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## Signs of Promise: American Sign Language at Gallaudet University during the Nineteenth Century

**Jonathan Wooldridge**

A college classroom stood empty in the early morning stillness, filled with the latest state-of-the-art Victorian Era scientific equipment. A small group of students and their professor filed into the room, and without speaking a word they began their Chemistry lessons. In a nearby classroom students studied the works of Plato and in another they learned French, Greek, and Latin--all in complete silence, their eyes trained on the hands of their professors and classmates. The students were all deaf, and every facet of campus operations was designed around their silent world. This was the scene of late nineteenth century Gallaudet University, located in Washington, D.C. just a few blocks northeast of Capitol Hill. Founded by Amos Kendall in 1857 as a primary school called the Columbia Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind,<sup>[1]</sup> the school was granted collegiate status in 1864; to this day, it remains the world's only college-level educational institution dedicated solely to the deaf.<sup>[2]</sup>

Under the leadership of its first president, Edward Miner Gallaudet, the school found itself at the heart of a nationwide debate regarding the proper method of educating the deaf--a debate that became the sounding board for issues with much larger social ramifications. On one side were the manualists, who advocated that all instruction be carried out using only American Sign Language (ASL), a naturally-developed language that served both as a mode of communication and as a major feature of Deaf identity and culture.<sup>[3]</sup> On the other side were the oralists, who advocated the exclusive use of articulation therapy and spoken instruction to the point of banning the use of ASL wherever possible. Grounded in the belief that deaf people were better served by assimilating with hearing society than by forming their own culture or language, oralists believed that suppressing the use of ASL inside and outside of the classroom while focusing on the development of speech were the most beneficial methods of education. The combined method, in which oral methods of speech therapy would be taught alongside ASL, became the compromise used at Gallaudet University. This choice was not without controversy; oralists generally denounced the use of any Sign Language, especially when combined with their own speech therapy methods.<sup>[4]</sup> While E.M. Gallaudet's decision often put him at odds with the growing support for Oralism throughout the rest of the nation (and indeed the world), he remained dedicated to the combined method--a policy that continues at the institution to this day.<sup>[5]</sup>

This debate was a major part of the politics surrounding deaf education throughout the century, and it directly affected students throughout the nation--but the issue at hand was not merely one of methods or techniques. At the heart of the debate lay a more significant issue: the social perception of deafness as a disability. Oralists considered deafness to be a pathological condition requiring treatment through physical therapy. On the other hand, manualists and supporters of the combined method believed that deafness did not have to be corrected and that education was no more about physical rehabilitation for the deaf than it was for the hearing.

It was for this reason that E.M. Gallaudet's administration as president of the university took the combined approach, accepting the usefulness of speech therapy to the deaf, rejecting the idea that it was a correction of nature's wrongs, and holding on to American Sign Language--not the inability to hear--as the core of Deaf cultural identity. This debate was the public platform that E.M. Gallaudet used to advocate this position, but his focus was always on making the university something far greater than a compromise. He intended to create a college that went beyond method,

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finding meaning and identity in deafness for all those affected by it, and becoming a truly national college with its effects on Deaf society felt throughout America. By creating a community of higher education in which deaf students were celebrated for their unique language and culture and not ostracized for their physical condition, E.M. Gallaudet's administration of Gallaudet University fought against the social stigma of disability that pervaded the field of deaf education in the nineteenth century, advancing the notions that the deaf were not socially disabled and that their physical condition did not prevent them from being full participants in society.

### The Man and the Vision

Born in 1837 to Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Sophia Fowler--a deaf woman who was one of Thomas' former students--Edward Miner Gallaudet did not originally intend to follow in the footsteps of his illustrious father. The elder Gallaudet was a famed educator who co-founded the first school for deaf children in the United States: the American Asylum in Hartford, Connecticut--now known as the American School for the Deaf. Edward had planned to become a banker or enter the clergy, but after the untimely death of his father when he was twelve, he soon became drawn to the work of educating the deaf. At the age of 19, only one year out of a collegiate teachers' program, he was already a full-time instructor.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 1857, just one year after E.M. Gallaudet joined the faculty of the Hartford school, Amos Kendall contacted him in regards to opening a school for the deaf and blind children of the District of Columbia on a plot of land he owned a few blocks north of the Capitol Building. Kendall was a journalist, lawyer, and former Postmaster General of the United States, but by the time he contacted Gallaudet he was in retirement. Thanks to Kendall's distinguished career, he was a man of great authority and respect within the government so his nomination for principal of the new school would not be taken lightly. Well aware of that, he nominated E.M. Gallaudet-- only twenty years of age, with a single year of teaching experience--as his first pick for superintendent of the new school.<sup>[7]</sup> The choice was definitely unusual given Edward's overall lack of teaching experience and unfamiliarity with blind students, but Kendall's correspondence with Gallaudet showed that he had full faith in the young teacher's ability to lead. In Gallaudet's published writings, he presented himself as up to the challenge from the start, but his own private writings revealed a bit of a conflict dating back to his beginnings as a teacher--not so much in his abilities to teach, but in a desire to follow his father's footsteps in entering the clergy before dedicating his life to education.<sup>[8]</sup> Despite his youth and relative inexperience, by the time he needed to come to a decision on whether or not to accept the position, Gallaudet was completely confident that he was making the right choice having full faith that with his skills he would "do great things" for the Deaf community and for God.<sup>[9]</sup> With that, the stage was set for him to achieve these "great things"--though critics would say that it was handed to him on a silver platter by virtue of pedigree. With only a few meetings between himself and Kendall, the groundwork for the national college for the deaf was underway.

After a few years of operation as a primary school, and the quick abolishment of the department for the blind due to a lack of teachers, Gallaudet proposed to Kendall that a department for a college for the deaf should be created. The idea was unprecedented, and the vision for the college was ambitious. Its most basic purpose was to provide education to the deaf people of the United States, but there was a much greater goal: to prove to the world that the deaf could study the same subjects as the hearing with the same level of success, as well as to offer them all of the benefits of such an education.<sup>[10]</sup> The college was a chance to show that a portion of the population, looked upon by others as inherently inferior to the hearing, could achieve the same academic prestige, and that their disability was not an inability.<sup>[11]</sup>

Kendall was initially skeptical about the necessity or feasibility of a college dedicated entirely to the education of deaf people, but after Gallaudet relentlessly pursued the matter, he offered his full support. This was crucial to

securing the existence of the college, as Kendall's influential status as a respected member of the government helped to secure funding for the institution from Congress. Both Congress and Kendall's support was absolutely necessary for the school's continued existence, as the campus was on Kendall's land in a federally managed city.<sup>[12]</sup> With the encouragement of Kendall and the school's board of directors, Edward Gallaudet went to Senator James Grimes in 1864 with a bill providing the school with the ability to confer degrees and to establish a proper collegiate department; it passed with little difficulty and the full support of President Lincoln.<sup>[13]</sup> With that, the first college exclusively for the deaf was established, and Amos Kendall saw to it that E.M. Gallaudet--the man whose vision had made it possible--was its first president.

The dream had been realized--a college devoted entirely to the deaf existed that could give degrees holding equal status to those given to hearing people. The creation of such an establishment gave legitimacy to their abilities and elevated the status of their culture, sending the message that those who could not hear were just as capable, just as intelligent, and just as educable as anyone else. There was an immediate effect on the American Deaf community; they finally had the opportunity for higher-level education on a campus designed exclusively to serve their needs--an opportunity not shared by the deaf anywhere else in the world.<sup>[14]</sup> The students of the primary school at Gallaudet were overjoyed at the opportunity to continue their studies beyond high school, eager to prove wrong the skeptics who doubted their ability to "master the sciences and the arts" as well as their hearing companions.<sup>[15]</sup> But for the institution's newly elevated president, the time for rejoicing would soon give way to a need to mount a heavy defense of the methods with which he conducted the school--namely, a defense of the combined method and of American Sign Language from the steadily increasing number of oralists who did not agree with his idealistic view of the method's intentions.

