



MVM@Homeschool

Everyone Spoke Sign Language *The Chilmark Deaf Community*

Grade Levels Included: 4-6

Ages: 9-12

MA Curriculum Frameworks:

HSS.4.T4a5
RI.4

HSS.5.T1.3
RI.5

HSS.6.T1

What made Chilmark a place of scientific interest in the 19th century? How do people communicate when they speak different languages?

Background:

From 1694 to 1952, Martha's Vineyard - and specifically the towns of Chilmark and West Tisbury - had an unusually large population of people with hereditary deafness. As a result, the residents of the Island developed a local dialect of sign language, used by hearing and deaf people alike, allowing the Deaf community full and unbiased integration into Island society at large. Scientists and researchers studying the causes of deafness took great interest in Martha's Vineyard because of deafness' prevalence here.

Learning Objective:

Students consider how people communicate when they do not speak a common language. The Chilmark Deaf Community serves as a case study to engage with the wide variety of languages spoken on the Island (presently and in the past).

In This Package:

- Teacher's Guide & Lesson Plan
- MVM@Homeschool Artifact Display
- Read All About It!
- Writing Activity Worksheet
- Hands-On Activity Guides
- Field Trip Guide

Teacher's Guide

Welcome to MVM@Homeschool! We hope your students will enjoy this opportunity to experience a little bit of the MV Museum in their home classroom. This package includes photographs of Museum artifacts, copies of documents from our archives, oral histories, and activity guides to enhance student learning. MVM Education staff are available to answer any questions you might have while presenting this lesson; please email education@mvmuseum.org if you need us!

MVM@Homeschool Learning Kits are designed with flexibility in mind for anyone teaching and learning at home. All of the content and activities can be presented in a single day or spread out over several classes, depending on your needs and preferences. Content [underlined and in blue](#) is directly linked to the internet from this document.

Contents of This Kit

- Section I:** The Story of the Chilmark Deaf Community
- Section II:** MVM@Homeschool Artifact Display
- Section III:** Read All About It!
- Section IV:** Writing Activity Worksheet
- Section V:** Hands-On Activity Guides
- Section VI:** Field Trip Guide: *A Driving Tour of Martha's Vineyard's Deaf Heritage Sites*
- Section VII:** Additional Materials and Further Reading

Section I:

The Story of the Chilmark Deaf Community

Lesson Plan

What made Chilmark a place of scientific interest in the 19th century? How do people communicate when they speak different languages? How do languages “die”?

A. What made Martha’s Vineyard so interesting to scientists studying deafness?

1. Chilmark in the 1800s
 - a) Up-Island communities like Chilmark, West Tisbury, and Gay Head (Aquinnah) were geographically isolated from the down-Island towns.
 - (1) Unpaved roads meant troublesome travel. Many people didn’t bother to go down-Island unless they absolutely had to do so; a trip to Edgartown could take an entire day!
 - (2) The relative lack of good harbors up-Island meant that going by boat was also challenging.
 - b) Because of this isolation, the white families descended from those that had arrived in the 1600s and 1700s tended to marry local people - meaning that many residents of Chilmark married their semi-distant cousins.
 - c) By the 1850s, there were more Deaf people living in Chilmark than anywhere else in the United States!
 - (1) In the village of Squibnocket, almost 25% (1 in 4) of the people were Deaf.
2. Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language
 - a) With so many Deaf people in the community, both Deaf and hearing residents learned to speak a local dialect of sign language.
 - b) MVSL was unique in a few ways:
 - (1) It used two hands to form the letters of the alphabet;
 - (2) It could be spoken while speaking out loud, too;
 - (3) “Everybody” could speak at least enough MVSL to communicate with their neighbors, according to multiple historical sources.
3. Scientists Come to the Island
 - a) In the mid-1800s, mainland scientists took notice of the unusual number of Deaf Islanders and decided to study them, looking for clues as to how deafness occurs.
 - b) Alexander Graham Bell, the most prominent of the scientists to study the Chilmark Deaf Community, and his colleagues had different theories as to what was causing the deafness:
 - (1) Maternal fright
 - (2) Environmental factors
 - (3) Heredity
4. English Ancestry

- a) Bell constructed elaborate genealogies of the Deaf, trying to find a pattern within the family histories. He got so frustrated that he gave up without finding the answer.
 - b) All of the Deaf people on the Island had parents who carried the recessive gene that causes deafness. It's very likely that all of the Deaf had one or both of the original Deaf colonizers in their family tree.
 - (1) Jonathan Lambert lived near what is still called Lambert's Cove today; he had seven children, two of whom were Deaf. He was identified in 1714 as being "deaf and dumb" and was probably the first Deaf person to live on Martha's Vineyard.
 - (2) James Skiffe of Sandwich, Massachusetts, had children who came to the Island in the early 1700s.
 - c) Most of the original English colonizers of Martha's Vineyard had family ties to a small, secluded part of Kent in England: The Weald.
 - (1) The Weald also had a high rate of deafness, and a unique, widespread dialect of sign language.
 - (2) It's very possible that James Lambert's dialect of sign language came from his family's origins in the Weald. As deafness increased on Martha's Vineyard, the Kentish sign language evolved into a new dialect specific to Chilmark.
5. Studying "Dead" Languages
- a) When Katie West died in 1952, Martha's Vineyard Sign Language died with her.
 - (1) We call a language "dead" when there are no longer any native speakers.
 - (a) Latin and ancient Greek are considered "dead" languages even though we can still study them and read them. They're just not in everyday use.
 - (b) Wôpanâak, the Algonquian language of the Wampanoag People, was considered to be a dead language for almost a hundred years.
 - i) In the late 1800s, after centuries of being forced to learn and speak English, Wôpanâak fell out of everyday use and was almost lost to history.
 - ii) In the early 1990s, Mashpee Wampanoag scholar Jessie Little Doe Baird began having dreams of her ancestors speaking to her in a language she did not understand.
 - iii) Using the King James Bible translated from English to Wôpanâak in the 1600s, she began to revive her people's lost language.
 - iv) Today, the Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project has reestablished Wôpanâak as a living language. They have an immersion school in Mashpee and the language is now offered as an elective at Mashpee High School.
 - (2) There are a few videos of people using MVSL during interviews about their lives in Chilmark, but not enough to reconstruct the entire language.

- b) MVSL may have had an influence on the development of American Sign Language, so it lives on in a few ways.
 - (1) In 1817, the American School for the Deaf opened in Hartford, Connecticut. Almost all of the Deaf children from Martha's Vineyard would attend school there for at least a few winters.
 - (a) At the school, they learned the new standard dialect: American Sign Language. It used only one hand to form the alphabet and had very different signs for many terms - or no sign at all for some familiar Vineyard words, like scallop!
 - (b) When you watch the film of Joan Cottle Poole Nash demonstrating MVSL signs alongside an ASL speaker, you can see where the dialects are similar and where they are different.

