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Gaining Insights into Signed Music Through Performers

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Abstract

Signed music is best described as an inter-performative art form that combines lyrical and non-lyrical musical performances and is deeply rooted in the culture of deaf people who communicate through signed language (J. H. Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017; J. H. Cripps et al., in press [a]). The key investigative component for this article includes outlining the experiences that three Canadian performers had about their signed music creativity during a plenary at the Partition/Ensemble 2020 Conference held by the Canadian Association for Theatre Research in Montreal, Quebec. The panelists responded to two questions that they developed for themselves: What inspired us to become musicians? How did the creative process of composing the signed music piece occur from the beginning to the end? The paper also covers an open discussion that the three performers had among themselves. Some signed music work examples are provided for viewing to support the premise that deaf people have full capacity for the creation and enjoyment of music. The paper represents a departure from the long-held view that music can only prevail in the audible form. The insights gained from the three deaf performers are the first of their kind and will contribute to the musical world.

Introduction

Signed music is now emerging as a new awareness among deaf people about their true musical capacity. The prevailing social view holds that deaf people live in a “world of silence.” This includes deaf people not having the full ability to enjoy music for the reason of their hearing loss. People who can hear often say that they would miss music the most if they became deaf. It is only in recent years that some scholars have questioned the notion that music is reserved for people who can hear (e.g., J. H. Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017; J. H. Cripps et al., 2016, 2017, 2019, in press [b]; Egbert, 2017; Loeffler, 2014). A formal distinction between signed music and audible music is imperative to help create a more accurate picture of deaf people's musical capacity (J. H. Cripps et al., 2017). According to J. H. Cripps et al. (in press [a] and Cripps and Lyonblum, 2017), signed music is an inter-performative art form that combines lyrical and non-lyrical musical performances and is deeply rooted in the culture of deaf people who communicate using signed language. It does not include audible sound and does not translate preexisting musical works in its conception, performance, and recording. Signed music stands as an art in its own right and is deemed as fully accessible for deaf people.²

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1  Initials J. H. is added to prevent from being confused with J. E. Cripps as both are siblings.  
2  Signed music is a recent term introduced to the ASL/Deaf Studies literature to help capture authentic musical works that deaf performers have created to date. The second author of this paper, Jody H. Cripps, acknowledges that the terms deaf music and visual music have been used in the literature for several decades, but they are besieged with confusion and limited understanding of what music is for deaf people (see J. H. Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017, for further discussion of this topic).
For clarification, signed music is not an accommodation. Currently, deaf people are subject to society’s efforts to “allow” them to experience hearing people’s music through accommodations. A common practice includes having deaf people attend to music through the spoken language lyrics translated into signed language, imitating audio-centric music (e.g., hip-hop or dip-hop), and feel them via vibrations (Bahan, 2006; Best, 2018, 2021; Brétéché, 2021; Decault et al., 2020; Friedner & Helmreich, 2012; Holmes, 2016, 2017; Jones, 2015; Leigh et al., 2020; Listman et al., 2018; Loeffler, 2014; Maler, 2013, 2015; Maler & Komaniecki, 2021; Nadal-García et al., 2021; Selby, 2011; Silvestri et al., 2018). However, deaf people exhibit mixed feelings when it comes to the musical accommodations as described here (e.g., Begue & J. E. Cripps, 2018; Best 2018; J. H. Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017; for similar discussion, see Darrow, 1993, and Maler, 2013). One common response from deaf people is “Thank you for sharing your musical experience with us, as we now have a better understanding…” What this reaction suggests is that the accommodated musical experience is superficial. Deaf people only get an idea of what music is about for hearing people. Many deaf people actually cringe at the idea of listening to more accommodated music performances (J. H. Cripps et al., in press [b]).

More attention is evidently needed in understanding what viable music is to deaf people and about signed music in particular. With this paper, readers will learn more about signed music with some depth through the eyes of three deaf Canadian performers. A significant portion of this paper covers the experiences of these performers with regard to their signed music creativity when they participated in a plenary at a conference. The informative dialogue on signed music performances is unprecedented and valuable for American Sign Language (ASL)/Deaf Studies scholarship. In addition, readers will have the opportunity to review the emerging signed music theory and research, hopefully leading to an appreciation for the three deaf Canadian performers’ testimonies on their journey in becoming musicians. Several videos of signed music performances are provided to help support the performers’ remarks about their contributions to the musical world.

Theory and Research for Signed Music

The music of deaf culture stands as an important source for gaining a greater understanding about human capacities for music in general. For the support of signed music theory, it is necessary to look back to the time of ancient Greece and consider how the philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (ca. 570 BCE–ca. 495 BCE) described music. During the development of early music theories, Pythagoras discussed a mathematical concept called music of the spheres describing the movement of the planets reflecting mathematical proportions, shapes, or patterns. He claimed that these patterns were present everywhere and that they direct all temporal cycles that include the seasons and rhythms of nature (Boethius, 1867; Pliny the Elder, 1938). Interestingly, the auditory-based music properties were not included or identified in this theory. Looking at the experience of music based on the movement of the sun, moon, and planets, Pythagoras further stated that humans were unable to hear the music of the spheres (Boethius, 1867; Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf, 2015; Pliny the Elder, 1938). In other words, one can derive meaning from and appreciation of music without depending on hearing it (J. H. Cripps et al., in press [b]).

Considering Pythagoras’s writing requires a change in many people’s thinking about what constitutes music. Signed music being integral to deaf culture now demands recognition and support. Another point has been made by Hamm et al. (1975), who wrote that “there is no culture known to man, no single civilization of the past, that does not have its own body of music” (p. 71). If deaf culture prevails, deaf people should be able to create and enjoy music in their own distinctive ways.

Within the deaf community, pieces or works of signed music have been published and circulated over the years (for the historical accounts of signed music in the deaf community, see J. H. Cripps et al., 2016, 2017, and in press [b]). At the same time, signed music performances are admittingly sparse when compared to signed poems and narratives. Deaf people are well known for producing high-quality poems and stories in ASL (see Byrne, 2017, for a review of ASL literature). Part of the reason for why signed music does not have a strong standing in the deaf community is attributed to many of its members falling victim to the indoctrination by the larger society that audible music is the standard. The incentive or support for deaf people to create and enjoy signed music is lacking. Equally problematic is that deaf children should undergo a music enculturation process while growing up but are not provided with any opportunity to do so (for the importance of music enculturation for human beings in general, see Campbell, 2011, and Tan, 2014). At schools for deaf children in the United States and Canada, teachers are known for signing in the classrooms, but there is no known effort made to integrate signed music into the curriculm.

Nevertheless, the future for signed music can be described as bright when considering society’s push for embracing differences and diversity. Thanks to the ground-breaking research and scholarship, the concept of signed music has become better understood and increasingly accepted (J. H. Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017; J. H. Cripps et al., 2017). According to its working definition, signed music is

wholly autonomous from the auditory experience. While it is pleasing to the eyes, just as conventional music pleases the ears, it has parameters that are completely different from musical forms hearing audiences are
used to, such as audible pitch. Specifically, a high-quality music performance (without words) includes handshape variations along with unique movements like circles, motioning up-and-down, back-and-forth, or to-and-fro representing possible notes. Some performances also include lyrics or “words” in ASL. (J. H. Cripps et al., 2017, p. 4)

A close look at the non-lyrics and lyrics is critical for understanding the legitimacy of signed music. Janis E. Cripps’s abstract film Eyes (2003), for example, is best characterized as non-lyric (see Figure 1). The performer used both hands to make intricate movements (in the signing space and in front of her face), relying on just one basic handshape (i.e., extended fingers and thumb) from the beginning to the end of the film. There is one part of the performance in which the listener may detect a sign-like rendition of a bird flying, but the majority of J. E. Cripps’s rendition can only be seen for its musicality without conventional signs.3 Perhaps the most important and musically powerful message from the performer refers to her hands and herself as a signer. The performer celebrates her hands, including their capacity for expressing music through eyes.

![Figure 1](image1.png)

Figure 1: Full rendition of J. E. Furlong-Cripps's film Eyes (2003).

Tick Tock (2017) by Ian Sanborn, the second signed music example, is, this time, lyric (see Figure 2). In this film, many different signs (along with classifier constructions) are produced in sequence with clear meanings from beginning to end. Sanborn included some non-lyrics during the piano-playing portion, as signing becomes arbitrary at that point. Sanborn expressed music notes with his hands “dancing” on the piano keys. The hands could not be precisely identified, but clearly something was moving musically. Tick Tock remains highly verbal in ASL; viewers can follow Sanborn’s descriptions of deaf children undergoing speech therapy sessions, for example. The performer’s basic message is in favor of an educational reform that includes promoting elasticity and flexibility for artistic expressions, including that of signed music.

![Figure 2](image2.png)

Figure 2: A clip of Ian Sanborn's Tick Tock (2017).

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3 The conventional signs refer to the lexicon such as woman, run, sick, and think and the classifier system (e.g., car passing a tree; see Supalla, 1986, for further discussion on the classifier system).
When thinking about the theoretical basis for signed music, it is important to consider a study that J. H. Cripps and his colleagues conducted in 2017. They investigated five known musical elements: rhythm, timbre, texture, melody, and harmony to see whether they exist in J. E. Cripps’s *Eyes* and Pamela Witcher’s *Experimental Clip* (2009). The researchers used the work of Clifford Geertz’s essay *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture* (1973) to examine musical elements with the two selected signed music performances. Based on their study, the signed music pieces are found to exhibit rhythm, timbre, and texture that resemble the musical traits described in non-Western societies (Schmidt-Jones, 2007). What this suggests is that these pieces of signed music abide by principles that are common to music worldwide. In short, deaf people may not experience access to rhythm, timbre, and texture through the audible music mode, but this does not stop these artists from devising and incorporating those features in their own musical works. Music is a powerfully ingrained ability for human beings, and deafness does not interfere with individuals’ ability to create and enjoy music. Melody and harmony, on the other hand, are difficult to pinpoint in *Eyes* and *Experimental Clip*, and more work is needed to investigate these elements in other signed music performances.

**Dialogue on Signed Music**

Three performers who contribute to signed music were invited to participate in a plenary at Partition/Ensemble 2020 Conference held by the Canadian Association for Theatre Research in Montreal. Plenary speakers Hodan Youssouf, Pamela Witcher, and Jody H. Cripps had the opportunity to develop two basic questions to ask themselves during the plenary. The performers made themselves available online and collaborated in an open discussion and analysis of their works (see Figures 3–5 for their signed music pieces). Witcher facilitated the prerecorded plenary discussion and had it edited into a 45-minute video made available in four languages: ASL, Langue des signes québécoise or LSQ, written English and French with supported transcripts and audio-visual descriptions (J. H. Cripps et al., in press [c]).