### **Gallaudet and the Combined Method**

Due to his nearly absolute authority as president of the college, E.M. Gallaudet's personal support of the combined method was responsible for the commitment to both American Sign Language and speech that became the policy of Gallaudet University. While he could be credited for its implementation at the national college, he was not responsible for the method's creation. An 1881 study published in the *American Annals of the Deaf* counted a total of fifty-six schools for the deaf in the United States, thirty-seven of which (Gallaudet included) were using the combined method with the remainder split between oral and manual. Of the twenty-five schools for the deaf that were older than Gallaudet, all but three were using the combined method. One of these was the Connecticut Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb, the first American school for the deaf and the school which E.M. Gallaudet's father, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, had co-founded.<sup>[16]</sup> The influence from his father's preference towards the combined method was crucial in E.M. Gallaudet's decision to carry out the same work in the same manner. His mother Sophia Fowler Gallaudet was also highly influential. As a deaf person with no speech capability, Sophia Gallaudet was one of many cases of the "deaf-mute" that oral education was dedicated to stamping out.<sup>[17]</sup> Cases like those of Sophia prompted both the young Gallaudet and the oralist theorists to reexamine the term "deaf-mute."

Though the term would eventually be considered impolite at best and outright offensive at worst, the nineteenth century understanding of the condition of deafness was that it was so inexorably connected to muteness as to make "deaf-mute" the most common, complete, and correct terminology. The oralist argument was that this double disability required fixing--if deafness as a cause could not be stamped out, then at least the consequence of muteness could be.<sup>[18]</sup> Manualists argued otherwise; for example, E.M. Gallaudet recalled his mother being a sociable and caring person not in need of speech (or requiring her deafness to be fixed, for that matter) to have a fulfilling life. He reported that she had always seemed to him to be perfectly content and capable of as normal and rich a life as anyone else, speech or not.<sup>[19]</sup>

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Although he was dedicated to his father's work and inspired by his mother's example, "continuing the legacy" of his family was far from the main reason behind E.M. Gallaudet's commitment to the combined method. Throughout his life, Gallaudet wrote extensively on the subject, and while his general position of support for the combined method never wavered, the rhetoric that he used to express that support varied considerably. On the wake of his trip to Europe in 1867, Gallaudet published his first public statement on the matter in the school's Tenth Annual Report to the Department of Education. His report compared the oral, manual (which he called "natural"), and combined methods as he observed their use in Europe.<sup>[20]</sup> With the United States government as his audience, and with a desire to defend the methods of the newly created college, Gallaudet did not hesitate to attack the oral method and its practitioners for the failure of their system to serve the needs of the deaf.<sup>[21]</sup> This failure, as he put it, was due to the oral method's exclusion of Sign Language. Gallaudet argued that it was apparent through simple observation that not all deaf people were capable of speech--a point of view not shared with his colleagues who advocated oral-only education--so the suppression or outright prohibition of Sign Language was detrimental both to education and the ability to communicate with other deaf people. This set the tone for Gallaudet's early strategy in his defense of the combined method: promote the compromise between two irreconcilable positions by attacking the most threatening competition.

He continued to promote this idea some decades later in 1896, when he released a pair of publications in the *American Annals of the Deaf* directly attacking the oral-only advocates. The first, "The Combined System Approved by Friends of the Orally Taught," was a collection of letters from students and parents of students who had transferred or desired to transfer from purely oral schools to Gallaudet University, with E.M. Gallaudet's commentary tying the testimonies together. By using not only his own words but also those of the parents and students, Gallaudet personalized the debate while continuing to attack those who believed that pure oral education was by definition the most beneficial method. However, the letters he chose to publish were universally critical not only of oralism but also of Alexander Graham Bell, who was portrayed as the ringleader of a failed system that was harmful to the deaf and actively opposed Gallaudet University's work.<sup>[22]</sup> Gallaudet accused Bell of spreading "oralist propaganda," but his response to Bell's tactics in this publication used the exact same approach--particularly through an appeal to emotion by eliciting sympathy for the "unfortunate victims" of an inferior method.

E.M. Gallaudet's second publication of that year, carrying the antagonistic title of "Is an Oral College Needed?" was an affront to the oral movement from someone directly challenged by it. To answer the question posed by his title, Gallaudet unsurprisingly said "No." By acknowledging that many instructors trained in that method were worried about losing anything they had gained through years of hard work, Gallaudet addressed the oralists' counterargument that students taught to speak would lose their ability upon using ASL. Furthermore, Gallaudet felt that the establishment of an oral-only college would sabotage his work and deny its students an environment that catered to their need for both speech and sign.<sup>[23]</sup>

These two articles were published well after the Milan Conference of 1881; Gallaudet's presentation at the conference was starkly different from the antagonism and pathos of his other arguments. The Milan Conference was intended as a definitive agreement between the many educators of the deaf in the world on the best method with which to carry out their work, though by no means was it to be international law or even binding to anyone who chose not to accept it. In contrast to the United States, where fewer than ten percent of deaf students nationwide were educated in oral-only institutions, Europe was a different case.<sup>[24]</sup> There, the debate was essentially settled and most of the continent used the oral method; in such an environment, Gallaudet's cries for compromise must have seemed unnecessary.<sup>[25]</sup> But instead of relying on personal attacks or case studies, President Gallaudet made a generalized logical appeal regarding the reasons why he used the combined method. None of these reasons were

new--the value of speech to the deaf, the importance of Sign Language to reach those who could not acquire speech, being careful not to equate speech with a complete education for the deaf in the same way that one would not do that for the hearing--but the approach was entirely different, as he used a tone of reasoned, technical justification.<sup>[26]</sup>

It was unsurprising, then, that the closest to a definitive treatise on the combined system that Gallaudet published took this tone as well, as it was presented before the British Deaf and Dumb Association--a universally oralist group--at their Second Congress in 1891. There, Gallaudet once again made his case for the flaws of the oral-only system, but in a way uncharged by emotion, laying out his reasoning for continuing to advocate the method despite the increased lack of support from his colleagues. While he celebrated and embraced the methods and successes of the oralists as undeniably valuable to the deaf, he found that their exclusion of Sign Language was troublesome to both the students and to those who advocated his own methods. To rob the deaf of their natural language was to rob them not only of their preferred method of communication, but also of the culture and sense of community that considered that language to be its defining factor.<sup>[27]</sup> The value of speech to the deaf made oral education a worthwhile pursuit, but it was a long, challenging process with a notoriously low success rate, and to focus solely on speech training to the exclusion of reaching the deaf through their own means was to ignore the mental and cultural development of the student for the sake of physical therapy.<sup>[28]</sup>

According to Gallaudet, "the greatest good for the greatest number" was dependent not on excluding either method but on being all-inclusive, thus removing the need for debate and elevating the content of the education over its approach.<sup>[29]</sup> It was this goal of educating the mind and not merely retraining the mouth that became the policy of Gallaudet University. The school's publications downplayed the debate to focus on other things; none of Gallaudet University's official course catalogs made a single mention of instructional method until 1910, forty-six years after becoming a college, and then only as a footnote that every effort was required to preserve and enhance speech capability whenever present and able.<sup>[30]</sup> The debate may have taken the attention of the educators--oralist, manualist, and combined advocates alike--but it was never the focus at the university that sought to represent the entire American Deaf community. Despite Gallaudet's best efforts to move the focus away from the debate, those who opposed him were less inclined to drop the subject.