B. A Multi-Lingual Island, Then and Now

1. Wôpanâak
 - a) The Algonquian language of the Wampanoag People was spoken here for thousands of years before the English colonizers arrived.
 - b) Depending on the dialect, this Island was called Noëpe or Capawock in Wôpanâak.
 - (1) Other Indigenous place names that survived colonization:
 - (a) Nobnocket
 - (b) Squibnocket
 - (c) Menemsha
 - (d) Aquinnah
 - (e) Quansoo
 - (f) Chappaquiddick
 - (g) Katama
 - (h) Sengegontacket
2. English
 - a) When the English began permanent settlement here in 1642, they spoke what we now call "Early Modern English," the same kind of English that William Shakespeare spoke.
3. Martha's Vineyard Sign Language
 - a) Possibly a descendant of the Kentish sign language of the Weald.
4. Portuguese
 - a) The earliest Portuguese immigrants to Martha's Vineyard arrived before the American Revolution.
 - (1) In the 1700s and 1800s, most of the Portuguese living on the Island came from the Azores, a group of islands in the Atlantic, and from Cape Verde, then a Portuguese colony off the coast of West Africa. Many came by way of the south coast mill cities of New Bedford and Fall River.
 - b) In the late 1900s, most of the new immigrants speaking Portuguese came from Brazil, a trend that continues today.
5. Yiddish & Hebrew

- a) In the early 1900s, Jewish immigrants from Lithuania and other parts of Eastern Europe arrived on Martha's Vineyard and brought yet more languages to the Island: Yiddish and Hebrew.

C. Visit the MVM@Homeschool Artifact Display

1. Study the objects in the pictures.
 - a) Josie West was a member of the Chilmark Deaf Community. The famous artist Thomas Hart Benton painted this portrait of him around 1920.
 - b) This spyglass is similar to ones used by fishermen and sailors while out at sea. According to the stories recorded in Nora Ellen Groce's book *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, Chilmarkers would also use spyglasses to see someone who was signing to them from far away!
2. Look at the maps of Chilmark, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and England. Note the red stars on the maps - these places are linked in the story of hereditary deafness on the Island.
 - a) Early Deaf colonizers Jonathan Lambert and James Skiffe's ancestors came from the Weald, Kent, England.
 - b) Jonathan Lambert came to Martha's Vineyard by way of Barnstable, Massachusetts. James Skiffe's children came to the Island from Sandwich, Massachusetts.
 - (1) Did you know? Both Barnstable and Sandwich in Massachusetts were named for towns in England.
 - (2) Why do you think so many towns in New England are named after towns in Old England?
 - (3) Can you think of any other towns near here that share their name with a town in England? Hint: There are two right here on Martha's Vineyard!
3. Watch the videos of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language being spoken.
 - a) Can you see any similarities between MVSL and American Sign Language?
4. Listen to the oral history about Chilmark and the Deaf who lived there.

D. Read All About It! - All Grades

1. Read the article about Martha's Vineyard Sign Language. How did Joan Poole (later Nash) find out about MVSL?
2. Do you have an older relative or neighbor who would be willing to tell you stories about Island life when they were young? If so, ask if they remember anyone who spoke a different language and how they communicated.

E. You Don't Say - All Grades

1. Imagine that you've just met a space alien who doesn't speak your language. In a few sentences, describe how you communicate with it. How would you introduce yourself? How would you ask it questions like, "Where do you come from?" Be creative!
2. Take a survey of your friends and relatives. Do any of them speak more than one language? Which language(s) do they speak?

F. Hands-On Activities

1. Try Martha's Vineyard Sign Language
2. Island of Many Languages Scramble Game
3. Make an Inherited Traits Family Tree

G. Field Trip: A Driving Tour of Martha's Vineyard's Deaf Heritage Sites - *All Grades*

Background for Teachers

Articles from the [Dukes County Intelligencer \(February 1981\)](#) provide a good overview of Deaf history on Martha's Vineyard. Words highlighted in red appear on the supplemental vocabulary sheet (page 25).

Excerpted from "The Island's Hereditary Deaf: A Lesson in Human Understanding"
by Nora Groce

Martha's Vineyard by the latter part of the 19th century was already attracting national attention. Her whaling fleet and fishing vessels were among the finest in the world. The Island's natural beauty and moderate climate were responsible for her growing fame as a summer colony and, at least in part, the reason for the unqualified success of the well-known Camp Meeting held annually at Oak Bluffs. ...

In scientific circles, Martha's Vineyard was also regularly being discussed ... because the Island, particularly the town of Chilmark, had an exceptionally high proportion of people who were born deaf. In the era before Mendel's laws of inheritance had become the basis for the modern science of human genetics, the question of how **traits** might be inherited from one generation to the next, was of increasing interest to scientists. Martha's Vineyard frequently found itself at the center of heated scientific debates as some of the finest minds of the 19th century sought to account for the appearance of Island deafness on the basis of either heredity or environment.

Particular attention began to be focused on Martha's Vineyard when, in the early 1800s, Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone and one of the foremost figures in American deaf education, joining the controversy, decided to try to explain how deafness was inherited. He believed that by tracing back through the records and establishing the genealogy of every family with two or more deaf children in New England, some kind of pattern would begin to emerge.

Relying heavily on the unpublished work of the Hon. Richard L. Pease of Edgartown, Bell soon found that not only was the highest concentration of deafness in New England to be found on the Vineyard, but that many of the families with deaf members in other areas of New England were directly related to individuals who had originally come from the Vineyard. Unfortunately, Bell was never able to account for the fact that deaf parents did not always have deaf children and that hearing parents sometimes had children who were born deaf.¹ Because of this, he eventually abandoned his study. ...

¹ Mendel first presented his ideas on heredity in a paper read to the Brunn Natural Science Society in 1865 and the work was published in the Proceedings of that Society the following year. Unfortunately, no leading scientists seem to have taken notice of this original publication and it was only in the year 1900 that, by coincidence, three scientists, working independently, all came upon references to Mendel's paper and realized its importance. For this reason, although the science of genetics may technically be said to extend back to 1865, actually scientists, such as Alexander Graham Bell, working on problems of heredity some 20 years after Mendel's now-famous publication, were completely unaware of its existence or conclusions.

The Cause of Island Deafness

The situation in which a small nucleus of original settlers inhabits an area with restricted access, such as an island, a high mountain valley or an isolated oasis, is not an uncommon one. In situations such as these, prominent geographic boundaries, coupled with a relative lack of mobility, tend to encourage future generations to marry close to home, often among people who are already to some degree related. This marriage pattern ... usually causes no problems in the ensuing generations. However, in those cases where one or several of the early settlers introduce a deleterious gene into this original group or “gene pool” (or when there is a mutation in a gene once the group is established), the descendants of these original settlers will have a higher probability of inheriting this gene. This is called “Founder’s Effect” by anthropologists and the Martha’s Vineyard deaf provide an excellent example of it.

The first deaf Islander was almost certainly Jonathan Lambert, who came to the Vineyard with his wife and family in 1692. Lambert, who was both a carpenter and a farmer, settled by the cove which still bears his name and lived there for the rest of his life. Lambert’s name appears infrequently in the records of the period and it is only because of a passing mention by Judge Samuel Sewell of Boston that we are made aware of the fact that he was deaf. ...

Deafness, of course, can be caused by a number of different things: it can be inherited; it can be caused by environmental factors before a child is born; or it can be the result of any one of a number of childhood illnesses and accidents. We do not know how Lambert himself became deaf, however, in his will probated in 1738 Lambert states that two of his seven children are also deaf. ...