**Background of the Plenary Speakers**

Hodan Youssouf has been deaf since childhood and has participated in a multitude of artistic projects in both hearing and deaf circles in Quebec and abroad. Born in Somalia, which does not have services adapted to deaf people, Youssouf was sent by her hearing parents as a refugee to France before she immigrated to Canada in 1989. Today, she is active within the deaf community in Montreal, having worked for nine years in deaf education. Youssouf is fluent in two signed languages, LSQ and ASL. Also active in the theatre community, Youssouf can currently be seen in *La Traversée*, a bilingual LSQ/French play on tour with Voyageurs Immobiles, Cie de création.

Pamela Witcher was born to deaf parents who are originally from Newfoundland. Witcher has some residual hearing that suggests her to be hard of hearing, but she embraces the deaf community in Canada as one of its strongest supporting members. Witcher is fluent in LSQ and ASL. An interpreter, translator, cultural mediator, museum curator, and multidisciplinary artist, Witcher finds it necessary to overlap old and new discoveries that have the power to change views and ideas outside and within the deaf community. She had performed signed music at various venues throughout Canada and the United States. Witcher works as a Community Relations Manager with Canada’s Video Relay Service. She resides in Gatineau, Quebec.

![Figure 3: A clip of Hodan Youssouf’s Mask (Masque) (2018).](https://youtu.be/eCBkMEBHJ8s)

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4 Witcher’s full performance can be seen at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPHraTb36wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPHraTb36wc).
Jody H. Cripps, a deaf Canadian, resides in the United States to pursue an academic career in a university setting. He is currently an assistant professor at Clemson University in South Carolina. Not only does J. H. Cripps perform signed music, but he also has an established research and scholarship agenda for understanding and legitimizing this type of artistic work for the deaf community. J. H. Cripps’s latest grant allows for conducting ground-breaking ethnomusicological research on the creative process and production of a signed music showcase, *The Black Drum*, performed by a signing musical theater troupe, the sponsorship funded on the behalf of the Canadian Council of the Arts via Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf. J. H. Cripps was born to deaf parents in Ontario and is fluent in ASL.

**Discussions During Plenary**

As panelists, Youssouf, Witcher, and Cripps had the opportunity to respond to two questions: What inspired us to become musicians? How did the creative process of composing the signed music piece occur from the beginning to the end? In addition, an open discussion with the panelists asking more specific questions regarding their signed music works follows. The transcripts for these sessions are shown below.5

**First question: “What inspired us to become musicians?”**

*Mask (Masque)* by Youssouf:

5 The participants’ comments were video recorded in ASL and LSQ, then translated into written English (see Cripps et al., in press [c] for further details on how the languages and translations were used in the plenary).
HY: The title of this video is about masks because I like to think that with the oppression\(^6\) of society, masks allow us to hide, while we should reveal ourselves as we are. We must stop hiding our identity, which suffers from that, and take off our masks to show our authenticity.\(^7\) The people on either side add a broader visual aspect, showing our various real facets. If the people who represent me were absent, it would be as if I am left to present myself only with my mask on. I would have had to hide behind these masks, which I do not want to do. This video shows the experience of oppression and is the result of a weeklong reflection. I wanted to talk about masks, and I thought, Why not present this video about masks? It was a first experience for me. It was a challenge because I had never made other videos. It made me want to do other projects. I would like to go beyond this project which is rather basic. I would need to push the self-analysis, to do something more advanced, to unpack and discover things inside, in an assertive way. We will see how it goes, but signed music is something I am very interested in. I still have a lot to learn. So that is something to explore further.

**I Honour You** by Witcher:

PW: This video *I Honour You* is a new video, newly released, freshly out in the public. How did this come about? Such an interesting thing… let us see… a month ago, prior to making this video… now that COVID was hitting us, which had me confined and working from home. Before that, I was always busy in my head, and going to and from places, but COVID reduced that. Staying and working at home had made me more relaxed and gave me the chance to deepen and strengthen my roots, to be more connected with my family, and to have better quality time at home. This allowed me time to be introspective regarding my mother’s death two years ago, to process the grief. Then, other things were hitting us, the movements such as Black Lives Matter, celebrating Indigenous People, and LGBTQ+ groups, and different kinds of pain on Earth. There was a lot of thinking, looking back on my childhood, the values that my mother taught me, such as true love, true blood, loyalty to the family, to nurture and protect my children, true breath, although her breathing is no more but her breath is everywhere, all around us and she carries on, passed through the generations moving forward.

This was not the only thing happening, but also several other things [were] happening all around us at the same time. I had a vision in my mind, the repetition of three verses: I honor you true love, I honor you true blood, I honor you true breath. Those three verses were tormenting me, bickering at me continuously, to the point where I told myself I had to create something out of this. It had been quite a long time since I last created a signed music piece. It was 2009 when I created my first signed music clip, but prior to that I was involved in the tambour group (no name) for three years. One year prior to that, I was involved in a band (Glenna McConnell) where I did translation works on stage, and much before that, my mother loved music that was visually pleasing, the visual sounds. She was totally deaf and was attracted to visual motions shown on the TV—you know, those black-and-white shows and all those movements, such as the heads tilting quickly left and right, the musical “water cake” that musically splashes water, those legs bopping in the air, the bumptious celebration of exaggerated dances and movements. My mother watched those all the time. When I would get home from school, my mother would be watching these shows and we would be watching them together. She bought me a record player to listen to music with my hearing aids and listen with the most hearing I could have. She even gave me a tape player. So, with all those music shows and pieces and rhythms and experiences I lived through, they built up one after another. Let us see… then, at the age of eighteen, I went through a Deaf Power phase, angry about mainstream education and oralism\(^8\) and all that shit to purge out. I went through the process of finding my deaf identity and getting rid of the hard-of-hearing way of thinking. I could plunge into this subject longer, but I won’t. Now, to the point of this discussion.

Moving forward, looking at the translation experience with my hearing aids, I found it hard trying to listen and translating the audible sounds into translated songs, into signs. When I discovered the tambour group, I became hooked and got rid of the band group. Being with the tambour group allowed me to be creative and play with my signed music, to develop my own pieces with my language. The audible rhythms were developed to follow my original concept, which gave me confidence in my performances where making mistakes or being unable to follow the audible rhythms were not a concern anymore. Instead, I was able to immerse myself in my signed music performances and rhythms, knowing the group would follow my lead.

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6. The term oppression used here indicates the performer’s experience with audism.
7. Similar outcomes can be seen in *UnMasked: Revealing Deaf Identities*, a 2020 visual art piece created by Canadian deaf artist Maryam Hafizirad. The film further explores her thoughts and comments.
8. Witcher’s use of the term *mainstream education* is the equivalent of *special education*, which promotes deaf individuals enrolling in regular public schools that are spoken language predominate. This is contrary to schools for deaf children where a rich signing language environment most likely prevails. *Oralism* is one of the philosophies that educators of the deaf hold, based on teaching deaf children speech only. It does not encourage them to use signed language. For further discussion on the history of oralism in deaf education, see Baynton (1996) and Moores (2000).
Well, some oppression occurred within the group. What happened was that the leader would remove deaf players who he felt were not good enough to play tambours and continued to play with two hard-of-hearing players. I was one of the removed players, and imagine the hurt that transpired between us. Those three stuck together and went their own snobbish way. I was furious and I rebelled at that point. That was the trigger for my decision in 2009 to eliminate audible sounds. That was one of the sparks. There were also other things that were happening, that brought me to that decision. The experiences that surrounded me and what I saw, such as the ASL poetry that was popular in the 1990s, 1995… the [ASL] storytelling that was captivating, such as the story *Bird of a Different Feather* for one example. There were people like Sam Supalla, Ben Bahan, Clayton Valli, and Ella Mae Lentz, etc.

The trigger also led us to look at phonocentrism deconstruction, a heated discussion, but that occurred later. Back to the first trigger that prompted my decision to proceed with the *Experimental Clip*. That was my very first piece. After that, there were several signed music pieces and performances. Now, currently, this one (*I Honour You*) is another piece, again, that comes from the fruits of my creativity, my own creation.

Rain by Cripps:

JC: [*The creation of Rain*] was a surreal and odd experience. I did not grow up performing, just one high school performance. I have a little bit of it in me, but people did find me funny. The video is really an inspiration from my sister [Janis E. Cripps], who composed *Eyes*. My sister wanted to challenge her brother (me) and her parents [all deaf], who were indifferent to music and anything associated with it. When she made *Eyes*, it made an impact on me. I then investigated it and studied it. I was tempted to produce something myself too. So I analyzed it with curiosity, and also as a researcher, which in turn really interested me. That is how I started to play with music notes. For my production, I did not have a story for it. I used several different music notes to play around with. I used different possible handshapes and movements to illustrate the types of rain. There were a lot more, but I cut many out to keep it short. I played around with three notes, sometimes five. I did this at my parents’ trailer park near the lake and water with the rain, which was nice.

Second question: “How did the creative process of composing the signed music piece occur from the beginning to the end?”

HY: I wrote down all my ideas related to the idea of *Mask* in a notebook, like how to sign this or that message, how to do this or that. Then, as I went along, I wrote down everything that came to mind. As the ideas came, I found how to express the mask with my hands in signed music. I made several combinations of signs and once I was satisfied with my script, I was able to make the video and share it. It did not just happen by snapping my fingers. There was a long thought process behind it. At first, I was not too sure about the idea of the mask. I had thought of using a tree, but I thought it was a concept that was used too often, and I did not want to copy. I wanted to find an original idea that came from my own experience, and finally the idea of the *Mask* came to me. I then worked from this concept to refine my signed music piece.

I did not quite master the technology. So, I asked Cinéall Production for help with this project. They helped me with the editing and showed me how to edit. Then I practiced a lot with someone who was an expert at it. I learned from him. If he had not been there, I could not have executed this project. They were a great help to me.

PW: OK, now… talking about the process of how this piece was made, I am thinking… oh yes! A lyrical poem that I wrote [in English] in 2002, *The Bloom of a Rose*, that I had always wanted to translate [into ASL], had been put on hold. The piece was very intricate and deep in English. An adaptation was possible, but I decided not to, leaving the suitability of the text to the English language. Now, the three “I Honour You” verses needed to be expanded in its content. I decided to take inspiration from some of the ideas pulled from the lyrical written English poem and have them merged into the new song that goes with the verses, such as the bubble floating in the air, ripping the chest apart and shearing the skin to hang out dry on a clothesline. If you look at my written poem, you will see some of those ideas merged into the signed music piece. Another example is the spider on the web crawling and lying down to sleep.