### **Oralism: a Well-Intentioned Extremism**

The oral method completely rejected the use of Sign Language in favor of focusing the entirety of the educational effort on the development of speech. This was achieved through a combination of speech therapy (which oralists preferred to call "articulation training") and spoken instruction.<sup>[31]</sup> Key to the oralist approach to developing speech in deaf students was the complete prohibition of Sign Language; all communication between teachers and students was to be conducted verbally, never manually.<sup>[32]</sup> The combined method's use of American Sign Language went against the central principle of oral education: that the deaf gained the most out of life from integration with the hearing world, and that such integration was achieved through speech. Oralists saw the combined method not as a compromise but as sabotage; to allow students the opportunity to fall back on ASL risked the destruction of whatever speech had been gained.<sup>[33]</sup>

While it was easy to designate oralists as the villains in the story of Gallaudet University, this was not the case. They were by far the most vocal opponents of Gallaudet's methods, but their opposition came from a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of deafness and not from any ill will towards deaf people. In contrast to the spirit of inclusiveness and attempts at compromise that the proponents of the combined method promoted, the oralists' methods were extreme, taking a prohibitive stance on the primary aspects of Deaf identity and community

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in favor of promoting conformation to the standards of hearing society. However, their approach was not malicious; oralism was a well-intentioned extremism that institutionalized a sense of inferiority in the people it was meant to help.

From the point of view of the oralists, deafness was a disease, and such an affliction required a cure. Their remedy was speech, as the use of Sign Language made no attempt to bring the deaf out of their silent world and therefore did nothing to improve their illness. In other words, deafness was the cause, muteness was the undesirable symptom, and ASL was an ineffective treatment. By this logic, a person's capability for spoken language was considered the best indicator of auditory health, as it came naturally to the hearing and had to be given to the deaf. With speech, even though the cause could not be erased and the ear itself would hear no better, the deaf would theoretically be able to mask their illness to avoid the public shame of disability.<sup>[34]</sup>

Alexander Graham Bell, a firm supporter of oralism and the most public figure in the movement, characterized the deaf as "defective" and American Sign Language as "artificial [and] derived from pantomime." This was a complete contrast from the declaration of those who advocated the combined method, as they considered Sign Language to be the natural language of the deaf and speech to be an artificial construct that was alien to the unhearing mind.<sup>[35]</sup> Bell's words were just a few of the many expressions of the idea that there was something physically and morally wrong with being unable to hear--but more so, being unable to speak. Since this propagated the stigma of disability that Gallaudet University was dedicated to removing, there was no possible way that a method in which deafness was indoctrinated as wrong could be compatible with a national college meant to accept the deaf for who they were.

Another major difference between the oral and combined methods was that oralists championed their techniques not merely as a way of teaching deaf people but as a scientific field of study. Oral educators incorporated in-depth studies of the physical mechanics of speech into their own practices, focusing on an attempt to convey the sensation of speaking rather than its sound.<sup>[36]</sup> One of the ways in which instructors attempted to use these ideas was Visible Speech, a phonetic alphabet developed by Alexander Melville Bell (Alexander Graham Bell's father). The purpose of Visual Speech was to devise a means of conveying the physical mechanisms behind each sound through writing; it was sophisticated and efficient enough to be taught to many educators regardless of the method they intended to specialize in.<sup>[37]</sup> The idea behind making oral education a science was to systemize the highly variable task of bringing sound to those who had no concept or experience of it--a task that was dependent on the physical capability and patience of the deaf child.

Ultimately, the focus of the oral method was to bring speech to the deaf--after all, to be unable to speak was considered an even worse affliction than to be unable to hear, as it led to alienation from the hearing community and the world at large. For some oralists, there was an even larger objective in mind. While oral education was designed to eliminate muteness from the Deaf community, a few oralists advocated applying eugenic theory--the application of genetics to engineer humanity towards more desirable traits--to erase the disease of deafness altogether.<sup>[38]</sup> To these people, the goal of oral education was to wipe out deafness and Deaf culture in favor of the superior trait of hearing. Alexander Graham Bell contributed to this way of thinking with his work, *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, which epitomized this radical point of view by proposing that the suppression of Sign Language was the only means to combat an "epidemic" of deaf intermarriages. His claim was that the undeniable fact that deaf people almost exclusively married other deaf people was a deliberate attempt on the part of the Deaf community to exploit natural selection to create an inherently inferior deaf sub-species of humanity.<sup>[39]</sup>



Clearly, this was simply not the case--deaf people married each other for every reason that hearing people married each other, none of which included the creation of a new form of humanity. Nonetheless, members of the scientific community celebrated this practical application of eugenics and pushed it as a preventative measure to avoid the growth of the deaf population; even if it could not prevent hereditary deafness, removing Sign Language in favor of speech would at least cure its symptoms.<sup>[40]</sup> While it was easy to accuse those who promoted the eugenic eradication of deafness as uncaring, it was an extreme view not shared by many oralists. However, the underlying perception of deafness as a defective illness that required a cure informed these extremists as much as it did the average oral educator. The classroom experience in an oral school was difficult and taxing on both instructor and student, but it was not the land of oppressive phonology drills and scientific depersonalization that many of its opponents claimed it to be. Instructors trained in the oral method aimed to gain the trust and friendship of their pupils in the hope that their students would understand that teachers had their welfare in mind. They sought to build a student's character and morals as well as their speech--an objective shared with educators using the manual and combined systems. Speech therapy was intended for the benefit of the deaf, not for an ideological victory over those who disagreed with the oral method.<sup>[41]</sup>

For all of its good intent, the oral method had one major issue that rendered it unusable by Gallaudet University-- it made no attempt to remove the stigmatization of deafness. Rather, it was the application of a belief that being unable to hear made a person defective and in need of treatment to blend in with the hearing community. In the eyes of the oralists, a society that was dominated by the able-bodied had no place in it for those who were disabled, so the work of curing those afflicted with disability was a noble effort to save a forsaken people.<sup>[42]</sup> However, for those who did not consider disability to be a disease, the perceptions of the oralists fell flat. At Gallaudet University, where the condition of deafness was accommodated but never considered an inherent inferiority, there was no place for an ideology that was the embodiment of the stigma that the college fought against.

There was, of course, a place for speech therapy. Gallaudet accepted the importance of teaching speech to the deaf, but he considered it to be a valuable resource that allowed for communication with the hearing world. It could not be the remedy for deafness as so many oralists claimed, since, in his mind, there was no disease to cure. Speech therapy was worth pursuing, since the ability to speak was extremely valuable to both the deaf and the hearing people who came in contact with them. However, Gallaudet believed that it should never be used to exclusion; to neglect the iconic and community-defining Sign Language in favor of stressing assimilation with the hearing world was to reject Deaf identity.<sup>[43]</sup> Their culture was based not on their condition but on the shared use of American Sign Language; for example, ASL allowed Gallaudet and the hearing members of the university's faculty to be active members of the Deaf community despite being able to hear. Deaf culture looked past the physical state of one's ears or voice and used ASL as the defining aspect of their identity.<sup>[44]</sup> Oral education, for all that it offered to bring to the deaf, did not accept this fundamental aspect of their identity, and this in combination with its built-in shaming of the disabled meant that it was not welcome at Gallaudet University.