Islanders themselves had no idea why deafness appeared so frequently. Some claimed, correctly as we now know, that the deafness “ran in families,” but many Islanders saw no pattern to the appearance of deafness whatsoever. There were several reasons for this.

Many Vineyarders, along with some of the leading medical authorities of the 19th century, believed that deafness, as well as many other congenital disorders, was the direct result of “Maternal Fright” (sometimes called “marking”). This was supposed to be the prenatal effect on the infant of psychological stress on the mother. ... Maternal fright was not the only explanation offered in attempts to account for the Island deafness. According to a reporter for the *Boston Sunday Herald* in 1895, one deaf person thought that deafness was “catching just like diphtheria and smallpox,” and yet another author suggested that it might have something to do with the amount of salt that is in the air on the south side of the Island.

Even so eminent an authority as Alexander Graham Bell, at his wits’ end trying to find the connecting links through familial inheritance, speculated to the Royal Commission of the United Kingdom in London in 1886 that environment might have something to do with it. ...

Because deafness had appeared regularly on the Island for over 250 years and particularly because many Islanders, especially those who lived up-Island, learned and used the Island sign language regularly², there seem to have been few or no social barriers placed on deaf Islanders. From earliest childhood they were included in all work

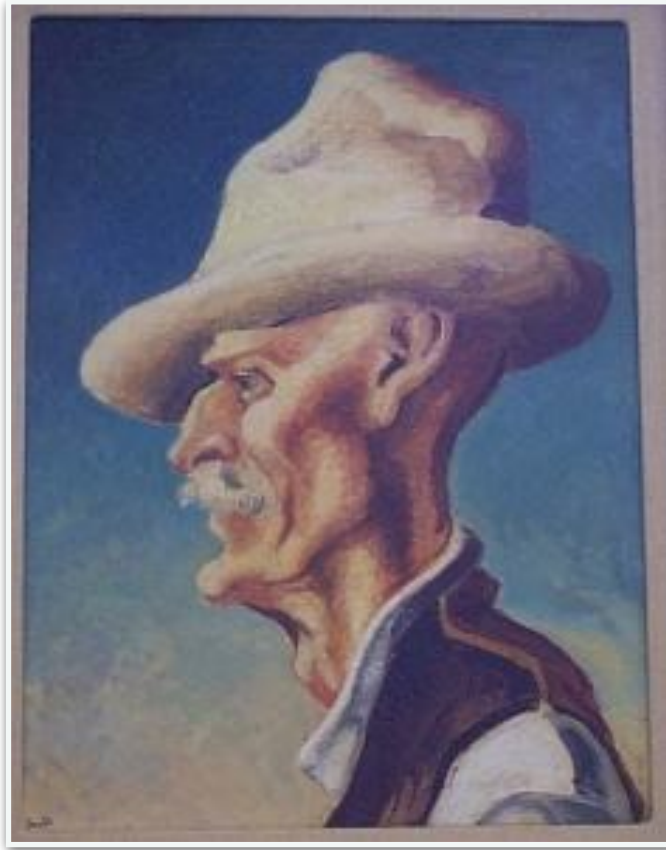
² Groce

and play situations. They seem to have freely married partners, both hearing and deaf. Tax records indicate that they generally earned an average or above-average income (indeed, several were very wealthy) and church records indicate that they were usually active in church affairs.

Legacy of the Island Deaf

Island residents began to marry off-Island more often towards the end of the 19th century. Increased mobility by boat, train and later by car, as well as the influx of summer people and their hired help, drastically changed traditional Island marriage patterns, particularly up-Island where the population had remained quite stable for generations. The result was that the number of individuals who were born deaf declined rapidly. In the 1840s some 14 deaf individuals were born in Chilmark, in the 1870s there was only one.

Section II:
MVM@Homeschool Artifact Display



"Josie West," by Thomas Hart Benton, c. 1920 -
Object 1976.002.002



19th-Century Spyglass - Object 1935.036.001

MVM@Homeschool: More to Learn

Watch!

[Martha's Vineyard Sign Language \(MVSL\) and American Sign Language \(ASL\)](#)

Video courtesy of YouTube

[The Chilmark Deaf Community](#)

MV Museum and Chilmark Public Library

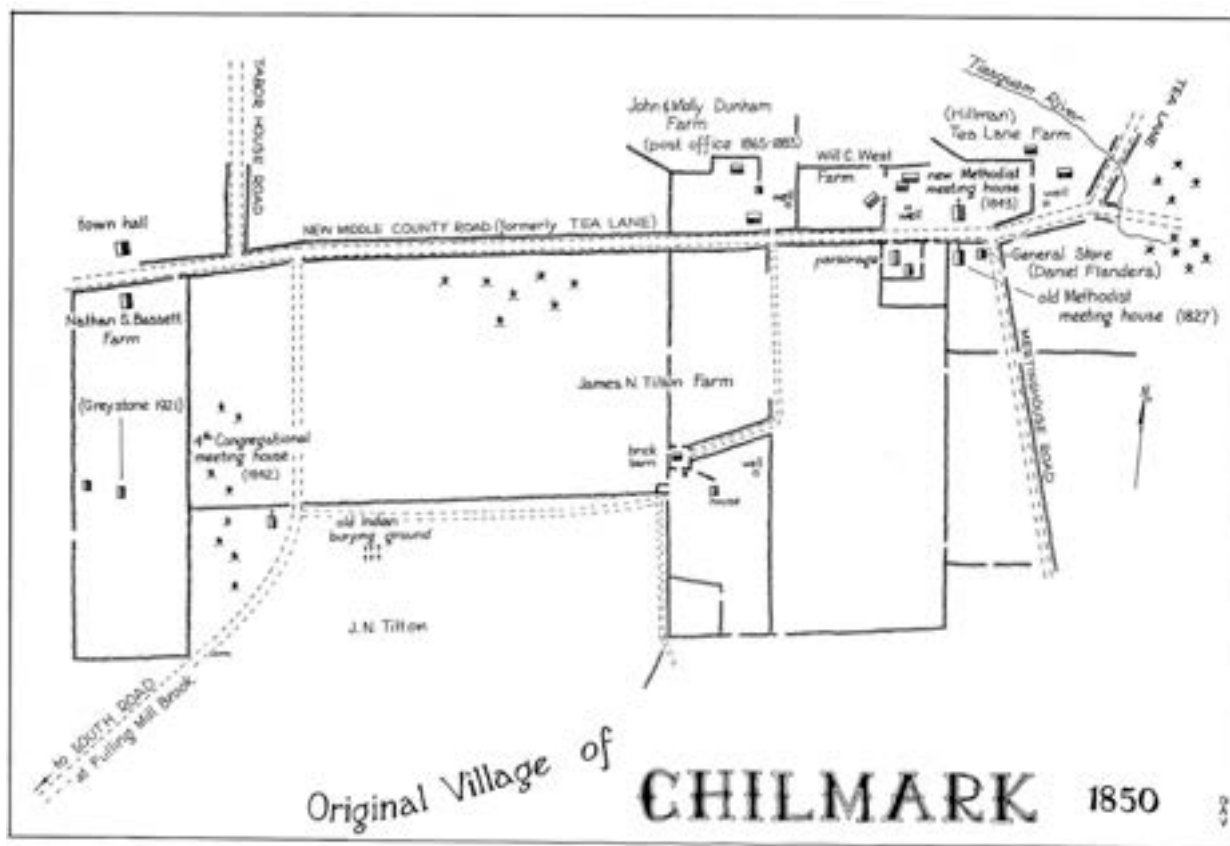
July 17, 2019

Listen!

