudets. In 1817, Gallaudet opened the first school for the deaf in America. The main principle of the school was to give the deaf a language so they could gain understanding of religion. The story in *Big River* takes place in 1840. By this time, several schools for the deaf had opened in America promoting sign language as the means and skill needed for the deaf to learn. However, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, deaf people found their language under attack by educators who believed it was primitive and showed ignorance; thus the need for the NAD films promoting and preserving sign language. Because Deaf West’s production uses deaf and hearing actors who sign and sing to tell the story, the production is a symbol to the deaf and hearing audience of how far the deaf community has come—from a defensive
position to an offensive one promoting the artistic expressions of the community. It is also a reflection of a deaf identity ingrained with the evangelical Protestant ethic to serve the greater good of the community by educating others of its struggles to preserve sign language and gain recognition and respect for it.

Like their fellow advocates of the past, the NAD continues to use contemporary and effective means necessary to persuade both deaf and hearing audiences of their cause. The NAD is the “largest constituency organization safeguarding the accessibility and civil rights of 28 million deaf and hard of hearing Americans in education, employment, health care, and telecommunications” (“About NAD”). As activism within the deaf community takes different forms, one constant will continue to connect the community to Protestantism: the inherent link of the advocacy for sign language with religious rhetoric to preserve it.
Deaf advocacy for sign language was grounded in religious discourse in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. As T. H. Gallaudet brought education to the deaf in America with the opening of the American School for the Deaf in 1817, he brought more profoundly Protestant religion, which would leave an imprint on the American deaf identity through the mid-twentieth century. As I laid out in chapter one, T. H. Gallaudet’s mission to bring education and a language to the deaf came from his Protestant conviction to help others to come to know God. This Protestant influence on deaf education left a lasting impression on the deaf community. The deaf community emerged because of residential schools bringing together deaf individuals that were spread apart. As more schools for the deaf emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century, oralists supported a national identity that placed an emphasis on citizens speaking a common language. Because deaf individuals did not speak, they were set apart as immigrants in their own country. Fueling the outsider status assigned to deaf Americans was the growing support for the oral tradition of education. As science progressed and influenced popular thinking, the theory of evolution and eugenics backed up the oralists’ claims that the deaf needed to learn to speak and lip read in order to be on equal status with the hearing Americans.
The religious rhetoric found in the school, the sanctuary, and the social activism produced by the American deaf community empowered a deaf identity facing challenges from a dominant hearing community that threatened to end the use of sign language. The nineteenth and early twentieth-century arguments supporting the use of manualism or the combined method of instruction, the chosen method by deaf ministers to convey a sermon in signs and advocate for the political interests of an emerging community, and the efforts to garner support for deaf community advocacy have cemented a deaf identity grounded in the use of sign language. I argue that while participation in religious services and evidence of religion’s presence in the deaf community has diminished over the last half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Protestant religion is still tied to the deaf community through its use of sign language.

As I have shown in the previous chapters, deaf Americans faced challenges specific to their language use. As oralists emphasized speech and lip reading, they threatened the existence of sign language in schools for the deaf. In response, the deaf community united to defend their claim to their language. Late nineteenth-century debates regarding deaf education often split on ideological lines. Manualists aligned their arguments supporting sign language with a Protestant ideology that was involved with bringing sign language to deaf Americans. Many viewed sign language as the “natural language of the deaf”—a theory that has recently been supported with Judy Kegl’s study of Nicaraguan sign language among deaf children in two different schools (see Bower). The combined system of educating deaf students was supported by many deaf community leaders. This method of instruction valued both oral and manual teaching emphasizing
that all deaf students should learn sign language and that sign language would be the method of communication in all matters of religious training and instruction. Oralists, influenced by advancements in science, cited evolutionary theories to support the view that sign language use was symptomatic of a species of lower development. Deaf individuals were outsiders to a hearing community struggling to define their national identity, as well as to Christian educators seeking to save the heathens. In times of challenge, the deaf community appealed to the like-minded Protestant hearing community, using their shared religious beliefs as a way to build bridges and garner support for sign language.