### **The Milan Conference: a Turning Point**

The feud between oralists and the supporters of the combined method fueled the vast majority of the discourse between educators of the deaf for much of the nineteenth century. It was considered by many educators and deaf students alike to be the absolute most important issue in the entire field--though even this claim was still subject to debate. In one of many efforts to diffuse some of the tension between educators on opposite sides of the debate, Gallaudet University held a conference in 1868 where leading American teachers of the deaf came to debate their methods, though not so much against each other as in comparison to European methods of instruction. As E.M.



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Gallaudet always tried to be the great compromiser, the convention's final resolutions were non-committal, proclaiming that it was the duty of all schools to provide articulation training as well as to use Sign Language.<sup>[45]</sup>

Additionally, Gallaudet University's convention recommended that the debate be confined to an academic journal, specifically the *American Annals of the Deaf*, in the hopes of providing a more public forum for discussion while avoiding direct confrontation between educators on opposing sides.<sup>[46]</sup> The *Annals* was the first academic journal dedicated to topics concerning the deaf, providing to the field of deaf education a form of legitimacy and equality with hearing education as well as being an outlet for research. It became a valuable resource for academics and the public alike, but more importantly, the editorial staff of the *Annals* did not prohibit deaf authors. More often than not, they were completely welcome to do so.<sup>[47]</sup> Having a public scholarly forum with which to discuss matters of Deaf interest and argue all sides of the debate was incredibly important, bringing the concerns of the deaf into the public as well as the larger academic community. However, the *Annals'* impact only extended that far; it was meant for discussion and presentation, not for decision or policy-making. In order to radically influence the actions of a large portion of educators, a body of academics would need to pass a decisive resolution.

This is exactly what the delegates of the 1880 Milan Conference in Italy produced. Officially called the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, it was the first convention of instructors of the deaf from around the world.<sup>[48]</sup> Gallaudet and his colleague Isaac Peet (whose daughter Elizabeth would go on to teach at the national college) presented papers in support of Sign Language and the combined method. In the same tone of compromise that defined his approach to the most publicly visible appeals for his system of education, President Gallaudet's presentation at Milan was a plea for the delegates not to equate the giving of speech with the giving of education. A hearing person, he said, already had speech, and their education was not devoted to the acquisition of a different means of communication. While the ability to communicate orally was incredibly valuable to deaf people in their interactions with hearing people, the existence of Sign Language made it unnecessary for their education. In short, the deaf should be educated in Sign Language just as hearing people were educated in oral languages; to do otherwise would enforce the idea that deafness meant inferiority.<sup>[49]</sup>

Gallaudet's plea was nothing new, but at Milan, oralist delegates were much greater in number than their colleagues who supported the manual and combined methods, so his speech made little impact. Oralism dominated the remainder of the conference, and among the papers presented in support of it was that of Susanna E. Hull. At the time, Hull was a prominent figure in the European oralist movement and ran a school for the deaf in the London district of Kensington. Her paper celebrated the sentimental value of speech to those working with the deaf and condemned Sign Language for getting in the way of her work. Basing her opinions on the seventeen years of experience she had teaching deaf children, Hull claimed that she was initially undecided on a preferred method as she began her career, despite entering the field of deaf education without having ever met a single deaf person.<sup>[50]</sup> Her views fell quickly in line with those of her oralist colleagues, attributing a drop in her ability to teach speech to her students to the use of British Sign Language in tandem with articulation training. From that point on, she said, she became a dedicated oralist, and her recommendation to the delegates at the convention was to avoid the use of signs altogether.<sup>[51]</sup>

Most of the presentations at the Milan Conference came to the same conclusions as Hull; true to form, oralists advocated the banning of signs, and the few supporters of the combined method that were present argued that to do so negated their students' intellectual development.<sup>[52]</sup> Many people had said all of this before, but Milan was the first convention in which a committee was given the means to create what was intended as a definitive resolution on the proper method of teaching the deaf. The end result was that this resolution declared that not only was the pure-oral method the best method of education, but that the use of Sign Language in tandem with speech was

damaging to the deaf and should be banned. Sign Languages of all kinds were not considered languages in their own right, and as such, only spoken languages were deemed to be capable of higher-level thought. Signing was declared to be a primitive gesturing that was inferior to speech in every way, so it was only fair to the deaf that they be taught a method of communication that supposedly negated their inherent inferiority.<sup>[53]</sup> This kind of language was familiar to the debate, and it was deliberately written as a condensed version of the typical oralist arguments. This was the first time that such language had been declared policy by an international committee of instructors. Doing so gave the conference an air of consensus--that the delegates involved had unanimously agreed that the deaf were wronged by their condition, inferior to the able-bodied, and in need of corrective measures to ensure their assimilation into an able-bodied world. With this semblance of consensus, the debate was, in theory, no longer needed; the world's educators had agreed that oralism was the superior method.

The reaction to the Milan Conference resolution was mixed, as the lack of delegates representing non-oral schools and near complete lack of deaf delegates (there was only one) meant that a consensus between all instructors did not exist. The supporters of the combined method were, naturally, appalled by the resolution. Isaac Peet, a professor for the deaf in New York and one of the American delegates present in Milan, conceded that some of the Milan resolutions were beneficial to the deaf. One of these was the third point, which stated that national governments should take every step necessary to ensure that the deaf were educated.<sup>[54]</sup> However, Dr. Peet had considerable doubts about the benefit of speech in actual conversation, stating that his own observations showed that it was much easier for both deaf and hearing people to simply write to each other when all else failed. In terms of education, though, he accepted that both systems, used alone, were imperfect, but that the effort required to teach the deaf to speak did not justify the fact that, more often than not, those efforts failed to produce anything close to normal speech. Sign Language, on the other hand, was more practical, and while it had its own limitations, it was in fact a good method of introducing the concepts in spoken languages to those who had no experience with sound.<sup>[55]</sup>

Dr. Peet's reaction to the Milan Resolution was based on the idea that both signed and spoken languages were imperfect, but his colleague E.M. Gallaudet had a very different opinion. Gallaudet's position remained unchanged: Sign Language was the only natural means of communication for the deaf, and was therefore no better or worse than any spoken language was to the hearing. President Gallaudet's biggest issue with the convention was not its resolution, but the way it was run. First, he lashed out at the organization and promotion of the Conference itself, declaring that the fact that it was managed by oralists meant that it was a foregone conclusion that any resolution they passed would be supportive of the oral method. Second, he accused oralist educators of deliberately stacking the committee with other oralists to gain an advantage over those they did not agree with. Finally, he argued that the resolutions passed at the Milan Conference had no authority because the conference's voters heard a disproportionate representation of scholars and educators.<sup>[56]</sup>

On the other side of the debate, supporters of the oral method were thrilled with the Milan Conference's validation of their philosophies, and they took this validation as free reign to criticize the attacks made against them by their opponents. Susanna E. Hull responded to Gallaudet's criticism of the Milan Conference with a scathing critique in the subsequent issue of the *Annals*. She accused him of stigmatizing the value of speech and misrepresenting the English delegates' allegiances in his publications. She asserted that his very presence at the conference was a sign of the organizers' willingness to have those opposed to the oral method in attendance; if they wanted to stack the committee as he claimed, they could have easily refused to allow a single person who was not an oralist. Most importantly to her argument, though, was that she viewed the resolution as indisputable fact; since such a large international body of instructors passed it, she considered it to be by far the best statement of their wishes for the deaf.<sup>[57]</sup>

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Despite the best efforts of the committee at Milan, and regardless of any attempts to sway it towards any particular method, the debate was far from over. Rather, the resolutions passed at the 1880 conference only added fuel to the fire. Both sides accused the other of misrepresenting their arguments to each other and to the public, and any attempts at consensus were promptly discarded. While it was an important statement of what was then considered the most effective and proper method of educating the deaf, the resolution was not law. Since it was non-binding, those who did not agree with it were free to ignore it. This was exactly what Gallaudet University did, and in doing so they remained dedicated to the use of American Sign Language even as the popularity of ASL instruction dwindled across the nation. To assuage fears among oral educators who were worried that the national college was not operating up to international standards, Gallaudet University increased publicity of its instruction in speech training.<sup>[58]</sup> Gallaudet University intended to show that the international community's guidelines for deaf education had shamed the deaf and constituted an attack on their language. Despite the overwhelming pressure to eradicate signed instruction in the wake of the Milan Conference resolution, the national college of the United States would protect American Sign Language as the central feature of Deaf identity.