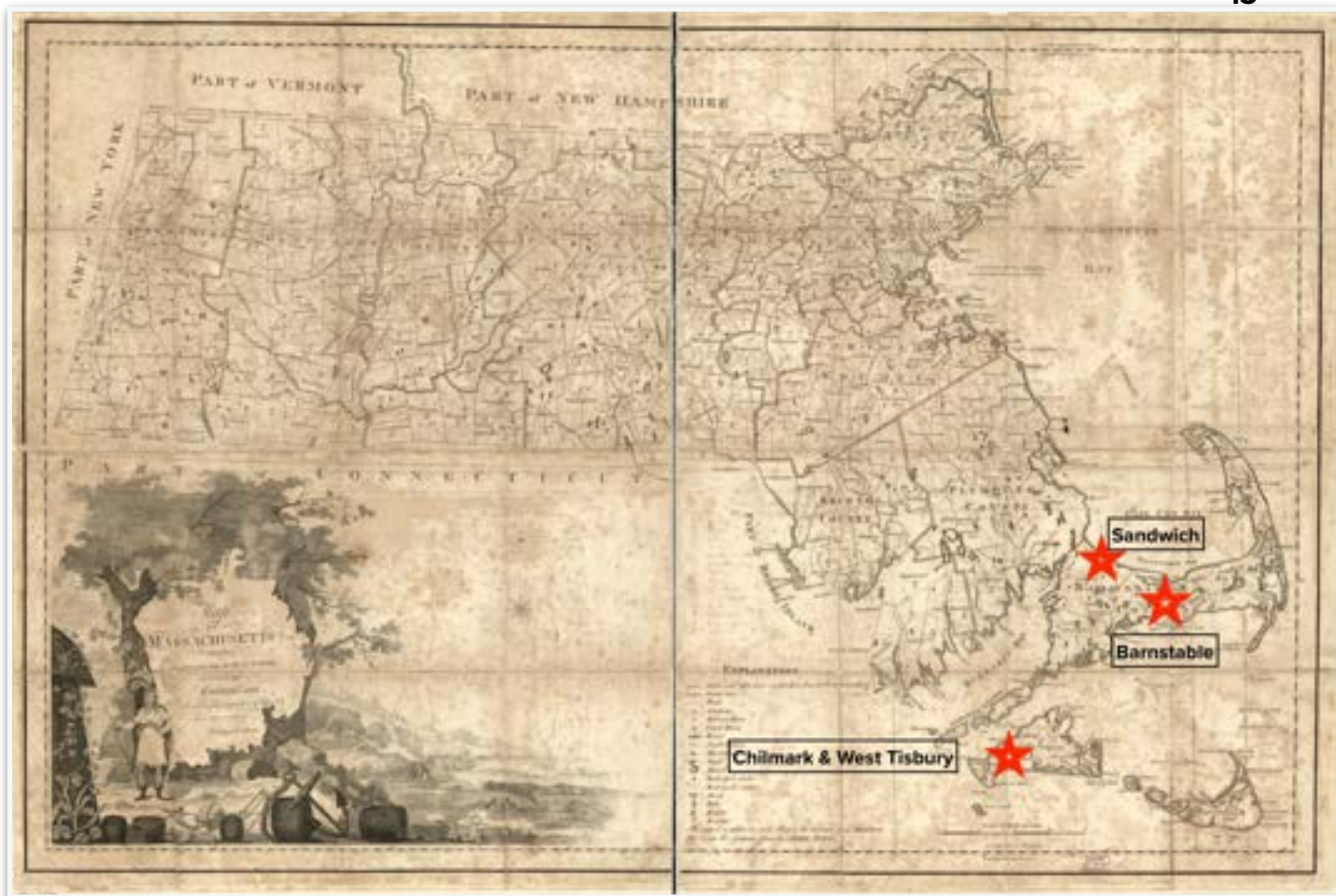
[Eric Cottle: Recollections of the Chilmark Deaf Community \(1997\)](#)

Oral History from the MVM Collection

Connect!



Map of Chilmark, Massachusetts, in 1850



Carleton's Map of Massachusetts Proper, 1801



Wallis's Map of England, 1798

Section III: Read All About It!

HISTORY

WHERE SILENCE REIGNS

Roots of American Sign Language: The Deaf Voice of the Vineyard

By Tom Dunlop

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL had invented the telephone 20 years before, but Massachusetts, his headquarters, still knew him best as a teacher of the deaf. In 1895 he was closing the books on a four-year study of hereditary deafness in the Northeast. An early result surrounded him. Nearly every family with a pattern of deafness in New England could be traced back to the early white settlers of Martha's Vineyard.

And not to the Vineyard as a whole, but to one rolling green corner of it, where the farmland swelled between walls of stone and cliffs at the edge of the sea, where the only things standing between an up-island fisherman and his catch were the rocks, the fog and the storms.

But for many in the western highlands of Chilmark, a storm was something seen, tasted, smelled—but never heard. Hoofbeats reverberated under the heel but not against the ear. From Peaked Hill to the ocean fishing grounds, the one language everyone spoke came not from the mouth, but from the hands.

In the winter of 1895 Bell sent a colleague to Squibnocket, a tiny oceanside enclave of Chilmark with a clubhouse for New York fishermen and its own post office. His colleague's mission: to see the signs.

On Jan. 19, 1895, the associate filed a newspaper story from the Squibnocket Post Office. The St. Louis Globe-Democrat picked it up and ran it under the headline, Where Silence Reigns.

"In this isolated New England community of

146 persons there are 36 men, women and children born deaf and dumb—almost exactly 25 percent of the population. In five families, out of 28 children, 15 are deaf. Here is a startling array of faces for the scientist and sociologist. What does it mean?"

"A condition so phenomenal that every resident of Chilmark learns to talk with his fingers as early as with his tongue, for he will have to do with the deaf socially and in business every day. Nowhere else in the world could you see such singular pantomimes as are carried on from Chilmark's back doors."

"The spoken language and the sign language are so mingled in the conversation that you pass from one to the other or use both at once almost unconsciously. Half the family speaks, very probably half does not. But the mutes are not uncomfortable in their deprivations, the community has adjusted itself to the situation so perfectly."

There was no other place quite like it. In its solitude, Martha's Vineyard had fallen victim to a recessive gene for deafness that kept appearing in up-island families like a pebble in a shell game. Yet

it sheltered these rural Vineyarders from the mainland idea that an inability to hear or speak could be a handicap. Self-reliant in all things, they began to build on a system of signs their ancestors had used and along the creek, Martha's Vineyard sign language was the only language that everybody knew.

The tainted gene ferried itself to the Vineyard through the descendants of two or more Englishmen who had settled on Cape Cod. They came from the market towns and farmlands of southern and eastern Kent, a secluded area known as the Weald. There, for centuries, the boundaries of marriage were limited by the distances that young men and women could walk. The seed of congenital deafness took root through inbreeding and deepened. So too did the need for a sign language that the hearing and deaf could share.