The one place that typically remained a signing place at residential schools was the chapel. Religious training maintained importance at deaf residential schools well into the twentieth century. Chapel services transmitted not only the deaf community’s value of sign language but perpetuated a deaf identity that exuded morality. As oralists and manualists split on how to educate deaf students scholastically, they often agreed that religious training should be done through sign language. Reasons for this practice, as I explain in chapter three, were grounded in physical practicality and in the ability for sign language to best convey the abstract theology of a minister’s sermon. While sign language continued to be transmitted in the chapel, religious services also had the effect of connecting young deaf students with a larger deaf community. Deaf ministers who came to schools to deliver sermons were often the only deaf role models for deaf students in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As students graduated from residential schools they sought social interaction at churches where they knew they would
find other deaf individuals who used sign language. The Protestant church provided the
deaf community a signing sanctuary. Deaf leaders emerged from ministries to the deaf
and the pulpit became a platform for not just religious training but for an expression of
community values. The political interests of the deaf community were often supported
by the church and the church became a location where strong bonds were formed among
deaf people. The Protestant church played a major role in the deaf community
maintaining a deaf identity most recognizable by their use of sign language.

As the deaf community faced struggles, they were often defensive in their
responses to a dominant hearing community. Turning to artful expressions, the deaf
community fought to preserve sign language. Historically the deaf community preserved
master signers on film. Veditz’s leadership led to the NAD’s moving picture campaign.
Veditz was one of the filmed signers whose speech *Preservation of the Sign Language* is
legendary in the deaf community. His fiery biblical metaphors name oralists the new
pharaohs coming to enslave the deaf community who uses sign language. Veditz’s ethos
was powerful in the deaf community and his pathos appealed to a still mainly Protestant
nation in the early twentieth century. As deaf activism took many forms throughout the
twentieth century, the theatre became another location and artful expression of deaf
activism. The Deaf West Theatre’s production of *Big River* has reached thousands of
people on its national tour and is an example of a shift in Deaf activism from a defensive
stance to an offensive one. Through a musical with religious themes and references,
contemporary leaders in the deaf community offer deaf and hearing audiences an event to
cause reflection on the use of sign language and the recognition of the treatment of deaf
people in America. This is one secular example of deaf activism that exhibits a link to Protestant religion suggesting that the American deaf identity continues to have a religious imprint.

We are now left asking what the implications are of this evidence of a Protestant influence on an American deaf identity. I contend that there is significant evidence to suggest that more research and study is needed in the contemporary deaf community, research that is valuable to rhetoric, composition studies, and disability studies. One specific area to investigate is the role technology has played in the shaping of a contemporary deaf identity. In many ways, technology has fulfilled some of the same functions of religion in the deaf community.

While there are members of the American deaf community who actively participate in deaf and hearing congregations, the church’s role as a social place for deaf individuals has been impacted by technology. Technology has allowed many deaf individuals to socialize outside of one another’s physical presence, as well as provide platforms for deaf activism much like the church did in the early twentieth century. For example, the Internet has become an active place for Deaf advocacy. As technology has allowed the deaf community greater access, it also has implications for a deaf identity and the community’s cohesion.

**Technology: Helping or Diminishing a Deaf Identity?**

Historically, some technology represented another way the deaf community was set apart from the hearing community. For example, in 1876 prominent oralist and
opponent to sign language, Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated his voice telephone at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Bell’s invention further separated the deaf from the hearing at a pivotal time in the history of the deaf community. Because the successful use of the telephone relied on the users’ ability to speak and hear, deaf people were excluded from using Bell’s invention. It was not until 1964 that the first teletypewriters (TTY) were introduced that would allow deaf individuals to communicate over phone lines. Advancements in technology have played an interesting role in the deaf community. While allowing greater access to mainstream America for some deaf and hard of hearing individuals, technology has also divided the community based on what it means to be Deaf. For example, more recently, technology has allowed the sophistication of cochlear implants that many parents of deaf children view as miraculous inventions allowing their children a permanent place in the mainstream. With greater use of cochlear implants in the 1990s, came protests by the deaf community claiming cochlear implants threatened the existence of the Deaf culture. While technology has allowed deaf individuals greater access to mainstream society and to one another, it cannot be overlooked as one impetus for change in a deaf identity.