### The Debate is (Partially) Resolved

After the Milan Conference, the debate seemed settled decisively in favor of oralism, but the immediate effect of the convention's resolution on Gallaudet University was negligible. The resolution set a precedent for oral education not only for the United States, but also for the educational world at large. However, the Milan Conference Resolution was non-binding, so those who disagreed with it were free to ignore it. The commitment of Gallaudet to the use of the combined method was set in stone from the founding of the college, so a proclamation made by a committee with no actual authority would not be able to force such a drastic change to a long-standing policy. However, one issue remained in regards to Gallaudet's role in the debate between oralists and supporters of the combined movement, and that issue surfaced in 1891 with the establishment of a graduate department for the training of future instructors of the deaf. The school for teacher training was known as the Normal School (also referred to as the Normal Department), and with its creation Gallaudet intended to provide a place for those interested in educating the deaf to study both the oral and manual methods of teaching.<sup>[59]</sup> As a side effect of his efforts, however, he launched himself into the most directly confrontational debate he would have with the supporters of oralism.

The need for a specialized school or department for training of teachers of the deaf was not new. In 1884, British instructor Emma Garrett wrote to the editor of the *Annals* in support of such a department for the purpose of helping to give new teachers a thorough understanding of how to teach articulation; as support she cited not only the rising number of teachers in Britain but the strain that the lack of such a department placed on smaller schools that did not have the resources to train other teachers effectively.<sup>[60]</sup> Educator James Logan expressed the need for a Normal School for teachers of the deaf in America as far back as 1877, citing the fact that many teachers of the deaf went into that work without any previous experience; as the deaf had wildly differing needs in accommodation, teachers who were unprepared for these accommodations would be prone to doing more harm than good. Unlike Emma Garrett's clearly oralist position, Logan's proposal for a Normal School made no mention of which method would best be suited for future teachers, but he implicitly supported the combined method by suggesting that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet's school in Hartford--a combined school--should be the location for his ideal teacher training department.<sup>[61]</sup>

With the need for a Normal School well established, E.M. Gallaudet went to the House Appropriations Committee. Since the federal government funded the college, the creation of a new graduate school--or any other department, for that matter--would require monies from Congress.<sup>[62]</sup> Shortly after, Gallaudet received word that Alexander

Graham Bell had asked to testify before the House Appropriations Committee against the measure. To Gallaudet's surprise, Bell claimed that not only would Gallaudet's proposed department for instructor training be opposed to Oral methods, but that it intended to accept deaf students.<sup>[63]</sup> Oral educators such as Bell feared that E.M. Gallaudet's staunch disapproval of purely oral education would affect the new legions of teachers that were to be under his training. This was despite Gallaudet's assertions (both public and private) to the oralist community that not only would methods of articulation be taught alongside Sign Language, but the Normal School was not intending to accept deaf pupils in the first place.<sup>[64]</sup>

This move was unusual given Edward Gallaudet's policy of welcoming deaf teachers. The environment of Gallaudet University was one that made no distinction between the deaf and the hearing; it successfully trained deaf people to do the same work. On the one hand, forbidding deaf people from training to become instructors at a Gallaudet-run facility seemed counter to the entire point of the college. On the other hand, Sign Language instruction was falling out of favor after the Milan Conference. Gallaudet preferred to play the role of compromiser, so his initial decision to not allow deaf students in the Normal School came from anticipating the eventual argument that oralists would make. To compromise before the counterarguments had even begun was meant to expedite the process of gaining approval for the Normal School from not only Congress, but from Gallaudet's sworn enemies.

Despite his attempt at an early compromise, E.M. Gallaudet's plan did not initially succeed, due to a misunderstanding on the part of Alexander Graham Bell. Bell's request to testify before Congress against the measure came as a surprise given the enthusiasm he had expressed to Gallaudet for the creation of such a department, so to clear up any other misunderstandings, Gallaudet met with him to discuss the matter. It appeared evident to Gallaudet that the Normal School was to be solely for the purpose of training hearing teachers of the deaf, thus he expected that Bell's complaint would be somehow related to the methods taught to the future instructors. Bell surprised Gallaudet with a different accusation, one that he thought was already addressed: that Gallaudet meant to use the school to train deaf teachers.<sup>[65]</sup>

Alexander Graham Bell's problem with the school teaching deaf teachers made sense given his strongly oralist beliefs. Bell believed that to become a teacher of the deaf one had to have "full possession of all their faculties." If deaf people were accepted into a teacher-training program, not only would the program have to accommodate their condition, but the oral method could not be taught to them. Since the training department in question was at the national college, Bell worried that suppressing the oral method among future teachers in Washington D.C. would trickle outwards to the rest of the country.<sup>[66]</sup> This logic seemed sound to him but was refutable by the fact that at this point in time, the national college had been in operation for twenty-seven years without any foreseeable threat to the increasingly popular oral method. Nevertheless, Alexander Graham Bell took his misunderstanding of E.M. Gallaudet's intentions before the United States House Appropriations Committee in favor of forcing the National College to refuse applications to the Normal School from deaf people. Gallaudet, of course, had already planned to do exactly that, but Bell had a larger point to make: that the national college was behind the times. After the Milan Convention, support for the oral method was growing steadily throughout the nation, and Gallaudet University's stubborn dedication to the combined method meant that Edward Gallaudet found principle to be more important than progress in education. Because of this, Bell argued that despite Gallaudet's promise that the Normal School would not accept deaf students, such a policy would be impossible to implement at Gallaudet University.<sup>[67]</sup>

Congress heard Bell's pleas as well as Gallaudet's reassurance that only the hearing would be accepted, so they compromised to fund the Normal School on the conditions that it would teach only hearing students, with emphasis on oral methods--exactly as Gallaudet had originally planned. It was a blow to aspiring deaf teachers, but so long as American Sign Language had been restricted and not banned outright, Gallaudet considered it a victory over the

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pure-oral methods of his opponents. Most importantly was that the Normal School was established; while he had to compromise to get it, Gallaudet could always wait until after the debate had settled down to add deaf students to the teacher-training program.<sup>[68]</sup> With this dispute resolved, Gallaudet University could move on with its work of providing education not only to the deaf, but also to new generations of teachers dedicated to the same work.

The Normal School fiasco illustrated the importance of Gallaudet University in the world of deaf education. The first college solely for the deaf was also the first to respond to the need for a training school for teachers of the deaf, demonstrating the school's pioneering spirit and innovation in its field. However, doing so led to an outcry of opposition from the most public figure in the oralist movement; while meaning well, Alexander Graham Bell could not bring himself to allow Gallaudet's principles (such as an inclusive environment and the refusal to consider deafness a problem) to affect the new legions of teachers that were to be under its training, as these principles directly conflicted with his own. The Normal School was a microcosm of the debate as a whole with a resolution that was not entirely in line with the principles of Gallaudet University, but Gallaudet's willingness to compromise in anticipation of the opposition's counterarguments showed that the debate no longer mattered as much. What was important was that the methods of the university itself were not changed; deaf teachers would continue to be employed by the school, and new teachers would be better suited to handle the challenges that awaited them.