Between 1642 and 1710, the recessive gene and a deaf population were sown into the new townships of Chilmark and West Tisbury, where the patterns of inbreeding went on. The math was remarkable. In the 19th century one American in 5,728 was born deaf. Across the island it was one in 155. In Chilmark, one in 25. And at Squibnocket, one in four. George West Sr., the hearing Squibnocket postmaster who with his deaf wife Deidamia had parented five deaf children out of eight, told Bell's colleague that he believed the condition to be "catching . . . like the smallpox or diphtheria."

The sign language was catching too. Infants, deaf and hearing alike, learned it in their cribs. "Signing was very well known on the island, especially in Chilmark," Emily Howland Poole told her great-granddaughter Joan, and other sign language experts, in a 1977 interview. "The deaf people were educated. They knew what was what, they kept in touch with national affairs as well as town affairs, they knew what was going on. They were very keen."

It is possible to see the career of Joan Conte Poole as the final living expression of the Vineyard deaf, the last of whom died in 1952. Poole, 33, is supervisor of education for the deaf at Newton North High School outside of Boston.

Growing up in Chilmark, she learned some old Vineyard signs from her great-grandmother Emily, who could hear. But at age nine, Poole didn't know how significant these signs were; she thought they might be Indian. Curiously, her great-grandmother was also able to teach Joan two sign language alphabets: American and British.

In November 1977, at age 19, Poole led a team of Ph.D.s from the New England Sign Language Society to Martha's Vineyard, and over two days coaxed three hearing blinders to recall a language they had not used in 50 years. On rudimentary video equipment, they captured some 200 Vineyard signs from Emily Poole, age 94, her son Donald LeMar Poole, 73, and the noted Vineyard histo-

"There was no other place quite like it. In its solitude, Martha's Vineyard had fallen victim to a recessive gene for deafness that kept appearing in up-island families like a pebble in a shell game."



Portrait, circa 1924, by artist Thomas Hart Benton, is of Jessie West of Chilmark; courtesy of the Dukes County Historical Society.



Painting by the late Thomas Hart Benton, longtime seasonal resident of Chilmark, appears courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Benton painted Chilmarkers George West Jr. and his wife, Sabrina Rogers West, in 1924. The painting entitled *The Lord Is My Shepherd* is part of the museum's permanent collection and will be on display at the Whitney June 25 through November 10 in an exhibition called *American Life in American Art*.

rian E. Gale Huntington, 74.

"As this was going along," Joan Poole says, "it became evident that not all these signs were directly related to American sign language. They were signs that we had never seen. Or that we knew were not part of American sign language. But it wasn't until much later, when I'd analyzed the tapes, that because there was a two-handed alphabet that's used only in Britain, I thought, 'Well, there must be a connection, somewhere back there.'"

Young Joan had found the key. She had linked the Vineyard signs to a British ancestry. While Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was at the new American School for the Deaf in Hartford, trying to build an American sign language out of French sign language in 1817, Vineyarders both hearing and deaf were conversing cheerfully in a sign language already 150 years old, some of it probably imported from the old island to the new.

The signs Joan saved on those two November afternoons are elegant both in logic and simplicity. At the Chilmark Store a deaf fisherman (for a hearing one, to keep the news from a stranger at his elbow) would hook both index fingers in the same direction to tell Rex Weeks, the hearing storekeeper, that he had landed a swordfish. These hooks represented the dorsal and tail fins of a swordfish breaking the water. Had he hooked a shark, he would have signed with only one hooked finger (with a shark only the dorsal fin is visible).

Just as on the mainland, "boat" was signed with two cupped hands moving from the body as if over waves. To say "sailboat," the mainland deaf lifted their thumbs from this gesture to signify a mast. But Vineyarders simply tilted their hands to one side, meaning a boat that heels over. "Scallops," for which there is no national gesture, was signed by manipulating the hand as if it were a puppet's mouth, and moving it across the body — only an Islander would know that this is how a scallop propels itself through the water.

With the language went wry Vineyard humor. As a boy in Chilmark, a hearing

man named Ernest Mayhew once walked face-first into a fence. For the rest of his life, his name in the sign language was self-induced chop to the bridge of the nose. The sign for the whaling port of New Bedford was a pinched nose and a thumb thrust over the shoulder, meaning, "Snells bad, over there."

Between 1825 and 1870 — particularly in the 1840s and 1850s — Martha's Vineyard sent more children and more families to the American School for the Deaf than any other area in the country. The national sign language was still new, still malleable. And into it charged the Mayhews and Lucees, Tiltons and Wests — lively Vineyard youngsters with a language all their own. Joan Poole has a theory about what happened next:

"The rest of the kids wouldn't have been as fluent in sign as the Vineyard kids. Probably the first Vineyard students were thought to be taking the beautiful French signs and distorting them, just destroying them — probably because Vineyarders had their own signs that they were using instead of the French. The teacher is standing up there signing 'cat' his way, and as a Vineyarder you're going to still sign 'cat' your way."

It became a quiet classroom battle of hand shapes and movement, decades long, a continent versus an Island. Poole reasons that the national sign language was finally woven together from the French system and from the Vineyard's. It is a contribution too long overlooked. American sign language owes a special debt to a seaside community as unique as it was silent, a place where the word "handicap" had to be spelled out. ♦

Tom Dunlop is a free-lance magazine writer and frequent contributor to the Vineyard Gazette. He commutes between his family home in Edgartown and New York City, where he is a professional theatre actor.



The story of the West family follows on the next page.

Excerpt: *Where Silence Reigns****Roots of American Sign Language: The Deaf Voice of the Vineyard***

Tom Dunlop

Martha's Vineyard Magazine, May/June 1991

Alexander Graham Bell had invented the telephone 20 years before, but Massachusetts, his headquarters, still knew him best as a teacher of the deaf. In 1895 he was closing the books on a four-year study of **hereditary** deafness in the Northeast. An early result astounded him. Nearly every family with a pattern of deafness in New England could be traced back to the early white settlers of Martha's Vineyard.

And not to the Vineyard as a whole, but to one rolling green corner of it, where the farmland swelled between walls of stone and cliffs at the edge of the sea, where the only things standing between an up-Island fisherman and his catch were the rocks, the fog and the storms.

But for many in the western highlands of Chilmark, a storm was something seen, tasted, smelled — but never heard. Hoofbeats **reverberated** under the heel but not against the ear. From Peaked Hill to the ocean fishing grounds, the one language everyone spoke came not from the mouth, but from the hands.

In the winter of 1895 Bell sent a **colleague** to Squibnocket, a tiny oceanside enclave of Chilmark with a clubhouse for New York fishermen and its own post office. His colleague's mission: to see the signs.

On Jan. 19, 1895, the associate filed a newspaper story from the Squibnocket Post Office. The St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* picked it up and ran it under the headline, Where Silence Reigns.

"In this isolated New England community of 146 persons, there are 36 men, women, and children born deaf and **dumb** — almost exactly 25 per cent of the population. In five families, out of 28 children, 15 are deaf. Here is a startling array of facts for the scientist and **sociologist**. What does it mean?

"A condition so **phenomenal** that every resident of Chilmark learns to talk with his fingers as early as with his tongue, for he will have to do with the deaf socially and in business every day. Nowhere else in the world could you see such singular **pantomimes** as are carried on from Chilmark's back doors.