The benefits of technology cannot be over stated; however in the case of the American deaf community, a critical look at the negative aspects of technology should be examined. As Bell’s telephone invention brought an ease of communication to the hearing community, TTY and computer technology have brought distant deaf community members in touch with one another without requiring face-to-face contact. And while TTY and relay-service have become accessible by a wide range of the deaf community,
more sophisticated technology is still out of grasp for some deaf individuals. One negative impact of technological advancements is a clearer stratification among the deaf community based on social class.

As more deaf individuals were mainstreamed with the passing of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, more deaf individuals pursued college educations outside Gallaudet University. With mainstreaming came a deaf population that did not rely on the vocational training at residential schools to prepare them for professional careers. According to the NAD’s website, deaf workers still earn less on average than hearing workers. However, there is evidence from the amount of academic publications by deaf individuals that more deaf people are involved in academia beyond Gallaudet University than at any other time. This suggests that while there are deaf individuals at every social level just as hearing individuals, that the access to technology, such as pocket size wireless text messaging devices, is limited to those who can afford the more sophisticated technology. The implication of this occurring is that the deaf community may become more isolated from each other. Communication can occur from anywhere, and does not require members to meet, and those who have greater access to more sophisticated technology may be further separated from those deaf people who have less or no access to such technology.

Of course, this same technology has helped deaf people gain broader access. While captioning has allowed deaf people to get their news from television or enjoy the same shows as their hearing friends and family members, it wasn’t until 1997 that the federal law was passed to phase in captioning for all television shows. Technology has
given hard of hearing people better hearing devices and led to the sophistication of
cochlear implants. Since the mid-twentieth century, scientists and doctors have worked
to perfect the technology of cochlear implants. A cochlear implant is a prosthetic
replacement for the inner ear (cochlea). When sound is converted into electrical impulses
by the external parts of the device, the small implanted wires touching the cochlea
stimulate the hearing nerve. A cochlear implant does not restore natural hearing and does
not act like a hearing aid and amplify noises. Speech is replicated by an implant as
electrical pulses that the person with a cochlear implant works to decipher as language.

In the 1990s, when cochlear implants were becoming more popularly used, the deaf
community protested their use. I attended a Deaf Nation Expo in California in the 1990s
where an artwork display contained the subject of cochlear implants. Many of the
drawings and paintings were interpretations of mutilations of ears graphically portraying
the blood spill caused by implants. At this time, many deaf community members, like
these artists, argued that implants were dangerous physically and posed a threat to Deaf
culture.15 Today these arguments have died down somewhat. Evidence of this is the
change in the sign used for cochlear implant. In the 1990s, cochlear implant was signed
with the sign for “vampire” placed behind the ear on the signer’s head signifying the deaf
community’s contempt for implants. Today a more frequent and politically correct sign
for cochlear implant is simply the initials “c” and “i.” This change in signs reflects a
change in attitude that also suggests a wider acceptance by the deaf community for not
only implants but possibly people with cochlear implants. Many parents who have their

15 For more information on debates surrounding cochlear implants, see the documentary Sound and Fury.
children implanted take the suggestion of the NAD seriously, and have their child learn both spoken English and sign language. By practicing sign language, more people with cochlear implants will participate in the deaf community, which has probably led to the greater acceptance of people with cochlear implants into the deaf community.

Technology also has played a role in the diminishment of social clubs and churches. The advent of technology has shifted communication between deaf individuals from needing to be in person to being able to be held via technology such as through instant messaging, real-time chat, TTY (by phone or the newer software that allows this to occur via computer), and video-phones. While the NAD reports that deaf Americans typically earn lower wages than most hearing Americans, technology has become more affordable; yet, technology is still out of reach for many deaf people. With more and more people using technology, bridges have been formed between deaf communities all over the world and between deaf and hearing peers. For example, I have developed online relationships with deaf educators at Gallaudet University. Technology has provided the deaf community with greater access to mainstream society, while causing further isolation for some deaf people.