### The Deaf Perspective

The Normal School incident illustrated the lack of deaf consultation in their own affairs. There were no deaf people attending the hearings regarding the Normal School, and only one of the one hundred sixty-four delegates at the Milan Conference was actually deaf. That man was James Denison, at the time a teacher at the Kendall School (the primary school adjacent to and associated with Gallaudet University).<sup>[69]</sup> Denison recalled that the other delegates frequently exhibited an air of superiority towards him and deaf people in general--especially among those advocating oralism. He compared the atmosphere of the convention to that of a religious assembly, where solemn, dark-clad people gathered to hand down an inflexible doctrine without consulting those whom their policies would affect-- a group of people who were naturally concerned about how they were to be taught.<sup>[70]</sup> Denison's observations of the Milan Conference were characteristic of the Deaf perspective of the debate. The decisions regarding policies and methods in deaf education were almost exclusively made by hearing people; not only was it unusual for the deaf to be decision makers, it was rare for them to even be consulted.<sup>[71]</sup>

Despite the circumstances that prevented them from making their own decisions about their education, the deaf were far from voiceless. One of the main platforms for their discourse was the *American Annals of the Deaf*, an academic journal that allowed contributions from members of the Deaf community as well as anyone involved in deaf education. The intended purpose of the *Annals* was to provide a place for articles on any subject related to the deaf, including history, culture, art, poetry, and education. But since the vast majority of contributors were those involved in education, the *Annals* quickly became a platform for the national debate on education methods. The difference with this publication, as opposed to the public conventions such as the one in Milan, was that the opinions of the deaf were entirely welcome in the former and hardly, if ever, consulted in the latter.<sup>[72]</sup>

One of the prominent members of the Deaf community that contributed to the discourse surrounding the deaf education debate in the *Annals* was artist John Carlin. A famed sculptor, landscape painter, poet, and orator, his opinions on the proper methods of education of the deaf were mixed. He held great respect for and gratitude towards the Gallaudet family, not only for their work on behalf of the deaf but also for their legacy of Sign Language instruction.<sup>[73]</sup> Although he lauded the Gallaudet family's work, his support of the use of American Sign Language in the classroom came with a few caveats. Carlin praised ASL as the best way to communicate with the deaf on a

day-to-day basis, considering it essential to the development of their language skills and of their higher rationalization abilities. He also condemned the limiting oral-only method that deaf people detested. He personally held a deep hatred for it, describing the dedication to which oralists held to their method as the "only correct way" as an infatuation with procedure.<sup>[74]</sup> But while Carlin was supportive of ASL, he cautioned against its overuse. He considered the language unstable, with a lack of standardization and a dangerous tendency towards jargon, and he warned that too much signing could impair a student's English language development.<sup>[75]</sup>

Carlin's writings in the *Annals* universally criticized the oral method, but as a member of the Deaf community for whom oral education had failed, this was unsurprising; his personal dealings with the oral method were unpleasant and unproductive. He had a unique point of view that oralist educators could never understand, for they could speak and he could not. Carlin expressed great regret at his inability to speak. His poem "The Mute's Lament," published in the first issue of the *Annals*, provided a look into the personal internalization of the stigma of disability. Carlin considered his deafness and muteness a curse; his feelings about deafness were those of frustration, while his feelings about his inability to speak were those of shame. He compared his disability to a prison, locking him out of connection with God and the rest of the world. He found solace only in his death, where he stated that his "ears shall be unsealed, and I shall hear; my tongue will be unbound, and I shall speak."<sup>[76]</sup>

John Carlin's devastation regarding his disability was riveting, but he was a person for whom oral education had failed. For those connected with Gallaudet University, where every part of campus life was tailored specifically to adapt to all students regardless of their needs, the shame that he expressed was rare. Among the national college's instructors was Gallaudet graduate John Burton Hotchkiss, a professor of History and English.<sup>[77]</sup> Being deaf himself, Hotchkiss was well aware of the struggles that those who could not hear faced in learning speech—an experience that the hearing teachers of the deaf would never know. Since he was unable to speak, the debate over education methods did not personally affect him, as he could not possibly use the oral method. Instead, he focused on Gallaudet's success in bringing to the deaf vocations and opportunities that had been previously closed to them. The key, he believed, was the connection between the students and their deaf teachers. By watching other deaf people doing the same things as hearing people with the same level of success, deaf students would learn that they too were capable of these things. And to Hotchkiss, Gallaudet University was the greatest example of the Deaf culture's capabilities at work.<sup>[78]</sup>

As supportive as the faculty was, the strongest arguments in support of Gallaudet University's methods were those made by its students, for these were the people who had to live with the decisions that others made about how they were to be educated. The educators had a voice in the *American Annals of the Deaf*, but the students of Gallaudet could not contribute to it. Their voice was heard in the newspaper *The Buff and Blue*, written and managed exclusively by Gallaudet students, beginning in 1892. The paper featured original literature, editorials, and news about Gallaudet and its alumni, but the only place students expressed their own opinions about educational matters or the use of ASL was in the editorial section.<sup>[79]</sup> The editorials of *The Buff and Blue* in its first decade revealed that Gallaudet students universally supported the use of Sign Language. The students took great pride in their use of ASL, considering it an essential part of their identities, their communication, and their instruction. The articulation department was initially met with widespread disapproval and disdain from the students who felt that the college had no need of it, but the initial anger gave way to acceptance and even gratitude at its existence—there were a number whose speech had improved, and there was no basis now for the oralists' argument that the college would destroy speech capability.<sup>[80]</sup>

Notably, *The Buff and Blue* contained occasions where students of Oralist establishments visited Gallaudet University. One particular group, students from a pure-oral school invited by President Gallaudet for an



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observational visit, attracted a great deal of attention when they failed to understand each other's speech at their dinner reception even after shouting over everyone present. This was an embarrassing counteraction to the oralist argument that deaf people taught to speak would learn to hide their condition, and the students of Gallaudet looked upon the debacle with bemusement and pity for their fellow deaf students. Another case involved a rival school's football team interacting with Gallaudet students at a reception prior to the game. Both the reception and game were held without a single signed or fingerspelled word from the oral school's team. The moment the students were alone and out of sight of their instructors, they revealed themselves to be not only just as proficient at ASL as the Gallaudet students were, but just as reliant on it. Though their signing was marred by considerable hesitance and discomfort, they were clearly more eager to use ASL than speech. Through the examples of their orally educated peers Gallaudet students came to see the environment of the oral school as oppressive, denying them the use of their language and the expression of their culture; this was a far cry from the fondness with which they described the nurturing environment of their own school.<sup>[81]</sup>

While the power to enact educational methods at schools for the deaf lay in the hands of the hearing people who ran the schools, the Deaf perspective was crucial to maintaining support for ASL where it was used. The unfortunate truth of the matter, however, was that taking an active and visible part in the debate was the privilege of hearing educators and advocates for the deaf. For the oralists, the natural inclination of the deaf towards Sign Language was a problem, not simply a linguistic preference or cultural feature, and it undermined their goal to bring speech to all deaf people.<sup>[82]</sup> The deaf, in turn, found that the oralists' inability to look beyond the physical condition of deafness rendered them blind to the realities of the Deaf cultural experience.<sup>[83]</sup> Through writing, those who could not hear had a voice with which to express their opinions and perspective--but that voice fell on deaf ears.