"The spoken language and the sign language are so mingled in the conversation that you pass from one to the other or use both at once almost

unconsciously. Half the family speaks; very probably half does not. But the mutes are not uncomfortable in their deprivation; the community has adjusted itself to the situation so perfectly.”

There was no other place quite like it. In its solitude, Martha’s Vineyard had fallen victim to a **recessive** gene for deafness that kept appearing in up-Island families like a pebble in a shell game. Yet solitude was also a blessing. For 250 years it sheltered these rural Vineyards from the mainland idea that an inability to hear or speak could be a handicap. Self-reliant in all things, they began to build on a system of signs their ancestors had used in England. In the stores, on the farms and along the creek, Martha’s Vineyard sign language was the only language that everybody knew.

The **tainted** gene ferried itself to the Vineyard through the descendants of two or more Englishmen who had settled on Cape Cod. They came from the market towns and farmlands of southern and eastern Kent, a secluded area known as the Weald. There, for centuries, the boundaries of marriage were limited by the distances that young men and women could walk. The seed of **congenital** deafness took root through inbreeding and depend. So too did the need for a sign language that the hearing and deaf could share.

Between 1642 and 1710, the recessive gene and a deaf population were sown into the new townships of Chilmark and West Tisbury, where the patterns of intermarriage went on. The math was remarkable. In the 19th century one American in 5,728 was born deaf. Across the Island it was one in 155. In Chilmark, one in 25. And at Squibnocket, one in four. George West Sr., the hearing Squibnocket postmaster who with his deaf wife Deidamia had parented five deaf children out of eight, told Bell’s colleague that he believed the condition to be “catching ... like the **smallpox** or **diphtheria**.”

The sign language was catching, too. Infants, deaf and hearing alike, learned it in their cribs. “Signing was very well known on the Island, especially in Chilmark, Emily Howland Poole told her great-granddaughter Joan, and other sign language experts, in a 1977 interview. “The deaf people were educated. They knew what was what, they kept in touch with national affairs as well as town affairs, they knew what was going on. They were very keen.”

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Section V: Hands-On Activity Guides

Activity A: Try Martha's Vineyard Sign Language and the 19th-Century Manual Alphabet

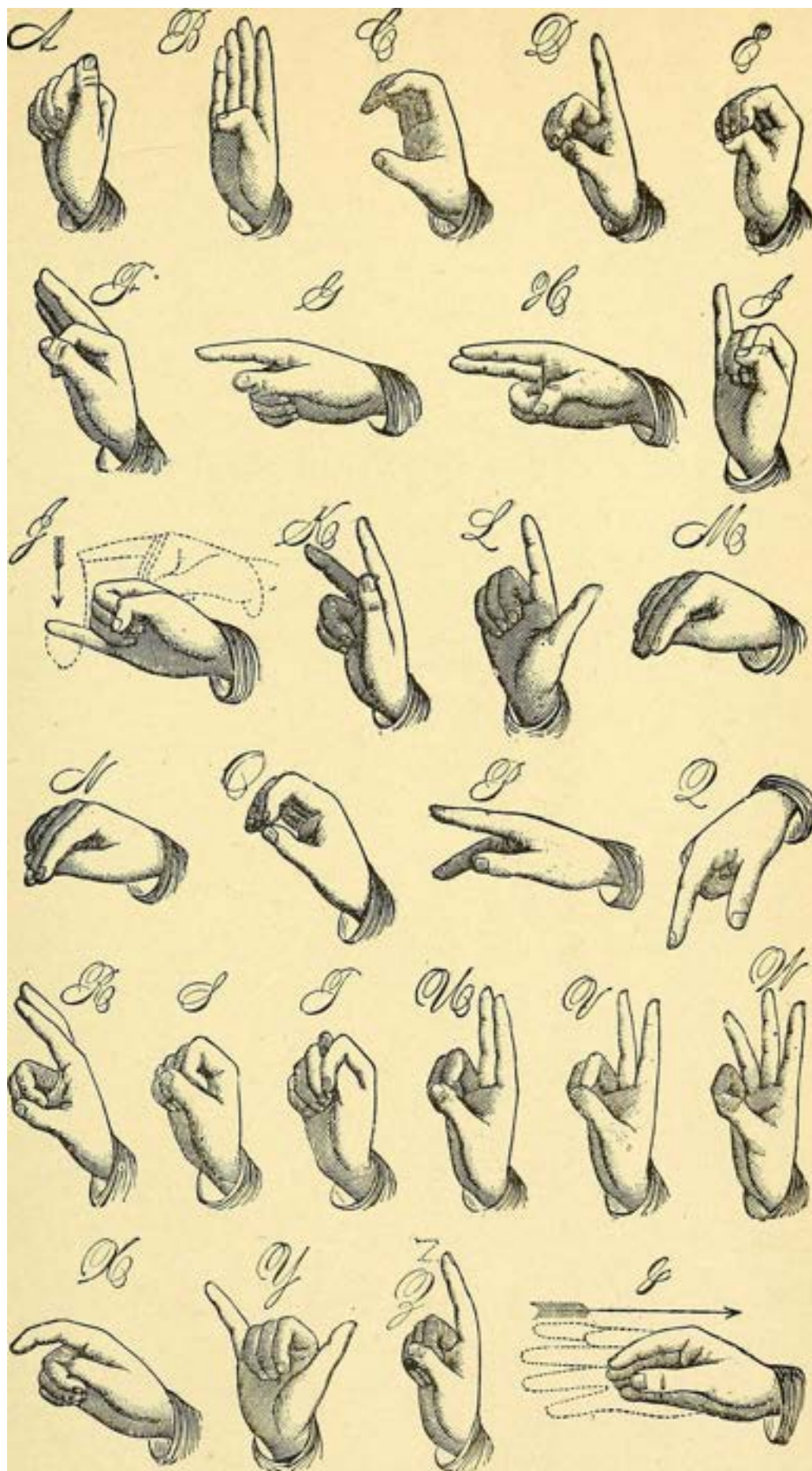
Watch the video (link on page 12) of Joan Cottle Poole Nash demonstrating Martha's Vineyard Sign Language. Look for the following words and try to copy her movements!

Oyster	Shark	Swordfish
Day	Night	Cranberry
Scallop	Baby	Clam

Bonus: New Bedford had its own special sign because of the very-smelly whaling industry that thrived on its docks. Point to the north and then hold your nose!

The 19th-Century Manual Alphabet

Look at the diagrams on page 20 and try to make the signs for the letters of the English alphabet. These are the signs that students at the American School for the Deaf learned in the 1800s. They're not specific to MVSL, but Island students would have learned them at the school.



Activity B: Island of Many Languages Scramble Game

The island of Noëpe has become the home of many different languages from all over the world!

People have come to this island, now called Martha's Vineyard, for many different reasons over the last four hundred years. Can you identify a few of the places people left behind to come here?

Study the map on page 23, then match these countries and territories and their language(s) to the numbered flags. (The Answer Key is on page 29.)

Hint: Some of these languages are spoken in more than one country!

