

DEAF HISTORY ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Did you know that sign language was once treasured on Martha's Vineyard?

DEAF PEOPLE LIVED ON THE ISLAND FOR OVER 200 YEARS

The first Deaf person settled on the island in 1694. Due to isolated communities and intermarriage, the number of Deaf people grew. The last Deaf resident passed away in 1952.



A HIGHER RATIO OF DEAF TO HEARING

In Chilmark, the ratio of Deaf to hearing was 1 in 25. In Tisbury, the ratio of Deaf to hearing was 1 in 49.

These numbers may seem small until you consider that the ratio on the mainland was 1 in 5,730.



THIS LED TO MORE PEOPLE KNOWING HOW TO SIGN IN VARYING DEGREES (Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, not ASL)

Imagine what this was like: Deaf people on this island had much more communication access than the norm. These Deaf community members were more included and valued!

WHY WAS DEAFNESS SO COMMON ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD?



Deafness came to the island from the Weald County of Kent, England, which had a large Deaf population. Some families on the island ended up having as many as 63 Deaf family members!

DEAF HISTORY AT MARTHA'S VINEYARD CONTINUED...

Deaf people were not considered disabled.

DEAF PEOPLE MADE A LIVING THE SAME WAY AS HEARING PEOPLE



They maintained their farms, were dairy farmers, sheep raisers, fishermen, laborers, owned their own businesses, and were mostly of middle class.

DEAF PEOPLE WERE COMPLETELY INTEGRATED INTO ISLAND LIFE



They attended church and community events, voted, served in town government and militia, participated in town affairs, and, of those who married, 65% had hearing spouses.

DEAFNESS DECLINED ON MARTHA'S VINEYARD

The American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut was built in 1817. Children left the island to attend school, married classmates, and remained on the mainland. Slowly, the Deaf Community on the island faded into history.

Today, some community members are embarking on a new chapter of Deaf history, working to generate interest in American Sign Language on the island.

Did You Know?

- Jonathan Lambert was the first Deaf person known to live on Martha's Vineyard.
- Jared Mayhew was a wealthy Deaf farmer and founder of Martha's Vineyard National Bank.
- Known family names with Deaf members are Lambert, Mayhew, Tilton, Skiffe, Hammett, Luce, Smith, and West.