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9 The term “phonocentrism deconstruction” was used to write a manifesto by deaf Canadians to combat audism during 2000s. Some authors of this paper pointed out that the term “phonocentric” is misleading and it should be called “audio-centric” instead.

10 A deaf-run production company in Montreal founded by Sylvain Gélinas.

11 The lyric poem *The Bloom of a Rose* is included in Appendix A.
Now, let us look at how the video was created. It was set in my studio here and my husband is a video technician, so I asked him to have the set arranged for me, to have the camera focused and ready for me to film on my own. When it was time and I felt ready, both he and my daughter were in bed and sleeping, and the house was quiet and empty. As ready as I was, I plugged in and the room became solid bright, and I found my mark on the floor where it was supposed to be, and turned the camera on. Through several takes, I went through the signed verses. It took about two hours for the takes. However, you would need to remember that it took me a month to think everything through before filming. So, the takes were done in a wink of time. The next day it took me half a day to edit it. The editing process is another technique and process that I could talk about, but we will keep it for another time, another discussion.

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JC: My niece’s name is Raine, so it suited the name of Rain. We [my sister and I] made it but then I had no time to finalize it. Neither did my sister, as she was busy with family life. We filmed this on July 1, 2009, on Canada Day, which was interesting to notice, but we did not get around to edit it, putting it on hold, until recently. I pitched this to my coworker, Jason Begue [sign name JB], alongside my sister. She explained to him how we wanted it to be edited. After the pitch, I offered him the footage and he liked the idea, so I gave him the footage to edit, but he wanted a storyline. My music notes assisted in his editing process and the development of an interesting and beautiful storyline. He worked on it with my sister, who consulted on this. It was a team effort to create this. It was beautiful and I’m thankful for the accomplishment. That is… that is our work!

Open discussion

JC: Did the audience watch Mask? Has it been shown? If so, how was it shown? How did you decide to show it?

HY: A research group … [led by] Véro Leduc who studied at the university was interested in exploring a form of music using signed language and wanted to go deeper. Véro reached out to me, as well as to Pamela Witcher and Daz Saunders with a goal of creating our own signed music pieces and presenting them at the VIBES Symposium—Vibration (2018). This process brought me to create the Mask, and it was presented only at this conference, nowhere else. It was Véro who established and led the project.

JC: Great job, it is beautiful!

HY: Yes, yes.

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JC: I’ve been thinking, I’ve known you, Pamela, for…

PW: Pretty much a long time.

JC: Yeah, about five years, seven years. We have had meetings from time to time. Now I’d like to ask, I know you’ve been producing signed music for quite some time, and recently you’ve had a role with The Black Drum performance [Canadian Cultural Society for the Deaf, 2020]. You were in the role of mentoring and tutoring, making sure the use of lyrical and non-lyrical notes in signed music was done appropriately.

PW: Yeah, Signed Music Director.

JC: Ah, director, OK. After being involved in The Black Drum, do you feel it was easier and smoother to produce I Honour You?

PW: Not really. It did not have a huge impact because really it was made from scratch. All the actors in the performance never did any signed music before. I asked the director if she had any signed music experience and she said no, that her experience was more of a poetry background if I remember correctly… a different medium of performance, a different form of experience… but with the signed music, she confirmed that this one was her first. It just hit me there, so I worked through them. It was interesting how the seeds were planted and spread. I want to see more of this and to see how it evolves with more seeds out there. When I went to The Black Drum performance, at the opening they announced to the audience, “Look at Pamela, she is a pioneer.” I was stunned by that word. It is a big word. I have been skeptically thinking about this and I talked to my husband about the word… “Pioneer!!?” and he said, “Yes, it is about picking many different aspects and having them tied together and have everyone look at this Signed Music package.” That was a good point, and I thought to myself, OK, maybe I can learn to accept that word, I don’t know… but it did help build my confidence. It helped me realize that we have important work to do, and I must not let it go or neglect it. The new generation really needs this, so I’ve decided to continue this work, to give back and—

12 For more information, see https://journalofasl.com/the-artwork-of-videoediting/.
JC: It is important.
PW: Yes, and I feel that signed music is coming back to me, I am excited, and I look forward to more.
JC: That is good.

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PW: I have watched your other film [The Artwork of Video Editing in Signed Music], with the same guy who did the editing, B…? What is his name?
JC: Jason Begue, yes.
PW: OK, Jason Begue, OK. JB and Janis E. Cripps were involved in the editing process of Rain and this is referred to in the research [The Artwork of Video Editing in Signed Music]. I would suggest that people watch this in relation to your comments, which are interesting.
JC: Yes, timing is important. Play around with the timing and see what you can come up with and that makes sense. You will see the rise and fall, a little bit of climax, in the video with the rain, and the ending has a crescendo. I would like to also add that my aunt and my wife are both culturally deaf and love ASL and use it every day. I showed them [our] video after it was completed. They both watched it and they both understand ASL, but both came to a different conclusion. For example, my aunt said that it had an angry tone and looked serious. My wife felt touched by it and said that it resembled hard work and navigating barriers your whole life. This is what was reflected in my acting, according to her. I didn't feel that at all while filming myself, but I used that mouth expression displaying emotions while signing the rain. I expressed emotions and facial expressions in signing the patterns of the rain while being under the rain with it hitting my skin, it was hard work. It is how my wife saw it. Both are fluent in ASL! Really, the perception varies from one person to another. This is why the music itself is very abstract and allows for different interpretations and perspectives. So my interpretation is based on what I am seeing. Sometimes when I watch a signed music performance, and each subsequent time I rewatch it, I tend to see something different, to learn something new, and my perspective and conclusions change. It is interesting. It’s never still nor static. I really enjoy that.

PW: I watched Rain a while back when it was released. I watched it again recently and I felt that I noticed more things, and then when I watched it one more time, I had a much closer look at it! It was deeper and deeper every time. The analysis went further and further! I was able to analyze movements and expressions.
HY: The connection of the rhythms.
PW: And the ending too.
HY: I felt the same when you were moving. I could feel it in my brain as if the music was felt there. There was no voice or beats, but I could feel and sense the rain.

Key Information Gained From the Performers

The major part of the plenary conversation addresses the performers' music enculturation and exploration and highlighted authenticity through the process of making signed music via lyrical and/or non-lyrical music in two signed languages: LSQ and ASL. Given that this kind of music has not been sufficiently analyzed or even recognized in the past, the performers who participated in the plenary found it necessary to take a step back to understand and include cultural appropriateness from the deaf community’s perspective before creating their pieces (see Cripps et al. in press [b] for further discussion on the authenticity of musical works for deaf people). To be specific, through their production process, these deaf performers are obliged to remove themselves from the audio-centric music that colonizes them. For example, Youssouf gave this topic much consideration when she mentioned, “I would need to push the self-analysis, to do something more advanced, to unpack and discover things inside, in an assertive way.”

Some common traits can be traced across Youssouf, Witcher, and Cripps's journeys as part of their music enculturation and creativity process. These traits include playing with music notes, enhancing signed creativity (or Art-Sign), and expressing personal experience within the oppressed society. Some issues of oppression or difficulties arise in their pieces, such as unpacking identity crises (Youssouf), exploring family and life values (Witcher), and expressing hardships (Cripps), all of which reflect the performers’ challenges with oppression within society.

Witcher's comments at the plenary about her past experiences in exploring the structures of signed music impacted her current pieces, including I Honour You. Her journey and experiences as a performer guided her working definition of the structure format on how signed music is different from signed language poetry. Witcher’s original definition can be seen in the film Signed Music: Rhythm of the Heart (2015) as follows:

See Klima and Bellugi (1976) for further discussion on “Art-Sign” for its poetic features in signed language art performances.
[Signed music] is more rhythmic, it has more beats. It has beats that you can manipulate to create rhythm, similar to 2/4 time or 3/5 time. Having studies percussion for three years, I learned about 2/4 time—one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four—or 3/5 time, they have subdivisions within the beats to add color, it adds interest … between the beats. And I thought that is the same for Sign. In Sign we use one-two, one-two-three, one-two-two-three, repeating that. But if we had one-two, one-two-three and then threw in a rapid succession of claps or polyrhythmic features, then visually we can create those same rhythms and beats. Throwing in bursts of beats within it to add to it. There would be this interplay of rhythm. In Sign, it becomes, like, the color of movement. (J. S. Crip et al., 2015)

Regarding the creativity process for one of her previous signed music pieces, Experiment Clip, Witcher added:

in a separate dynamic element with sudden movements of my body, by adjusting the tempo, slow and fast, also by manipulating light and dark, movements up and down, or facial expressions with different tempos. The light and dark aspects, maybe having one rhythm of its own and the facial manipulation—a different count. Subtly playing with those various rhythms and counts, but this can be done simultaneously—superimposing them, blending together into one seamless yet colorful piece of work. (J. S. Crip et al., 2015)

J. H. Cripps had his own experiences when learning about the importance of the rhythm foundations when doing signed music creativity process from his sister, Janis. While creating the signed music piece Rain, J. E. Cripps explained that it is important to have consistency in rhythm as follows:

For instance, if you have a clip where the person is signing, rain-rain-rain, as long as you stay within the time frame, you can put as many as you want in it. One example would be, when the person is signing rain-rain-rain-rain you can overlap another clip of the person signing splatter in between the clips, turning it into rain-rain-rain-splatter, rain-rain-rain-splatter, rain-rain-rain-splatter. It can be done, it’d be like adding a third-no, fourth beat. It is possible, more complicated, but if you put your mind to it, it can be done. I think it’s best to start off simple and advance to more complicated and ending it with simple. You need to set it up so people will be able to follow the beat and get used to it, then make it more complicated, as long as you still keep the same basic beat. That is the key, to go from simple, to give it its bones, to complicated then back to simple again. (Begue & Cripps, 2018, p. 4)

From these two performers’ perspectives, rhythmic and polyrhythmic features play important roles in signed music, with one or more consistent rhythm beat(s) being the staple of the performance. More formal research work is needed in following up on the performers’ insightful remarks on the signed music. Given that signed music is presented in a different form (i.e., signed, not audible), it is understandably difficult to explain what is involved, but these performers appear to have succeeded when taking the rhythm into consideration.

