

Finding Aid to the Martha's Vineyard Museum
Record Unit 310
Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard Collection
By Julia Novakovic

Descriptive Summary

Repository: Martha's Vineyard Museum

Call No.

Title: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard Collection

Creator: various

Quantity: 1 cubic foot

Abstract: The Collection on Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard is an artificial compilation made by museum volunteers over the years. Information on the "deaf community" includes newspaper articles, periodical publications, and a doctoral thesis by Nora Groce [author of *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*]. Copies of Alexander Graham Bell's research notes pertaining to Martha's Vineyard are also housed within this collection, as well as information on the 19th century American Asylum for deaf students.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information: The documents in the Hereditary Deafness Collection were acquired by the Martha's Vineyard Museum by various donors during the 20th century.

Processing Information: Julia Novakovic

Access Restrictions: none

Use Restrictions: none

Preferred Citation for Publication: Martha's Vineyard Museum, Hereditary Deafness Collection, Record Unit 310.

Index Terms

- Deafness
- "Deaf Community"
- Martha's Vineyard
- Chilmark
- American Asylum
- Bell, Alexander Graham
- Groce, Nora Ellen
- Thorkelson, Chris

Series and Subseries Arrangement

Series I: Reference

Series II: Alexander Graham Bell

Subseries A: Biographical Information
Subseries B: Research Notes and Correspondence
Series III: American Asylum
Series IV: Publications

Historical Note:

In 1692, Jonathan Lambert and his wife came to the Vineyard from England. He was the first recorded deaf person on Martha's Vineyard, settling near what is now Lambert's Cove. Two of his seven children were deaf. Over the next century, deafness manifested itself in dozens of Island inhabitants, although there was no discernable pattern of occurrence. According to Nora Groce, leading medical authorities in the 19th century claimed that deafness was caused by "Maternal Fright... a prenatal effect on the infant of psychological stress on the mother." People noticed that there was a considerable amount of deaf residents on Martha's Vineyard, much more significant than the rest of the America; in 1854, the national average was one deaf person for every 5,728 counted. In Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard, it was one for every 25.

Alexander Graham Bell took note of this phenomenon. After visiting the Island in the late 19th century, he made observations and befriended Richard L. Pease, a Vineyard historian. Bell dismissed notions of "maternal fright" and clay from the Gay Head cliffs causing the concentration of deafness on the Island. He concluded that the phenomenon was hereditary, although he could not comprehend how two deaf parents could have both deaf and hearing children. Many families sent their deaf children to the American Asylum in Hartford, Connecticut, where they learned what developed into American Sign Language.

By 1952, the last of the known hereditary deaf on Martha's Vineyard died. Nora Groce, in both her doctoral thesis and later her book *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, reported that this was due to the widening of the gene pool when members of original Vineyard families began marrying off-Islanders. Groce recorded oral histories of Islanders who lived in Chilmark and West Tisbury, where the deaf population was significant. Within these memories, many people could not recall who was deaf or not, since their prevalent form of communication was sign language. For 250 years, Up-Island on Martha's Vineyard did not consider itself a "deaf community," but a community which opened language barriers.

Scope and Content Note:

The Collection on Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard is an artificial compilation. The cubic foot of information on the "deaf community" includes newspaper articles, periodical publications, and essays. Copies of Alexander Graham Bell's research notes pertaining to Martha's Vineyard are also housed within this collection. Bell also transcribed the Birth and Death Records of Chilmark from the late 17th through the late 19th centuries, which Dr. Charles Banks later used for research.

Information on the 19th century American Asylum, later the American School for the Deaf, includes a list of pupils from the institute and a catechism “specially made” for the students there. Nora Groce’s lengthy doctoral thesis completes the unit.

Series Descriptions

Series I: Reference

This Series contains a list of the Martha’s Vineyard Museum’s holdings relating directly to hereditary deafness on the Island. Items on the bibliographical page include newspaper articles, periodical features, and books. Also within this series is a typed list of known deaf individuals from the 18th -19th centuries on the Island, taken from a genealogical file.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 1: Bibliographic list of holdings on hereditary deafness on Martha’s Vineyard.

Folder 2: List of known deaf individuals on Martha’s Vineyard, pre-1700 to 1870s.

Series II: Alexander Graham Bell

Subseries A: Biographical Information

This Subseries contains a published “Tribute to the Inventor of the Telephone” booklet from 1947, as well as a newspaper article summarizing Bell’s time spent on Martha’s Vineyard.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 3: Alexander Graham Bell, biographical information.

Subseries B: Research Notes and Correspondence

This Subseries houses photocopies of Bell’s research notes regarding the “deaf community” on Martha’s Vineyard in during the 1850s, as well as a transcript of the Birth & Death Records of Chilmark. There is also a transcript of a letter from Bell to a teacher in Boston recommending one of his Island acquaintances for a position instructing other deaf students.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 4: Alexander Graham Bell, notes on deafness on Martha’s Vineyard, c. 1870s.

Folder 5: Alexander Graham Bell, transcript of Chilmark Birth & Death Records, 18th-19th centuries.

Folder 6: Transcript of Alexander G. Bell letter, 1887.

Series III: American Asylum

This Series contains information on the institution now known as the American School for the Deaf. It was organized in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut, and many of the hereditary deaf on Martha’s Vineyard attended higher learning there.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 7: List of pupils of the American Asylum, 1817-1851.

Folder 8: "A Scriptural Catechism, designed principally for the Deaf and Dumb in the American Asylum," 1848.

Series IV: Publications

This Series contains much of the information named on the bibliographic list from Series I. There are newspaper articles ranging from the 1890s until the end of the 20th century, as well as several periodical pieces. Nora Groce, the famous author of *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, also wrote her doctoral thesis on the subject; a copy of it is housed in this series.

Box 1 of 1

Folder 9: Newspaper articles on hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard, 1895-1997.

Folder 10: Periodical features on hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard, 1895-1999.

Folder 11: Essay on "The Vineyard Deaf Community," Chris Thorkelson, c. 1993.

Folder 12: Nora Groce, *Hereditary Deafness on the Island of Martha's Vineyard: An Ethnohistory of a Genetic Disorder*, doctoral thesis, 1983.