### **Changed Lives: Gallaudet Students and Alumni**

The ambitious goal of Gallaudet University was to change the lives of deaf people across the nation. It was to be a nurturing environment of learning designed around their condition and not in spite of it; with the exception of the articulation department, no more attention was given to being deaf than any other institution would give to its students being able to hear. More importantly, Gallaudet University was meant to prove to the world that the deaf could study the same subjects as the hearing with the same level of success, all without shaming or punishing the students for their condition. In order to accomplish this and to be competitive with hearing universities, the course of study needed to be both comprehensive and rigorous.

Thus, the curriculum of Gallaudet during its early years as a college was designed to be a broad survey of many of the same subjects as the leading universities of the time. Its first class catalog was published in 1866, two years after the opening of the college. While this catalog had no information on the specific classes (such as scheduling, which professors taught which classes, etc.), it did detail the subjects that were expected of all of its students. While students studied classical languages such as Latin and Greek, Gallaudet did not put much focus on them in comparison to other colleges. This was done deliberately to save room in the course of study for more emphasis on French and German, as these languages were far more relevant in the modern age. Students studied Biology, Chemistry, and Physics for their sciences, and the curriculum was rounded out with instruction in History, Political Science, and Art. After four years of study, the graduating students would receive a Bachelor of the Arts degree, but if they decided to complete only two years of study in science, they would receive a Bachelor of Science. While this may have seemed incredibly basic, it was as comprehensive as one would expect for a two-year-old college with twelve students.<sup>[84]</sup>

The course of study grew considerably by 1910. The core languages remained, but courses in Literature, Philology, Writing, and Public Speaking rounded out the department. Studies in Mathematics expanded considerably to include



advanced courses in Geometry and Trigonometry as well as more practical vocational classes such as surveying. The sciences had grown to include Botany, Geology, Psychology, and Astronomy; the history department branched out to include political science, international law, and business-- all of which would eventually become their own departments.<sup>[85]</sup> In almost half a century, the college had come a long way, offering many of the same studies as major universities for the hearing. One drawback, though, was the fact that most of the diversity added to the course of study was in elective classes. Specializations did not exist at Gallaudet; all students took the same wide range of classes with a few electives selected from a large pool. This vast program of study was meant to prove the point of equality with the hearing. Unfortunately, this gave Gallaudet the image of being inflexible; course schedules were rigorously regulated for each term of each year, and there was very little opportunity to rearrange the set program of study.<sup>[86]</sup>

The fact that Gallaudet's curriculum became considerably more comprehensive throughout its first fifty years was a testament to the work of the college in providing education on par with the hearing, but it was not proof of the school's effectiveness in preparing its students for life after college. Gallaudet was meant to provide not only for the student's academic career but for the outside world; the national college's insular world conformed to the condition of deafness, but students had to be prepared for a world that did not. In light of this, Gallaudet's success had to be measured by what became of its students.

Statistics from *The Silent Worker* revealed that well over half of all Gallaudet graduates became teachers, and that nearly all of them went on to work at Gallaudet or other American schools for the deaf. Those who did not become teachers had different preferences, with a noticeable split along gender lines. Most of the women who did not enter the teaching profession got married (usually to other Gallaudet graduates) and remained unemployed housewives, though this particular figure was not much different than that of hearing women of the time.<sup>[87]</sup> Of those women who did enter the working world, one particular example stood out: Ella Florence Long. Long lost her hearing at the age of 7, and finding it difficult to continue in public education despite her ability to speak, she started attending deaf schools in her native Indiana and eventually graduated from Gallaudet University. She married J. Schuyler Long, then the principal of the Iowa School for the Deaf, but refused to remain an unemployed housewife. She was a prolific writer and editor for *The Silent Worker* with her husband, co-wrote an American Sign Language textbook that had wide use at the turn of the 20th century, and eventually rose to prominence as the Vice President of the National Association of the Deaf.<sup>[88]</sup>

The male graduates of Gallaudet had much more diverse professions, though the vast majority of them became teachers as well, with some of them--such as John Burton Hotchkiss--taking up work at Gallaudet.<sup>[89]</sup> A small number of alumni entered into journalism, law, civil service, agriculture, and the sciences, with some even becoming prominent members of their field.<sup>[90]</sup> One of these prominent men was Oscar H. Regensburg. Deafened from meningitis at the age of 13, Regensburg entered deaf schools until graduating from Gallaudet in 1890. He went on to work in accounting until he found his true calling: printing. Setting up his business in Chicago, Regensburg printed books, magazines and newspapers, one of which he ran himself: the nationally circulated *The National Exponent*. As the manager of this newspaper and a successful printing business, Regensburg distinguished himself as a prominent member of the Deaf community and as an intelligent businessman in the competitive spheres of Chicago.<sup>[91]</sup>

The successes experienced by the graduates of Gallaudet were no different than those of graduates of hearing colleges, though it was clear that there were skewed preferences as to the type of work preferred by the deaf. While many entered businesses such as printing, manufacturing, and the like, most of them joined the field of teaching-- the same discipline that had provided their own education. In one way, this was an incredibly endearing result; students educated in the nurturing and inclusive atmosphere of Gallaudet wanted to give back to education. They had found a place that did not judge their capability to learn as being connected to their ability to hear, and they

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were so touched by that attitude that they wanted to provide the same thing for other deaf students.<sup>[92]</sup> However, this did little to combat the oralist accusations of isolation and self-imposed segregation that Gallaudet contributed towards; if most graduates of Gallaudet University stayed within the world of deaf education, the oralist goal of integrating the deaf with the hearing world was rendered a failure.

The employment of Gallaudet graduates as teachers of the deaf was one of the main differences between those educated under the combined system and those who had been educated in pure-oral environments. Students of pure-oral programs were found to be lacking in their Sign Language skill, which impaired their connection with other members of the Deaf community. Since they could not hear the sounds they had been taught to produce, they were prevented by their deafness from becoming teachers of the very method with which they were educated.<sup>[93]</sup> Gallaudet students had been trained in both speech and ASL, so while their deafness still prevented them from becoming teachers of the oral method, they were proficient enough at signing to give back to the methods that did not stigmatize their condition or impair their cultural connection with other deaf people.

Gallaudet University was a college set up to be the compromise between two sides of a debate, becoming an oasis of Sign Language in an increasingly oralist educational world, but it was more than a product of the theory behind its methods. It was a place of learning that changed the lives of every student that walked onto its campus, giving them the education they deserved in order to be prepared for any type of work. The college's rigorous coursework gave deaf students a broad knowledge base equal to that of hearing students at other establishments, fighting against the pervading mindset that the deaf were mentally incapable of handling higher thought. The school's continuous use of Sign Language allowed students to develop their natural language and culture in an atmosphere that fostered communication with other deaf people, while its incorporation of articulation therapy allowed those who were able to develop their speech to the point that they could work around their physical condition to connect with the hearing world. This allowed them to remain dedicated to working with and for the deaf or to integrate into hearing society as they saw fit, opening up opportunities to the deaf of America that no other school could provide.