**Conclusion**

It is ironic that the position on music that the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras took up twenty-five hundred years ago has only now become relevant for the deaf community. Evident with what the three performers discussed in this article, the deaf community has begun to celebrate their own unique musical capacity. The long-held view about music being synonymous with audible sound is giving way to differences and diversity, which are part of creating a more positive outlook of deaf people. The three performers sharing their signed music experiences demonstrate some highly commendable traits of self-realization and empowerment traits. The definitions of signed music are novel and important when considering how deaf people’s music has been ignored throughout history. These performers’ engagements with signed music must be appreciated as courageous artistic endeavors. The attempt of one performer to describe differences between signed music and signed poems becomes important for further investigation sometime soon. In terms of accessibility, the deaf community has much to gain when pursuing signed music (see Appendix B for a list of recommendations for future research directions). ASL itself was once thought to lack linguistic properties and be inferior to spoken languages, which was accepted by many deaf people (for examples, see Eastman, 1980, and Maher, 1996), but that misconception has changed for the better today; the reported

14 This type of beat is part of percussion songs (see Bahan, 2006, for further discussion on signing percussion songs in the deaf community).

15 Emphasis added.
increasing acceptance among deaf people for signed music is encouraging. Given that music is universal, deaf people are now finding themselves to be “part of the club.” With all the discussions and signed music work examples discussed in this paper, it is safe to state that this alternative form of music is real. The signed music works that the deaf community’s performers delivered hopefully strike audiences as extraordinarily beautiful and engaging. Signed music and the associated topic of musicality for the deaf community is here to stay and grow.

Acknowledgments

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**Appendix A: The Bloom of a Rose**

Deep within the circle of a dark forest  
Where dragonflies sparkle through gothic roots  
Between ancient stumps, I inhale and I exhale  
Blowing around me, magic bubble walls  
Inside, this delicate garden I create  
Full of red roses and golden thorns

Strands of my eyelashes  
Blown by the dancing breeze  
Among the thorns waiting  
For wishes to be made  
With my visage hidden  
Behind the bloom of a rose

Deep the glorious sad feeling  
As standing silently in an endless field of roses  
May be the only escape for me to reside  
Away from this world of illusions  
Away from the harsh distortions  
They could bring out of me  
Me - and my fragile mind
Silky threads of my hair
Woven around into a web
Among the thorns waiting
For a spider to come and sleep
While all that can be seen
Are my fingers spread out across the azure sky

Deep the glorious sad feeling
As lying deep in sleep among the swaying stems
May be the only escape for me to reside
Away from this world of illusions
Away from the harsh distortions
They could bring out of me
Me - and my fragile heart

If in search of torture
From these thorns, I would pull the web apart
And whisper gently the wishes away
Against these thorns, I would press my heart
And begin to drip the color of a rose
With these thorns, I would skin myself inside out
To hang loose, slow to dry, slow to heal

Deep the glorious sad feeling
As gazing at my hidden visage in a reflective petal drop
May be the only escape for me to reside
Away from this world of illusions
Away from the harsh distortions
They could bring out of me
Me - and my fragile soul

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Appendix B: Recommendations for Future Research

At the end of the plenary, Youssouf, Witcher, and Cripps raised some recommendations for future endeavors in the arena of signed music. They are as follows.

- Signed music mentors for younger artists and community members to look up to older deaf people and for mentors to continue passing on deaf-related knowledge and experience;
- Experts providing workshops and training on signed music in different settings (e.g., online or in-person);
- More research on signed music and have signed music works recorded for dissemination purposes;
- Increase understanding for signed music in signed languages of different countries and how this alternative form of music can be appreciated through the tactile means for the deafblind communities;
- Promoting new ideas and creations among performers to bring materials to the public; and
- Creation of a signed music curriculum for K–12 for use in schools.16

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16 The Canadian Cultural Society for the Deaf (2015) developed a package/guidebook *Signed Music: Rhythm from the Heart* provides initial guidance that includes activities for young deaf or signing performers.
Cultural Insights on the First School Building for Deaf Children in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, 1870-1922

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OSD-SJW Archives and Museum

Introduction

This article presents a deaf-culture-rich account of the first school building when the Ontario Institution for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb (OIDD), now the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf, opened in Belleville on October 20, 1870. It includes building plans, sketches, clippings, and photographs. Figure 1 portrays the warm and colorful water painting, created in June 1881, that illustrates the first school building that stood for fifty-two years (1870–1922). Ambrose Wilcock Mason (b. February 6, 1851; d. January 8, 1935) is an eminent British deaf-born artist in Toronto, Ontario, who attended the school from 1871 to 1874, painted the work, and donated it to the school in a 54.9 cm (21⅝ in) by 65.4 cm (25¾ in) wooden frame with a raised design. The school building as shown was on the same lot as the existing Main School structure at the Belleville school. Today, the painting hangs in one of the hallways of the Main School.

Figure 1: The 1881 painting of the first building of the school.

According to Cripps (2021), schools for deaf children have played a key role in the creation and maintenance of deaf culture over the years. OIDD is no exception. The first school building subject to the discussion in this article carries a symbolic value for its role as a safe haven for deaf children who came to Belleville from all over Ontario. These children can be described as being protected from the predominantly, if not exclusively, speaking society. The rich signing environment

1 Adapted from the booklet created by the authors.
at OIDD allowed deaf children to socialize and experience full and effective communication. Deaf children having signing teachers was a very important consideration of its own. When considering the OIDD alumni, Mason, who donated the painting to the school, was understood to have succeeded as an artist in the larger society that had nothing to do with deaf culture. Yet Mason did not forget about his school for many reasons, including the opportunity to socialize and grow up in a rich signing environment. As discussed in Carbin (2005), OIDD also possesses a painting of the school's first deaf teacher, Samuel Greene. Greene was a larger-than-life personality who championed the empowerment and dignity of deaf people. Greene proved that deaf children are educable to the point that they can become teachers themselves. With Greene and other deaf teachers who followed in his footsteps, deaf students were and are provided with the role models they need (see Cripps, 2021, for further discussion on the deaf community's special relationship with their schools; see also Supalla, Small, & Cripps, 2012/2020, for the identity development needs of deaf children).

The Founder

There is another larger-than-life personality that also helped put OIDD on the map: John Barrett McGann, the founder of deaf education in Ontario. He was an Irishman who immigrated to Canada in 1855 and pioneered deaf education in Ontario from 1858 to 1870. It was fateful that McGann visited an American school for deaf children in New York during his move from Ireland to Canada. It was the well-known American educator Harvey P. Peet who headed that school, and he was renowned as a staunch supporter of signed language as deaf children's rightful and accessible language. (For more on the historical significance of Peet's work for the education of deaf children in the United States, see Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989, and for the concept of linguistic accessibility, see Supalla & Cripps, 2008.) Although McGann was a hearing person who did not know any signed language initially, he embraced Peet's position on the education of deaf children and committed himself to learning American Sign Language during his stay in New York.

While living in Canada, McGann was very persistent with provincial government officials to establish a permanent and fully funded school for deaf children. His actions and efforts finally received legislative support in 1868. Two years later, a brand-new school opened in Belleville. McGann was understandably comfortable about the idea of employing deaf teachers (which he did with Greene). Readers who desire to learn more about McGann and his pioneering deaf education work are encouraged to read Carbin and Fano (2021).

Architects and the Builder

Four months before the Ontario government considered and passed a bill on November 19, 1868, to permanently fund a new educational and residential institution for deaf children, its Public Works Department launched a call for architectural tenders to design it. This is where social bias against deaf people became apparent. In a newspaper clipping announcing the architect search, deaf students were referred to as "Deaf and Dumb Patients" (see Figure 2). The choice of words indicates that deaf children were uneducable and that OIDD would operate as a hospital. Fortunately, the intentions of the Ontario government and the lobbyists including McGann were well above the wrongful perceptions about deaf people at the time.

Figure 2: A newspaper clipping referring to deaf and dumb students as "patients."

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A clipping by a Toronto newspaper *The Globe*, dated December 4, 1868, announced that James Avon Smith (b. 1832; d. 1918), a noted Scots-born architect living in the city of Belleville, won the bid and received $200. The article also briefly described the main building (see Appendix A for this article along with other newspaper clippings on the new school). Cripps (2021) is correct in explaining that OIDD was part of society's agenda for the betterment of its citizens, including those who are deaf. OIDD was costly for its time, as the grand school building was located on a prime waterfront property. This school served as a testimony to society’s commitment. Unlike regular schools that serve hearing children locally, OIDD was a province-wide institution designed for serving the deaf student population.

More work followed in the preparation for the building of OIDD. It was during early 1869 that the Honorable John Woodburn Langmuir (b. 1835; d. 1915), a Scots-born businessman and former mayor of Picton (1864) near Belleville, journeyed as an inspector of prisons, asylums, and public charities for the province (1868–1882) to the United States with the Honorable John Sandfield Macdonald (b. 1812; d. 1872), the provincial premier from 1867 to 1871, to inspect school facilities for deaf children. They refused to announce that the new school would be built in Hamilton, Ontario, where McGann’s school had been since 1864, and they hinted that it might be located somewhere else.

The Ontario government, in about late February 1869, voted for the then town of Belleville, 171 kilometers (106 miles) east of Toronto. Premier Macdonald emphasized that the location was ideal because of its inexpensive properties, central location, and better access to the Grand Trunk Railway (now Canadian National Railways) connecting many key towns and cities of the province. The selection quickly set off a firestorm with questions and controversy from the media and citizens of Hamilton who had long anticipated that it would be in their city. In the next month, advertisements asked for land tenders in the vicinity.

On April 14 and 15, 1869, Macdonald, Langmuir, and the Honorable John Carling (b. 1828; d. 1911), a provincial commissioner of public works, were in Belleville to select one of the tendered sites for the construction of the school. Fifteen days later, on April 30, the Ontario government bought Spence Farm, consisting of eighty-six acres for $4,900, in the township of Sidney. Its location was just outside the western boundary line of Belleville, with a magnificent view of the Bay of Quinte. The owner who deeded it to “Her Majesty” was Scots-born William Hamilton Ponton (b. 1810; d. 1890), a solicitor and one-time mayor of Belleville (1852–1853). Sidney is now part of the Belleville municipality.

Irish-born Kivas Tully (b. 1820; d. 1905), a government architect and engineer for the province, was assigned to undertake and supervise all the work. Tenders for OIDD’s construction appeared in many newspapers. On May 18, 1869, the Ontario government awarded the contract to a building company owned by Christopher W. Kempster and Thomas L. Kempster of Hamilton, Ontario. According to Tully, the package agreement, initially estimated at $75,000, also included an entrance gate lodge, a barn, stables and coach house, a woodshed, main and branch drains, fences, avenues, roads, and a pumping engine house.

The construction contract stipulated that the work must begin immediately and end in September 1870. A large force of primarily local workers hired by the Kempster brothers had completed the foundation excavation by July 1869, and the stonework had begun. They also built a wharf on the school property for the steamers on the Bay of Quinte to efficiently deliver and quickly unload the materials.