Technology has played a part in the diminishing aspect of religion in the deaf community. Where the sanctuary once held a significant social function in a deaf individual’s life, technology allows that socializing to occur from the comfort of home. Once the pulpit was used to further political interests of the deaf, now the presence of the NAD has become overwhelming online and in lobbying efforts in Washington, DC. The NAD has been key in securing captioning for the deaf community, for insuring
technological updates in federal offices that anticipate the needs of deaf and hard of hearing employees and customers (NAD). The NAD’s use of technology and building a web presence continues the work of the church and church leaders who came before, but with it has come less of a need for religious rhetoric to argue for the use of sign language.

**Implications**

As more and more deaf students attend predominantly hearing postsecondary institutions, it becomes more important for composition studies to consider the identity of deaf students in the classroom. By investigating the experiences of contemporary deaf students in the composition classroom, we can devise ways to best teach all students. I suggest that ethnographic studies should be conducted of classes including deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students. How information is disseminated by the instructor through sign language interpreters and to all students and how that information is received is significant to informing instructors’ strategies to better teach a diverse population of students. Because students have different learning aptitudes, presenting information and assignments in different forms, orally and visually, for example, are methods that can help deaf and hard of hearing students as well as students with auditory processing disorders. In addition, deaf students who attend predominantly hearing postsecondary institutions may be straddling deaf and hearing identities. Investigations that uncover the role a student’s deaf identity plays in their academic identity would be valuable to composition studies.
While my research has examined the strong Protestant influences in the history of deaf education in America and in the deaf community through ministries by Protestant churches, very little if any work has been done with contemporary influences. Ethnographic work should be done with deaf adults who maintain strong religious aspects to their identity and examine how this relates to their preferred language use. Questions that may be asked include, what role is the church playing in advocacy for the deaf community? Deaf churches and ministries still exist serving a large population of deaf Americans, but with more secularization in American society at large, has this aspect of a deaf identity, like the effects of advancements in technology, stratified and fragmented the deaf community? Technology has been used by churches to minister to deaf people. The OMEGA Project founded by Deaf Missions set out to make available to deaf people the entire Bible in ASL. So far the New Testament has been completed and is available in a five-disc DVD set (see Deaf Missions website). What impact will technology have on worship choices made by deaf people?

As rhetoricians we uncover aspects of communities we investigate. I have uncovered the use of religious rhetoric by the American deaf community to advocate for the preservation of sign language. While conducting research for this study, it struck me that this community has emerged on American soil and is identified by its language use, yet so little is written about it in the field of rhetoric. Gallaudet University archives are full of interesting rhetorical documents that are ripe for analysis. Speeches and sermons by deaf ministers, educators, and deaf community leaders are preserved on film and in the files of papers in Gallaudet University’s archives. Gallaudet University’s library also
houses a large collection of periodicals specific to the deaf community that contain information and articles that may interest rhetoricians. Because rhetoric scholars often neglect the religious aspect of their subject matter, whether it is in people or in texts, it is possible the deaf community’s rhetoric has long been overlooked in our scholarship because of its overwhelming Protestant component. What is important in our research is that we recognize the large component religion and spiritual matters in general play in the experiences people have and how that shows itself in their rhetoric. As Beth Daniell states, “[w]hen whole areas of people’s lives are closed off as unworthy of academic attention, the academy misses important information” (150). Protestantism has played a significant role in the evolution of the American deaf community to overlook that in studies of the contemporary deaf community would be detrimental. While many of the historical documents of the deaf community project a strong religious deaf identity, there are other aspects of the community’s use of language that would benefit the field of rhetoric. There is much more work that needs to be done to uncover and examine the complexities of an American deaf identity visible by language choices.
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