### **Gallaudet after Gallaudet: the Impact of EMG**

In 1910, after fifty-three years of service to the college, Edward Miner Gallaudet retired as president. His colleagues celebrated him as a man loved by his students for his work and for the importance he placed in personal connections—from the youngest children to his graduates and alumni.<sup>[94]</sup> His leadership of the school and stalwart defense of his methods brought it through a bitter debate with all of its principles intact, and none argued that his commitment to his work was a large part of what made Gallaudet University into the prestigious educational environment it became. By the turn of the twentieth century, deaf students left the national college to enter the world just as capably as their hearing peers, and their successes became those of the establishment as a whole. The goal that Amos Kendall and Edward Gallaudet set half a century before had been achieved.<sup>[95]</sup>

What, then, was to become of Gallaudet University after the presidency of E.M. Gallaudet? The first order of business, naturally, was selecting a new president, and this came with the appointment of Professor Percival Hall. Hall was a native of the District of Columbia, and after graduating from Harvard in 1892 he enrolled in the Normal School at Gallaudet. As a member of Gallaudet's faculty for fifteen years before his appointment to the position of president, Professor Hall taught mathematics and directed both the Normal School and the articulation department. Gallaudet himself had chosen Hall as his successor, confident in his ability to lead.<sup>[96]</sup>

Percival Hall's presidency of Gallaudet University began when the education of the Deaf in America was slowly but surely moving towards oralism; by 1900, forty-seven percent of all schools in America used the oral method alone

when just two decades prior that number was under five percent.<sup>[97]</sup> Not wanting to demolish the gains that the national college had already achieved under the combined system, Hall's administrative policies and commitment to the combined method were very much in line with his predecessor's. As Gallaudet University's role in the debate between methods of instruction was settled decades earlier, Hall looked forward to a different task: gaining respect for schools for the deaf among hearing academics. He lamented the widespread perception among the academic community of schools for the deaf as asylums, and he hoped that his hearing colleagues would come to stop considering the education of the disabled--be it deafness or some other disability--as charity work, instead viewing it as no different from the education of the able-bodied. Hall also embraced compulsory education laws and actively campaigned for greater improvements to facilities and modernization of the curriculum to keep up with the greater demands of an ever-increasingly industrial world.<sup>[98]</sup> Hall's vision was similar to that of Kendall and Gallaudet: a college where the deaf people of the United States could come together through education, escaping the stigma of their alienating disability and becoming better citizens of the Deaf community and the world.

By adhering to the same policies that Gallaudet had brought to the national college, Hall demonstrated a commitment to the success of the world's only university for the deaf. The movement of many American schools towards oral education put the use of any amount of Sign Language in a school for the deaf at risk. However, owing not only to the language's status as a defining aspect of Deaf culture and communication but also to its success as an educational tool, Hall and the community of Gallaudet University refused to abandon the language that had brought the school to such great prominence in the world of deaf education. Despite being a teacher of speech to the deaf and a teacher of oral methods to the hearing students of the Normal School, Hall's personal observations of Gallaudet students were proof enough to him of the effectiveness of both the combined method and of E.M. Gallaudet's educational philosophies. The value of speech was not lost to him, but Hall--and the community of Gallaudet University at large--felt that there was greater value in the use of Sign Language.<sup>[99]</sup>

With President Hall's dedication to continuing the nurturing community of education that Gallaudet's students had come to love, the future of the institution appeared to be clear and in good hands. What was not so certain, however, was the future of the education of the deaf in America at large. The nation's educators clearly moved towards a more universally oralist stance, but even Alexander Graham Bell, the oralist movement's *de facto* spokesperson, could not predict how long it would last or how quickly it would happen. Bell suggested that the United States would soon go the way of Europe, where even the long-standing manualist stronghold of France had ultimately switched to the oral system. While he was not incorrect in his assumption, he was mistaken in thinking that those at Gallaudet University would soon learn the error of their ways and switch to the purely oral system.<sup>[100]</sup> The students and faculty of Gallaudet disagreed, and while they quite often reserved judgment on the direction that American education would take as a whole, they were certain that Sign Language was at Gallaudet to stay.<sup>[101]</sup>

## Conclusion

By the end of the nineteenth century, Gallaudet University's status as a dignified educational establishment was secured through the efforts of Edward Miner Gallaudet, and the continuing work of its staff and students helped to ensure that, even after his work at the national college was over, the school would never lose that standing. Despite the debate over educational methods, E.M. Gallaudet's work in fostering an environment for the deaf to prove their abilities and desire for knowledge without being forced to conform to a hearing world had paid off. The Deaf community in particular celebrated the national college's use of American Sign Language as not only a means of preserving the language against the continually-growing national effort to stamp it out, but as a means of enriching their cultural identity.<sup>[102]</sup> Through the university that bore his family's name, Gallaudet left behind a legacy of devotion to enriching the lives of the deaf people of America.

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While it was easy to cast the story of the national college as a one-man-show, this was far from the case. Without a distinguished faculty devoted to the methods and causes championed by its president, and without a student body dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, the policies that made Gallaudet University a success would have never lasted. The employment of both hearing and deaf teachers--all of whom used Sign Language to communicate with students and each other--displayed the capabilities of deaf people to those who doubted their mental capacity or ability to learn. The students' readiness to learn and their acceptance of both spoken and signed instruction allowed the theory behind the combined method to succeed in the classroom.

The essential feature common to all of the successes at Gallaudet was American Sign Language. The use of ASL in every capacity--as a language of instruction as well as in ordinary communication between all people on campus regardless of the condition of their ears-- allowed deaf people to interact with their professors and each other in a way that did not punish or shame them for being unable to hear. This was crucial to the central philosophy of Gallaudet University--to adapt to the condition of deafness out of respect, not to attempt to change it or to degrade people. Even the use of articulation therapy--often meant as a cure or a correction of deafness --was for the benefit of communication, not to mask deafness so as to assimilate into the culture of the hearing. This principle allowed the creation of an inclusive environment at the school that allowed Deaf culture to flourish, one that did not judge people based on auditory capability. Gallaudet University opened up the opportunities of higher education to the deaf people of the United States, and their community was immensely grateful for its work. E.M. Gallaudet summed it up best when he was asked what the graduates of his college did after leaving: "they do almost everything."<sup>[103]</sup> After half a century of bringing education to deaf people, the only thing that he found them incapable of was hearing; otherwise, there was no difference in their potential for success. The national college for the deaf was meant to turn that potential into mental development, not to focus on the physical state of one's ears.

Edward Miner Gallaudet was not a hero, nor was he the savior of the deaf. But he did, along with the many others who came to the campus at Kendall Green, dedicate his life to the improvement of Deaf society. The growing support among American instructors for oralism and consequent shunning of Sign Language indicated that he lost the debate, as their method became standard in over eighty percent of American schools through to the 1970s.<sup>[104]</sup> However, the successes of Gallaudet University and its graduates proved that regardless of the sentiments of the rest of the nation, the national college would remain a place where the language and culture of the Deaf community could thrive amidst an academic environment that refused to place a stigma on disability. Doing so allowed the deaf people of the United States of America the opportunity to overcome the alienation of their silent world to become full members of society who would no longer be silent.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Henceforward referred to by its present name of Gallaudet University. While this is an anachronism (the school was renamed in 1894), it is near-universally used in the literature for the same reasons that prompted its changing: shorter length and avoidance of the insensitive term "deaf and dumb."

<sup>[2]</sup> John Vickrey Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf community in America* (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989), 79-83.

<sup>[3]</sup> A note on capitalization: the general consensus among scholars and the Deaf community is that the word "deaf," when not capitalized, refers to the physical condition of deafness, whereas capitalizing the word "Deaf" refers to the culture of deaf people. Due to the difference in meaning, this spelling convention is strictly observed in this text.

<sup>[4]</sup> Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 8-13.

<sup>[5]</sup> Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 8-13.

<sup>[6]</sup> Edward Miner Gallaudet. *History of the College for the Deaf, 1857-1907* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet College Press, 1983), 3-5.

<sup>[7]</sup> Gallaudet, *History of the College*, 8-9.

- [8] Gallaudet, *History of the College*, 8-11; Gallaudet. *Diary of Edward Miner Gallaudet, 1852-1877*. T.H. Gallaudet and Edward Miner Gallaudet Papers, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 19.
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