The Masonic ceremony of laying the cornerstone of the new school took place on August 12, 1869, in front of a large crowd of Belleville citizens and government officials. Addresses were delivered on the occasion by the Honorable Matthew Crooks Cameron (b. 1822; d. 1887), the provincial secretary to the legislature from 1867 to 1871, and McGann, the school’s founder.

With horse-pulled wagons, ladders, and pulleys, many skilled tradespeople completed the building structure for the official inaugural ceremonies to open OIDD with staff and pupils on October 20, 1870. Detailed information about OIDD’s new school building as quoted from the different architects is included in Appendix B. Figure 3 depicts a newspaper clipping on the amount for creating OIDD’s first building and Figure 4 illustrates the school’s first logo. Architecture sketches of the school’s first building can be seen in Appendix C.

**Opening Day**

The inaugural ceremony for the school for deaf children in Belleville took place in front of a large crowd on October 20, 1870. Full details of the event, including several addresses and speeches by the distinguished guests, appeared the next day in many newspapers. *The Globe* published a lengthy article entitled “Provincial Deaf and Dumb Asylum: Formal Opening.” *The Daily Intelligencer*, a Belleville newspaper, also provided full coverage of the inaugural events, in a very lengthy report titled “Deaf and Dumb Institute, Opening Ceremonies.”
The strong public attendance recorded for the school’s opening affirmed society’s commitment to the education of deaf children. The public, regardless of what some individuals may think about the validity of education for deaf children, was proud of the school (see Padden & Humphries, 2005, for the American public’s similar reaction to the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf in Philadelphia). A large portion of the public must have thought positively about deaf people at the time. It can be said that the rise of deaf culture with the creation of schools for deaf children in both Canada and the United States is a direct result of the enlightened public’s sentiments for helping fulfill deaf people’s educational potential.

The school’s first teaching staff was Wesley “Willie” Jones Palmer, who became the principal, along with McGann, Euphemia “Effie” (née McGann) Terrill, Raymond Daniel Coleman, and Greene (see the following section for brief details about them).
Also introduced were Margaret A. Keegan as the matron, Angus Christie as the steward and bookkeeper (i.e., bursar), Philip Flager Canniff as the farmer, William Malcolm as the steamfitter (i.e., engineer), and Henry McElhaw as the engine room staff, stoker, and night watchman. Appendix D includes several photos of the school’s first building with the teachers, staff, and students.

The Original Teaching Staff

For a greater appreciation of the biographical sketches for the five individuals who make up the school’s original teaching staff, it is important to understand that McGann is not the only teacher that was exposed to the American system of instruction for deaf children. Three other teaching staff members—Greene, Wesley “Willie” Jones Palmer, and Daniel Coleman—had their training in the American system and then left the United States for Canada. The American influence on Canada’s education of deaf children is significant. Deaf culture in the United States was stronger and more established in 1870, thanks to the schools for deaf children created from an earlier starting point in 1817 (Cripps, 2021). To learn more about the history of deaf education in the United States, see Van Cleve and Crouch’s A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America (1989) and Moores’s Educating the Deaf: Psychology, Principles, and Practices (2000). The biographical sketches that follow demonstrate the teaching staff’s strong attachment to the deaf community. While all the original teaching staff were hearing (apart from Greene, who was deaf), it did not stop them from becoming fluent signers for the benefit of deaf children.

Wesley “Willie” Jones Palmer

Wesley “Willie” Jones Palmer was the first head of OIDD when it was newly built and opened on October 20, 1870. His official title was principal. He was an experienced teacher (1858–1860), vice principal (1860), and principal (1860–1870) at the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Raleigh. During his tenure at OIDD, he introduced the American system of instruction in the classrooms and replaced the British two-handed fingerspelling, which was commonly used in Ontario at that time with the one-handed American manual alphabet. In 1879, Palmer lost his job due to alcoholism and returned to the United States.

Born on June 11, 1834, in Milton, Caswell County, NC, Palmer earned a BPh degree in 1854 and was awarded two honorary degrees (MA, 1860, and PhD, 1870) from Columbian College (now George Washington University) in Washington DC.

Sadly, Palmer was admitted to the Western North Carolina Insane Asylum in Morganton in January 1888. Five months later, on June 3, he was instantly killed “by deadly blows from one of the deranged inmates.” He was about fifty-three years old at the time of the incident. His family buried him at Cedars Cemetery in his native hometown.

Seventy-two years after Palmer’s death, in 1960 the city of Belleville honored him by changing the name of a street on the east side of the school to Palmer Road from OSD Lane. Palmer’s beautiful color sketch of the arrival of the lieutenant governor at the school on January 29, 1873, can be seen in Figure 5.
This school founder, McGann, first opened a privately funded school for deaf children in Toronto in 1858, which was later moved to Hamilton in 1864. By 1870, he founded the Ontario Institution for the Instruction and Education of the Deaf and Dumb as a permanent, provincially funded school in Belleville.

McGann was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, on Christmas Day in 1810. He taught hearing children at a parish/parochial school in Booterstown, south of Dublin, before moving to Canada via the United States in 1855. While working as a writing clerk for several months at the New York Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, McGann seized every opportunity to observe the teaching methods and activities used with the pupils. In Toronto, he was a schoolteacher and a private tutor for the first three years with hearing children before he began his life’s work with deaf children.

Because of ill health, McGann retired in 1878. He died two years later, on January 22, 1880, at the age of sixty-nine. Deaf people, including school alumni, helped raise funds to erect a stone monument over his grave in the Belleville Cemetery (Section M, Row 20, Stone 13) in appreciation for his dedication to the province’s deaf children. McGann’s work continues to receive great respect from the deaf community in Ontario to this day. In recent years, McGann’s monument was subject to restoration funded by the deaf community and was part of a rededication ceremony (see Carbin & Fano, 2021).
Euphemia “Effie” (née McGann) Terrill

Euphemia “Effie” (née McGann) Terrill began her work in 1858 at the age of eighteen as an assistant teacher when her father, McGann, first opened a small class of deaf children in Toronto. From that day forward, she would be continuously connected to the education of the deaf in Toronto, Hamilton, and Belleville for fifty-two years, except during four years of her married life. She retired from teaching in 1910.

Effie was born on October 23, 1840, in Askeaton, Ireland. She came to Canada in 1855 with her father and siblings. On June 22, 1865, she married Joseph John Gurney Terrill (b. November 18, 1839; d. December 7, 1869), who was also a teacher of the deaf. Terrill unexpectedly died four years later.

On November 16, 1927, at age eighty-seven, Effie passed away at her daughter’s residence in Oakville. Her remains were brought for burial in the Belleville Cemetery (Section M, Row 20, Stone 13), where her name was added on the monument erected to the memory of her father.

Daniel Raymond Coleman

Daniel Raymond Coleman Jr. was the last survivor of the original staff at OIDD. He came to Belleville in the early fall of 1870 with Wesley “Willie” Jones Palmer from North Carolina. He was a teacher, supervising teacher, and interpreter for fifty-two long and faithful years of service to the school. When he retired in 1922, Coleman Jr. was given the title of “teacher emeritus” to be remembered as an exceptionally successful instructor.

Coleman Jr. was born on March 12, 1840, in Washington DC. His father was Daniel Coleman (b. 1799; d. 1883) and was appointed to the post of third assistant postmaster general with the United States Postal Service Department, where he held the position from 1836 to 1841. Coleman Jr. grew up in Concord, North Carolina, and graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with two degrees (BA, 1860, and MA, 1870). When the Civil War broke out, Coleman Jr. served as a bass drummer with the Twentieth Regiment North Carolina Infantry of the Confederate States Army. He later became a teacher at the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Raleigh, where he taught for three years (1867–1870) before coming to Canada.

On September 25, 1931, Coleman Jr. passed away at the age of ninety-one. He was buried in the Belleville Cemetery (Section L, Row 21, Stone 4).
Samuel Thomas Greene

As mentioned earlier, Greene is remembered as the first deaf teacher at OIDD. He started with the inaugural teaching staff, which consisted of McGann, Terrill, Palmer, and Coleman. He taught there for twenty years until his untimely death in 1890.

On June 11, 1843, Greene, as everyone called him, was born deaf to a family of seven children in North Waterford, Maine. He and his older deaf sister, Sarah, had attended the American Asylum for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb (now the American School for the Deaf) in Hartford, Connecticut. Following his 1866 graduation, Greene was admitted to the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington DC, where he eventually graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1870.

For many years, Sam contributed significantly to the social activities of the Ontario deaf community. In 1886, he cofounded the Ontario Deaf-Mute Association (now the Ontario Association of the Deaf). Readers who are interested in learning more about Greene's life are encouraged to read Carbin's *Samuel Thomas Greene: A Legend in the Nineteenth Century Deaf Community* (2005).

On February 17, 1890, at the age of forty-six, Greene died from injuries sustained in an iceboat accident on the Bay of Quinte near OIDD. He was buried in the Belleville Cemetery (Section P, Row 8, Stone 4), where a monument to his memory was erected "by his mute and hearing friends" as cited on his monument.

School Heads Appointed at OIDD

Wesley “Willie” Jones Palmer
Principal, 1870–1879

Robert Mathison
Superintendent, 1879–1906

Charles Bernard Coughlin
Superintendent, 1906–1928
The End of the School's First Building

In the early 1910s, Dr. Charles Bernard Coughlin (b. April 5, 1862; d. December 10, 1928), the school’s superintendent and third head from 1906 to 1928, had constantly requested the Ontario Department of Education, in his annual reports and at several meetings with its officials, to consider modernizing the fifty-year-old OIDD building. The government, however, suspended all reconstruction plans for the school during World War I.

By 1919, the government finally decided that all alterations and repairs to update the aging OIDD structure would be too expensive. The construction of an entirely new school was necessary. In November, Messrs. Thomas Manley & Son, local Belleville contractors, won the tendered bid to excavate and build a new Main School in front of the original establishment (the newspaper clipping can be seen in Figure 6).

The first construction phase was the front portion, consisting of the administration and some classrooms. It was ready for occupancy at the close of the school session on June 15, 1922. That same day, the demolition crew arrived to start tearing down the old building, ultimately taking five months to finish. The remainder of the construction adjoined behind the front portion of the new school commenced. The workers built corridors with more classrooms, the dining room, a kitchen, an assembly hall as a chapel and gymnasium (i.e., an auditorium), a cold storage room, a bakery, and about six small quarters with a common room for the kitchen staff. Appendix E shows photos before, during, and after the demolition of the first building. Appendix F provides highlights at OIDD from 1870 when the first building was established, until it was demolished in 1922.