Portuguese

Lithuania

English

Jamaica

Spanish

Brazil

Yiddish

Great Britain

Hebrew

Cape Verde

Gaelic

Portugal

Lithuanian

Ireland

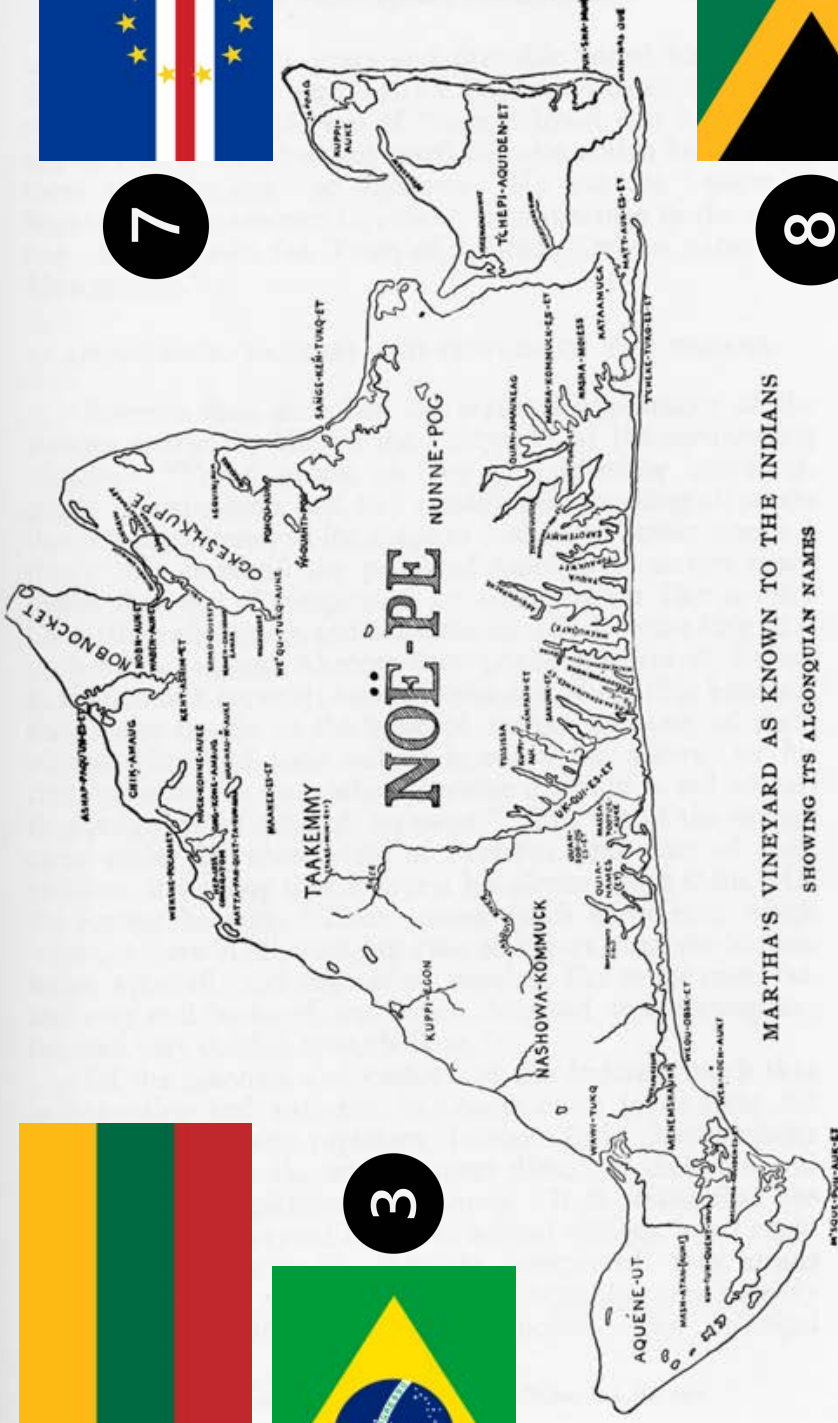
Wôpanâak

Puerto Rico

1. Country: _____
Language(s): _____
2. Country: _____
Language(s): _____
3. Country: _____
Language(s): _____
4. Country: _____
Language(s): _____
5. Country: _____
Language(s): _____
6. Country: _____
Language(s): _____
7. Country: _____
Language(s): _____
8. Country: _____
Language(s): _____



5



MARTHA'S VINEYARD AS KNOWN TO THE INDIANS
SHOWING ITS ALGONQUIAN NAMES



7



2



T

Activity C: Make an Inherited Traits Family Tree

Adapted from: www.familyloket.com

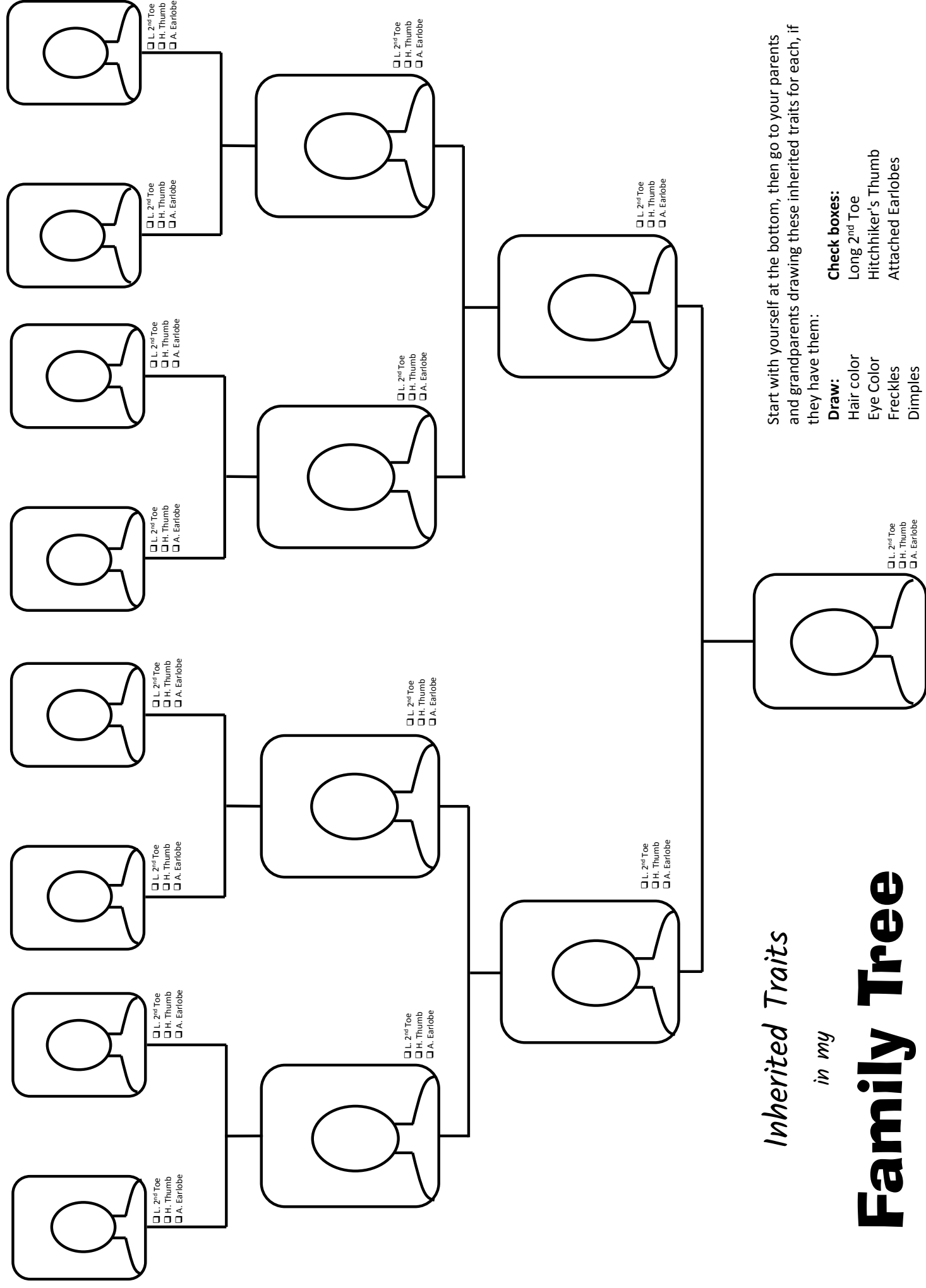
See if you can find out where some of your traits came from by looking at your ancestors!