The new Elizabethan-style school, still known today as the Main School, was fully occupied by March 1923 for 296 students. This represented a new era that turned out to be as challenging as what was discussed earlier in this article. While the nineteenth century was marked with skepticism about deaf people’s educational capacity, the twentieth century (and the present century) emphasizes the integration of deaf children and hearing children in schools. The long-held sensitivity for deaf children’s language and communication needs has effectively eroded. In the 1970s and 1980s, an aggressive form of integration practices was first pursued in the Canadian education system. Thousands of deaf students have been turned away from the now-named Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf and toward regular public schools over the years.

As Cripps (2021) explained, the question of linguistic deprivation has only recently emerged to challenge the current integration practices that favor spoken language schools over signed language schools. Under the deaf community’s watchful eyes, the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf continues to exist as a school with a small number of students. The deaf community has long hoped for a reversal of fortunes that will support and fulfill deaf students’ language and communication needs as part of the wider social acceptance for differences and diversity. When thinking about OIDD’s first school building.

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Erect New Buildings for School for Deaf

(Special Despatch to The Globe.)

Belleville, Nov. 16. — The old buildings at the Ontario School for the Deaf are to be demolished to make way for a modern structure, which will be erected in front of the present buildings. The new school will be larger than the old. Messrs. Thomas Manley & Son, local contractors, have been awarded the contract for the main building, and are already at work excavating. A force of men will continue work all winter. The present main building was erected nearly fifty years ago, and does not fill modern requirements. The school was known for many years as the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.

Figure 6: Newspaper clipping about the new establishment for OIDD.2

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2 The Globe (Toronto), November 17, 1919, p. 3.
opened back in 1870, the deaf education history proves to be rich. With multiple challenges and successes, the journey of the education of deaf children spans over 150 years from 1870 to today. The legacy of OIDD, including its first school building along with its teaching staff, and many other developments in the deaf community are part of the greater and diverse history of Ontario and Canada.

References


Appendix A: Newspaper Clippings about Ontario Institution for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb School’s First Building

![Report of the Commissioner of Public Works for the Province of Ontario, for the Year 1869, Appendix E–No. 2, p. 48 in Sessional Papers (No. 6), 1869.](image-url)
DEAF AND DUMB ASYLUM.

The Government, on Wednesday, awarded the design of a Deaf and Dumb Institution, sent in by Mr. James Smith, architect, Toronto, the prize of $200, offered some time ago by advertisement. Mr. Smith’s plan is highly spoken of. The building is in the form of an inverted T, and the whole of the ground floor is occupied by the school rooms, class rooms, Superintendent’s and assistants’ rooms. The dining room, kitchen and offices are placed in the rear of the main building, but connected with it by a hall. The servants’ apartments are placed over the kitchen, and the cellars underneath. The school rooms for the males and females are situated at the extreme ends of the building, and are entered from the front and rear by separate passages. The main entrance is in the centre of the building, connecting with a wide corridor running parallel with the front and ending at the school room. The main stairs is placed opposite the front door, and the stairs for the patients near the ends of the centre corridors, and completely isolated from each other.

The three upper floors are wholly taken up by the dormitories, Superintendents’ and assistants’ apartments, bath rooms and water closets, &c. The building is intended to be heated by steam, and ventilated on the most approved principles. The main building is 208 feet long, and about 60 feet wide; the rear wing about 100 x 50 feet.

The structure will be erected with brick and stone, with cut stone dressings. The roof is to be of the Mansard principle, with handsome dormers in it for lighting the upper story. In the centre of the building, over the main entrance, will be a tower over 100 feet high. The style of the building is the domestic Gothic. The estimated cost is $65,000.

The Globe (Toronto), December 4, 1868, p. 1

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TO CONTRACTORS.

SEAL ED TENDERS.

Addressed to the undersigned, at this Department, will be received until noon, on Saturday, 15th May next, for the construction of the following Public Works and Buildings:

AT BELLEVILLE.

A DEAF AND DUMB INSTITUTION, to be erected on the site known as the Spencer Farm, East half of Lot 26, on the Sidney Road, fronting on the Bay of Quinte, near the west limits of the town. Plans and specifications can be seen at this Department, and at the Shire Hall, Belleville.

Excerpt from The Globe (Toronto), May 7, 1869, p. 3

The contract for the erection of the Deaf and Dumb Asylum at Belleville, was awarded, on Tuesday, to the Messrs. Kempster, builders, of Hamilton.
Appendix A (con’t)

**Supplement to the Belleville Intelligencer.**

*Deaf and Dumb Institute, Belleville*

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**Principal Palmer of the Deaf and Dumb Institute.**

The following notice from the Raleigh (N. C.) papers, of Dr. J. Palmer, Principal of the Ontario Deaf and Dumb Institute, will show the high estimation in which that gentleman was held in his own home:

*From the Raleigh (N. C.) Standard.*

WILLIAM J. PALMER, Esq.—The announcement that this gentleman has accepted the position of Principal of an Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind, at Belleville, a city of some ten thousand inhabitants, located on Lake Ontario, in Canada, will be received with the profoundest regret throughout the entire state.

For ten years Mr. Palmer has been Principal of our State Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind. During that long period he filled the position with unrivalled ability, and we part with him knowing that the Institution has lost its most reliable officer, and the city of Raleigh a most useful citizen. We wish Mr. Palmer every success in his position, and happiness in his new home. He will be remembered by the people of this state as long as there is an Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind.

On Wednesday evening, September 21st, at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind, Mr. Palmer presented the following as his resignation:

*N. C. Inst. for Deaf, Dumb, and Blind, Raleigh, Sept. 21st, 1870.*

To the Board of Directors of the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind.

Gentlemen,—I hereby tender to you my resignation as Principal of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind, having accepted an appointment from the Government of Ontario, Canada, as Principal of the Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.

In severing a connection of ten years with the Institution as Principal, I do so with feelings of deep regret, but the duty I owe to myself and family render it necessary for me to take this step.

I can assure you that I shall feel a deep interest in the welfare and prosperity of the Institution, and in my new field of labor will be ready at all times to do anything in my power to advance its interests.

I am well aware that in the discharge of the varied and numerous duties which have devolved upon me I have committed errors, but I can conscientiously say, that I have always labored faithfully for the improvement of the unfortunate children committed to my charge.

From your predecessors in office, as well as ourselves, and from all the departments of the State Government, I have always received a prompt and hearty support in my efforts to promote the prosperity of the Institution, and I sincerely hope that the Old North State will continue to sustain this Institution as liberally as she has done hitherto.

Yours respectfully,

W. J. PALMER.

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*The Daily Intelligencer (Belleville), January 18, 1870, p. 5*

*The Daily Intelligencer (Belleville), October 19, 1870, p. 2*

*The Daily Intelligencer (Belleville), October 24, 1870, p. 2*
Appendix B: Architects’ Writings about the New School Building

The New School Building as Described by James Smith, Architect

This building, for the Deaf and Dumb Institution, is to be erected at Belleville, immediately west of the town, on the shores fronting the bay. The building is designed in the domestic style of Gothic architecture, modified to suit the requirements of the climate. The style is particularly well suited for an institution of the kind, being collegiate in appearance, and capable of being erected more economically than any other of the same dimensions. The main building is 208 feet long, with an average width of 50 feet. In the rear of the main building, but connected with it by a covered passage, is the dining-room, which is 60 feet long, and 30 feet wide; a kitchen 32 feet long, by 24 feet wide; also, a store-room, pantry, and cook-room; over the dining-room is the lecture room, having the seats raised at the rear, radiating from the teacher’s platform, behind which are large slates built in the walls for writing on. Over the kitchen extension are the male and female sick wards, each having separate entrances, and supplied with baths and water-closets. There will be three entrances in the front, the principal one in the center of the building being for the superintendents and visitors; the two side ones for the male and female students respectively.

The center hall is twelve feet wide and runs through and connects with the dining-room. In this hall are the principal stairs, at the first landing of which is a passage connecting with the lecture room.

The main corridors are six feet wide, run across the center hall, and connect with the [schoolrooms] at each of the building, each of which is sixty feet long by thirty-seven feet wide, with two [classrooms] in the rear of each. There will be ten [classrooms] in all, four in the center portion of the first floor, and six on the ground floor. On the ground floor of the main building are also, the superintendent's apartments, reception room, and clerks' rooms.

The first floor is wholly occupied with dormitories, matron’s and students’ rooms, assistants’ rooms, clothes rooms, and [classrooms].

The second and attic floors are taken up with dormitories, which have ceilings fourteen feet high, and are thoroughly ventilated.

There will be accommodation for over 350 pupils of both sexes; particular care has been taken in arranging the building, to have the sexes completely isolated. The dining room is entered by covered passages from the male and female halls.

There will be ample play yards on each side of the building, enclosed with high fences, for the males and females; also, large covered sheds for play in winter and wet weather.

The building will be heated by steam, the boiler room being away from the building, but so arranged as to connect with the fuel cellars, under the kitchen extension. The ventilating flues will connect with the boiler chimney stack in such a way as to secure perfect ventilation.

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3 This column appeared as a supplement to The Daily Intelligencer (Belleville), January 18, 1870, Vol. 3, No. 220, p. 5 (see original title and image at the upper left corner on Appendix A). Under a different title, the same article was also in the Report of the Commissioner of Public Works for the Province of Ontario, for the Year 1869, Sessional Papers (No. 6), pp. 55–56. J. B. McGann also wrote a description of the school during October 1869 in the American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb, 14(4), 247–251.
The buildings are to be erected with brick and stone, which can be procured in the neighborhood, and will present a façade of over 200 feet in length, and about 50 feet high to the eaves. The roof will be of the Mansard construction, fitted up with dormer windows and gallets, and is covered with slates and galvanized iron, and surrounded with handsome iron railings.

The front will be in five divisions, the ends and center projecting six feet from the main wall; the lower windows will be arched, with brick buttresses between them; the upper windows will be grouped, or in pairs, with flat arches, and connected together with stone string moldings.

The front entrance is under the tower, and is arched, with small arched windows on each side, and flanked with massive buttresses; over the central doorway are two grouped windows, and then a large Tracery window, and the whole is finished with a tower, with very steep roof and spire termination, with ornamental wrought-iron vane.

**Outbuildings as Described by Kivas Tully, Architect and Engineer**

The outbuildings of this institution will consist of a stable for four horses, [cowhouse] with stalls for six cows, harness room and carriage house in one building ninety feet by twenty-three feet, with hay loft. This building will be constructed of brick. Also, a framed wood-shed eighty feet by twenty feet, and twelve feet high, and a brick barn sixty feet by thirty feet, and twenty feet in height.

These outbuildings will be placed about two hundred feet in the rear of the main building, and macadamized roads twenty feet in width will be constructed to the same from the front and side roads.

An avenue sixty feet in width will be constructed from the Trenton Road, to be planted on each side, and to have a graveled sidewalk; the length of the avenue will be six hundred feet.

A brick lodge and handsome gate entrance will be constructed at the Trenton Road, and the lot will be closed with a strong picket fence eight feet in height.

The water will be pumped from the bay, on the east side of the lot, through an iron pipe two inches in diameter, by means of a steam pump of five horsepower, to be enclosed in a brick engine house.

The main drain, 1,400 feet in length, will convey the surface water and the overflow from the [farmyard] and main building to the bay on the west side of the lot.

The cost of land and buildings all complete will be $75,000.

The contractors of this Institution, Messrs. Kempster & Brother, are pushing forward the work with all possible rapidity. The site of the building, as our readers are already aware, is about in the center of the farm purchased for that purpose, a short distance from the westerly limits of the Town, and commands a magnificent view of the Bay and surrounding country. The foundations are about all excavated, and the stone work for the west wing of the building is nearly completed. The Bay shore at a convenient point a substantial wharf is in process of construction, at which the largest steamers can unload.—Already a considerable quantity of material, brick from various yards in the vicinity of Belleville, and stone from Point Ann are being accumulated here. At Point Ann as well as at some of the brick yards docks are being prepared so that the material can be easily shipped on board the schooners. A quarry of stone had been opened on the Institute farm, from which a large quantity of the stone used is being procured. The contractors have a large force employed, and as will be soon by advertisement, are in want of a number of bricklayers and masons. They have taken hold of this work with energy and spirit and with favorable circumstances, there is no doubt that the building will be completed by the time specified in the contract.

When the Commissioner of Public Works was here and announced that Belleville had been selected for the location of the Deaf and Dumb Institute, it was contemplated that when the corner stone should be laid some public demonstration should take place. The probability is that the work will be so far progressed as to admit of laying the corner stone about the first of August, and if anything is to be done towards a demonstration, immediate steps should be taken. The occasion is an important one for Belleville, and we think it of importance that some demonstration be made. It is not improbable that the Premier, with the Hon. John Carling and other members of the Ontario Government, would attend the ceremony of laying the corner stone. Will not some of our launching men take the matter in hand and make arrangements for a proper demonstration? If anything be done it should be done at once.

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4 Copied from a faded and blurred newspaper clipping, *The Daily Intelligencer* (Belleville), July 9, 1869, p. 2.
Appendix C: Architecture Sketches of the School’s First Building
Appendix D: Demolition of the School's First Building

Figure 10:
Excavating and building the foundation in the front of the old school structure, 1919.

Ontario Institution for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb School's Original Building, 1870–1922, behind the New Main School; first Phase under construction, 1920.
Cultural Insights

Students at the scene of the old school building brought down, 1922; OIDD's motto.
Photo album of William Ernest Cust, 1937.

Appendix E: School’s First Building with the Teachers, Staff, and Students

Dining hall, 1892.
Domestic science kitchen, 1903.

Photo album of James Harold Tait, 1907–1918.
Cultural Insights

Photo Album of James Goodbrand, 1883–1891. Wagon loads of pupils’ trunks made the 4.8 km (3 mile) trip between OIDD and the railway station every September and June.

Photo album of William H. J. Govern, 1911-1923.

Boys in sewing class, 1890s.

Mary Dempsey’s sewing class, 1896.
Raising the flag, 1907.

Manual training workshop, 1890s.

Carrie Gibson’s articulation class, 1896.

Sarah J. Templeton’s class, 1896.

William Nurse’s shoemaking class, 1896.

The laundry, 1890s.
Cultural Insights

George F. Stewart’s class, circa 1896.

In Sign Language, "God Save the Queen," 1900.

Daniel R. Coleman’s class, 1896.

Superintendent Robert Mathison’s office, 1896.
Daniel R. Coleman and his students, 1874.

James Ashley’s class, 1891–1892.
Cultural Insights

Officers and teachers, June 1906.

Officers and teachers, June 1906.
Students and staff, June 1906.
For the first time in the school’s history, eight pupils, whose names appear below, took their high school entrance examinations at the end of the 1913–1914 school year. They all passed with flying colors. **Standing (left to right):** Drusilla Mabel Buchan, Gladys Valentine Sours, and Sarah Isabel Barker. **Seated (left to right):** Edna Marie Gerolamy, Muriel Hope Kennedy, Evelyn Peters Hazlitt, Mona McFarlane, and Dorothy Stewart Hazlitt.

Red-Coated School Cadets Corps, November 15, 1914.
Appendix F: Some Noteworthy Highlights at OIDD, 1870–1922

1870: The first head at OIDD with the title of principal was Wesley “Willie” Jones Palmer (b. June 11, 1834; d. June 3, 1888), an experienced teacher from the North Carolina Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Raleigh. He resigned in 1879.

1870: OIDD’s first deaf teacher was Samuel Thomas Greene (b. June 11, 1843; d. February 17, 1890), an American from Maine who graduated in 1870 from the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington DC. He taught until his unexpected death in 1890 from an iceboat accident on the Bay of Quinte near the school.

1870–1917: Pupil deaths at OIDD numbered forty-three due to various diseases and sicknesses. Five were buried in the Institution Lot (Section D, Row 16, Stone 16) of the Belleville Cemetery, and the rest were taken home for burial.

1871: Annie Marie Perry (b. March 28, 1838; d. December 23, 1928) of Cobourg, Ontario, was OIDD’s second and first female deaf teacher. Perry attended the New York Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb in New York City from 1847 to 1852. She taught from 1871 to 1872 and 1874 to 1880.

1872: Built on the grounds of OIDD were additional buildings for the pupils in the trades of carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, and two residential cottages for institution staff.

1873: On January 29, members of the Ontario legislature with Sir William Pearce Howland (b. 1811; d. 1907), the lieutenant governor of Ontario from 1868 to 1873, visited OIDD (see the sketch in Figure 5).

1874: OIDD hosted the 8th Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf and Dumb from July 15–22. About 155 superintendents, principals, and teachers from schools for deaf children in North America attended. One of the delegates was the celebrated Dr. Edward Miner Gallaudet (b. 1837; d. 1917), then president (1864–1910) of the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University).

1874: Lord Dufferin (b. 1826; d. 1902), the governor general of Canada from 1872 to 1878, visited OIDD on September 6. He presented a bronze medallion to William Wright Smith (b. February 18, 1854; d. April 17, 1912) for his excellence in carpentry and cabinetwork and a silver medallion to William Kay (b. January 23, 1859; d. November 16, 1932) for his proficiency in the literary department and his good conduct. Their awards are permanently on display in the school’s OSD-SJW Archives and Museum.

1875: A new framed gymnasium was put up by the older male pupils under the direction of Henry Creber, the school’s master carpenter. Partitioned for the girls and boys, it featured a bowling alley, ladders, horizontal bars, and other physical equipment when completed.

1877: OIDD was the first in the city of Belleville to install one of Alexander Graham Bell’s telephones to be tested and put in use.

1877: The superintendent’s house, a unique large brick dwelling, was constructed and ready for occupancy.

1877: Wood Hall opened as a new building to house a bursar’s storeroom, isolation hospital, sitting room, and dormitory for older male students. In 1922, the lower floor became a print shop.

1878: The school’s founder, John Barrett McGann, retired. Two years later in 1880, he passed away.

1879: Robert Mathison (b. January 9, 1843; d. July 30, 1924) became the school’s second head as superintendent, with a career spanning twenty-seven years.

1888, 1894, 1900, 1906, 1912, and 1917: The Ontario Deaf-Mute Association held its summer conventions at OIDD. This organization, consisting mainly of school graduates, was established in 1886 by two deaf teachers, Samuel Thomas Greene (b.
June 11, 1843; d. February 17, 1890) and William Nurse (b. June 16, 1854; d. June 12, 1923). In 1910, it was renamed the Ontario Association of the Deaf. The association is still active today.

1889: Henry George (b. circa 1881; d. June 12, 1916), from Chatham, Ontario, was the first Black pupil admitted to OIDD on September 11, 1889. He left or graduated in 1898.

1892: OIDD printed its first semimonthly newspaper, *The Canadian Mute*, on February 15. When the school changed its name to the Ontario School for the Deaf (OSD) in 1913, the word *mute* disappeared from the publication’s banner. *The Canadian* ended its publication with its spring 1991 issue, just one year short of the periodical’s hundredth anniversary.

1893: Michael James Madden (b. March 20, 1871; d. January 11, 1942), a former OIDD student from 1877 to 1882, was the first deaf Canadian to have graduated from the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington DC.

1894: Lord Aberdeen (b. 1847; d. 1934), the governor general of Canada from 1893 to 1898, visited OIDD on June 1.

1895: Alfred Harper Cowan (b. March 8, 1872; d. May 12, 1949) was the first graduate of OIDD (1880–1889) to graduate from the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington DC.

1899: In February, more than 70 percent of the entire school population was sick with “la grippe,” another term for the flu.

1903: Two former OIDD students, Annie Lavina MacPhail (b. January 31, 1878; d. August 3, 1959) and Margaret Hutchinson (b. February 10, 1879; d. May 4, 1936), shared the distinction of being the first deaf female Canadians to attend and graduate from the National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University) in Washington DC. MacPhail attended OIDD from 1886 to 1894, and Hutchinson from 1886 to 1896.

1904: The Ontario government transferred OIDD from the Department of Prisons, Asylums, and Public Charities to the more appropriate care of the Department of Education.

1906: Charles Bernard Coughlin (b. April 5, 1862; d. December 10, 1928), a physician, became the school’s third head as superintendent, an office he held until his untimely death in 1928.

1907: The oral teaching system was introduced at OIDD in January and adopted as a policy schoolwide in 1912. Signed language slowly began to be phased out in the classrooms.

1913: Government officials changed the school’s name from OIDD to a more appropriate and politically correct term, Ontario School for the Deaf (OSD).

1913–1914: The school held its first high school entrance examination (see a photo with names of the successful students on page 42).

1914: The Boys’ Residence, Girls’ Residence, and Firehall were newly built and ceremonially opened on October 30.

1914: Some male students formed a noncombat military company and wore red-coated army cadet corps uniforms.

1919: A formal teacher-training program (known as the Professional Training for Teachers of the Deaf) commenced at OIDD. It ended in 1991 and was transferred to York University in Toronto.

1922: The original school building, built in 1870, was rebuilt to create a new structure, known today as the Main School.
Are There Really Deaf People Who are Languageless?

Kristin Snoddon
Ryerson University


When I was first approached about writing a review of the second edition of Susan Schaller’s *A Man Without Words*, I had some reservations—and I still do. First published in 1991, the book was reissued in 2012 with new material. In the late 1970s, Schaller moved to Los Angeles and encountered Ildefonso, a pseudonym she gives to a twenty-seven-year-old Indigenous undocumented migrant from rural Mexico who was “never exposed to education or signed language” (p. 30). The author first met Ildefonso in a community college class where she was hired to work as a signed language interpreter. Schaller was entranced by Ildefonso and began working with him to communicate and learn American Sign Language (ASL) and English in addition to concepts and information such as names, time, and history.

The first twelve chapters of this book consist of short vignettes describing the author’s encounters with and reflections on working with Ildefonso. The remaining six chapters and afterword narrate Schaller’s search for information about other deaf adults who grow up without learning a national signed language or going to school. (The term “national sign language” is used by the World Federation of the Deaf to refer to one or more signed languages that make up the linguistic ecology of a country.) The book also explores her desire to find Ildefonso again years after they stopped working together at the college. This part of the book contains further musings regarding the nature of language, communication, and deaf people who grow up without having the opportunity to experience a rich signing environment. For me, deaf children of deaf parents or of hearing parents who receive early and comprehensive support for learning a national sign language represent an ideal situation for language acquisition. These children are exposed to numerous signers (as found in any deaf community) and do not experience barriers to a wide range of human interactions. Moreover, if hearing children normally have language made available to them, we should expect the same for deaf children.

From reading the publisher’s description of the book, I wondered about whether Schaller’s accounts of teaching and befriending a so-called “languageless” deaf person would hold up against more contemporary understandings of language deprivation. I also contemplated how the book would appear in the face of a growing number of critiques by signed language anthropologists of the concept of languagelessness itself. For example, Erin Moriarty Harrelson (2019) discusses how the communicative practices of rural deaf Cambodians are marginalized and devalued by a view that sees only national signed languages as legitimate. In her fieldwork in rural Nepal, E. Mara Green (2014) studies “natural sign” as a mode of signing used between interlocutors when one or all individuals do not know Nepali Sign Language, a national signed language that emerged following the founding of the first deaf school in Kathmandu in 1966. I wished Schaller would take into consideration that deaf people are known for creating a signed language when there is no established national sign language at hand.

Some chauvinism, too, is evident in Schaller’s book; she initially views Ildefonso as “a wordless man” with an “alien mind and life” (p. 31) and a less “cohesive view of the world” than a “year-old baby” (p. 28). As she begins to teach Ildefonso, she compares herself to an explorer of the New World (p. 31) and “a god” (p. 75). One chapter of the book is devoted to comparing Ildefonso with Ishi, the last speaker of the Yahi tribe in California who revealed himself to white settlers in 1911. Schaller claims that “in some ways, a languageless person remains aboriginal” (p. 106), and she compares Ildefonso’s “mimes and gestures” with “intertribal communication” (p. 107). Near the end of the book, the author encounters a roomful of deaf undocumented residents from Mexico who communicate with each other without using ASL or (as far as we know) one of the signed language varieties of Mexico. Schaller states, “I felt like a time machine had flown me back to the Neanderthal age” (p. 182). All of this is highly problematic and reinforces racist stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as primitive.

There is some valuable and relevant content in the book; perhaps the most important takeaway is that deaf children and deaf adults who experience language deprivation can learn and contribute as community members and citizens in society. We must remember that deaf individuals who do not have full access to a natural language during the critical period for first-language
acquisition often experience poor educational and health outcomes. It is vital for governments and health professionals to recognize the role of signed language in deaf children's healthy development and ensure young deaf children and their families have access to signed language services (see, for example, Murray et al., 2019). Society must recognize the potential of and uphold the right to language acquisition and education for all deaf children, youth, and adults, including those who experience language deprivation.

In A Man Without Words, Schaller also distinguishes between language deprivation in deaf children and accounts of “children who survived alone in the wilderness, children adopted by animals, and children abused and imprisoned” (p. 149). The author argues that these experiences are different: “Deafness is not wildness, and the isolation of languagelessness alone is not the isolation of the woods or a basement or imprisonment on a chair” (p. 156). In spite of not knowing a national signed language, and even if they experience poverty, many deaf children grow up in loving families. As Schaller states, “Ildefonso had a sense of morality and expressed ideas and convictions about how people should live and treat others. … Ildefonso knew he was human, in spite of not always being treated as such” (pp. 156–157). In the end, Ildefonso knew and used ASL, acquired U.S. resident status, and gained full-time employment as a hospital gardener.

In the book's afterword, Schaller writes, "We are foreigners to a deaf person, even when she or he is our own baby" (p. 204). Yet I think the reverse is often true: deaf people are viewed by many hearing people as alien and unintelligible, and therefore of little interest. Audre Lorde (1984) has remarked on the “endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other” (p. 44). How often have we robbed ourselves of others based on language, culture, and educational differences? Schaller’s book is a testament to what she gained by being open to another.

References


The Success in Creating an International Perspective on Sign Language Policy

Beverly Buchanan
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The 2019 book The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages: Advocacy and Outcomes Around the World, edited by Maartje De Meulder, Joseph J. Murray, and Rachel L. McKee, is a delight for me for one simple reason. When I was younger, I went abroad to multiple countries around the world and was exposed to a variety of sign languages. I also used to work as a volunteer teacher for deaf children in Thailand. My other experiences include providing leadership training to deaf people residing not only in Thailand but in Colombia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Germany, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar. For other reasons, I went to Costa Rica, South Africa, and Tibet. In my home country, Canada, I grew up as a deaf person in Nova Scotia with the two sign languages used by my deaf parents. My father knows American Sign Language (ASL), and my mother is most comfortable with the Maritime Sign Language. Multilingualism is my life.

As I read The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages, I found it affirmed my experience of all the challenges that the deaf communities in the different countries I visited have faced in getting their sign languages recognized. The universal phenomenon of deaf people being signers is something to respect, admire, and celebrate. Historically, using sign language in a classroom was banned during the election at a Milan conference (1880), and today, sign language is accessible and should be used by every deaf person in any given society. Sign language is a natural language for deaf people as much as spoken language is for hearing people. From my view, society has the responsibility to see that young deaf children become signers through an appropriate and rich signing environments. Without this support, deaf children are at great risk of linguistic deprivation. I am fortunate to have deaf parents (as most deaf children are rather born to hearing parents and often find themselves not learning any sign language), as I became a native signer and had the opportunity to learn many more sign languages over the years.

With this in mind, I attended the World Federation of the Deaf Congress held in Paris in July 2019. There, I was fortunate enough to witness the diversity of sign languages of various countries. I came to believe that signing is everywhere, even though it can be denied to deaf individuals due to poorly conceived policies and limited access. A significant number of hearing people are inclined to take language for granted by speaking one or more languages, yet not knowing much, if at all, about sign languages. The government and the education system in particular have some discriminating ideas about how deaf children best learn and use language. With The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages, however, I applaud the editors for assembling a book that targets policies related to the sign languages throughout the world.

The book covers multiple countries, which is vitally important for any international study. Among the countries covered in The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages are (in alphabetic order): Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Catalonia (Spain), Chile, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Scotland (Great Britain), South Korea, Turkey, and Uganda, the United States, and Venezuela. The eighteen chapters are written by different contributors who share various strategies to achieve the legal recognition of various sign languages and to show the barriers that they have overcome. The book will be of interest to sign language activists, educators, policymakers, researchers in deaf studies, and those who specialize in sign language linguistics, sociolinguistics, human rights law, and applied linguistics.

The chapters are categorized into four parts based on their distinctive emphases: 1) Recent Sign Language Laws, 2) Implicit Legal Recognition, 3) Ongoing Campaign Towards Explicit Legal Recognition, and 4) Implementation of Sign Language Laws. Readers will learn about new sign language laws being created that are worthy of attention. However, legal recognition can either be implicit or explicit, and the trend is set to favor laws that are explicit rather than implicit. Also included in this discussion are
campaigns and strategies, as well as some barriers, in the legislative process. This book illustrates how advocacy for sign language legislation takes place within language policies in different countries. The advocacy activities depend on the intersections among language ideologies, public policy, and discourses within deaf communities. Based on the legislative challenges explored this book, it is unsurprising that deaf communities will need to fight to achieve any meaningful sign language legislation. Audism is prevalent and has continued unabated for so long. In general, people may be unfamiliar with the language used by deaf people and unable to address terms adequately in legislative or medical situations.

Additionally, the book is highly organized, and the editors prove to be experts in the area of sign language policy. In the first part of the book, the editors provide substantial information about the legislative process, the steps taken, and how resistance can be overcome. Policy discussions can often be dry and difficult to follow, but not so with this book. The second part discusses countries that have managed to attain quasi-recognition of the sign languages. Additional tools will need to be used to bring greater recognition and justification to the sign languages of these countries. The third part addresses how sign language legislation can change from one type to another; for example, some countries have made efforts to achieve official (or explicit) recognition instead of implicit legislative recognition for their sign languages. Finally, the fourth part expresses some contradictions and challenges; the sign languages in these countries may have legal status, but societal attitudes and bias have prevented the full implementation of the sign languages in a given country. In this part, I found the campaigns to have sign languages fully implemented in various countries inspirational.

Concerning how politics works out in some areas of sign language policy, it seems necessary to piggyback the topic of on disability legislation (especially in the United States). The Americans with Disabilities Act serves as a positive example for supporting the provision of sign language interpreting services (without any formal recognition for ASL as a language). I have come to think that the support for ASL is oddly ambiguous in American legislation. Yes, sign language interpreters are a valuable asset to the deaf community, but what about the opportunity for deaf children themselves in learning and mastering ASL? What are their guarantees?

The United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), as another example, recognizes sign languages in several sections—most notably under Article 9: Accessibility; Article 21: Access to Information; Article 24: Education; and Article 30: Recreation. The United Nations also recognizes September 23 as the International Day of Sign Languages. We, as global citizens, will need to recognize that sign language is a natural language among Deaf community.

Often, hearing people could feel free to choose to study sign language courses in high school or college. Anyone could learn a new language including parents of a Deaf child and community workers that work closely with Deaf people and those hearing people who are signers. The same holds true for many hearing children of deaf parents. These people do not fit in the disability framework. Hearing signers are important into deaf people’s lives.

As The Legal Recognition of Sign Languages shows, it is time to turn the discussion from Deaf under the category of a disability to sign language users as a diverse population and work toward each country having explicit recognition of their sign languages. We need that list to grow.