Print out a blank copy of the family tree on page 25. Using colored pencils or crayons, draw a self-portrait in the box at the bottom of the page. Make sure to use your real eye color and natural hair color, not contact lenses or dyed hair.

In the boxes above you, draw color portraits of your parents. It's okay to use your memory or photos if you need to!

Keep working your way backwards in your family (grandparents, great-grandparents) as you move up the page. Don't worry if you can't fill in everyone's picture or if you don't have all the colors.

When you're done, see if you can see any patterns that repeat. Does one hair or eye color repeat itself more than another?



Inherited Traits

in my

Family Tree

Start with yourself at the bottom, then go to your parents and grandparents drawing these inherited traits for each, if they have them:

Check boxes:

Long 2nd Toe
Hitchhiker's Thumb
Attached Earlobes

Draw:

Hair color
Eye Color
Freckles
Dimples

Section VI: Field Trip Guide

Take a drive around Chilmark to see some of the most significant places in the Chilmark Deaf & Signing Community's history! Print out the tour directions on page 27, pack some snacks, and spend a day exploring up-Island with your parent or trusted adult.

Look & Learn!

As you stop at each of the places on the tour, ask yourself the following:

- If you couldn't hear, how easy would it be for you to communicate with others?
- If you didn't speak or read English, would you be able to understand your surroundings?
- If you didn't arrive knowing that these places were important to the Chilmark Deaf Community, would you be able to tell their significance today? Why or why not?
- What other communities might also find these places important?

Deaf Heritage on Martha's Vineyard – A Driving Tour

During the colonization of Martha's Vineyard, a group of families with a hereditary deafness immigrated to the Island from England, many settling in the township of Chilmark. Deaf residents of Chilmark were valued members of the community, fully integrated into its political, economic, social, and spiritual life. Hearing residents conversed with their deaf neighbors in Martha's Vineyard's distinctive form of sign language, and used it to sign at public gatherings such as town meetings and church services for their deaf friends and relatives. Visitors were startled by the prevalence of deafness and sign language, but residents saw their deaf neighbors simply as neighbors.

There are no monuments to the Chilmark deaf community and the contributions its members made to the evolution of American Sign Language. However, amid the Martha's Vineyard of today, it is still possible to see traces of the Chilmark of the 19th and early 20th centuries: an insular world of small farms and fishing shacks where "everyone . . . spoke by hand."

Points of Interest



▲ Vineyard Haven Harborfront. Circa 1900.

Stop #1

Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce

24 Beach Street, Vineyard Haven
mvv.com/deafheritage

Beach Street, which runs in front of the Chamber of Commerce building, was once the gateway to the village of Holmes Hole.

Judge Samuel Sewall, whose account of a 1714 visit to Martha's Vineyard contains the first mention of a deaf resident of the Island, began his journey at Beach Street. So, perhaps, did Jonathan Lambert (the deaf man he met), when he immigrated to the Island in 1694.

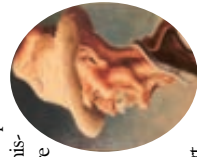
Thomas Hart Benton's portrait of Joseph "Josie" West. ▲

Stop #2

Martha's Vineyard Museum

151 Lagoon Pond Rd., Vineyard Haven. marmuseum.org

Overlooking Vineyard Haven Harbor, the Museum preserves, exhibits, and interprets materials related to the history and culture of Martha's Vineyard, including the Chilmark deaf community.



Thomas Hart Benton's portrait of Joseph "Josie" West, a deaf farmer, is on permanent display as are other materials, including a notebook kept by Alexander Graham Bell during his investigations on the Island in the 1880s.



▲ Lambert's Cove

Stop #3

Lambert's Cove

281 Lambert's Cove Rd, West Tisbury

Jonathan Lambert (or Lambert), who immigrated to Martha's Vineyard from Weald in the county of Kent, England around 1700, is believed to have been the ancestor of all the hereditary deaf residents of Martha's Vineyard. He settled near a shallow cove on the north shore of the Island, which now bears his name.



▲ Chilmark Town Hall

Stop #4

Old Chilmark Center

Middle Rd., junction of Tea Lane and Meetinghouse Rd., Chilmark

Until the early 1900s, the village center of Chilmark stood at these crossroads. Deaf residents of the town would have come here to worship at the Congregational and Methodist Churches, to do business or socialize at one of the two general stores, or attend meetings at the Town Hall. The roads that converge here all date to the 1700s. Most deaf citizens of Chilmark would have spent their lives on widely scattered farms like those that, even today, border Middle Road.



▲ Abel's Hill Cemetery

Stop #5

Abel's Hill Cemetery

322 South Road, Chilmark

Abel's Hill, named for 17th-century Wampanoag resident Abel Wauwumpubque, was the site of the first two Congregational meetinghouses in Chilmark, around the town's principal cemetery. At least twenty-eight members of the Chilmark deaf community are buried on the hilltop, including Jared and Jerusha Mayhew (Stop #9), "One-Armed Ben" Mayhew, Josie West (Stop #2), George and Dedamia Tilton West (Stop #8) and Katie West (Stop #6).



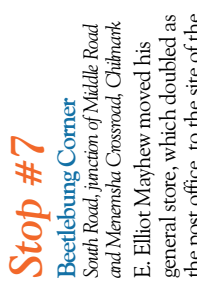
▲ Katie West House

Stop #6

Chilmark Public Library

South Rd., junction of Middle Road & Menemsha Crossroad, Chilmark

Founded in 1882, the library was originally located in E. Elliot Mayhew's store, and then in the town hall. In 1953, the town purchased the home of the late Katie West, sister-in-law of George and Josie West (Stop #8) and the last native speaker of Martha's Vineyard sign language—who had died the year before. The library opened in its new home in 1956 and maintains the Chilmark Deaf Community Digital Archive.



▲ Beetlebung Corner

Stop #7

Beetlebung Corner

South Rd., junction of Middle Road and Menemsha Crossroad, Chilmark

E. Elliot Mayhew moved his general store, which doubled as the post office, to the site of the current Chilmark Store. A new town hall, still in use today, was built on the Middle Road side of the intersection in 1887, and the Methodist church (now the Chilmark Community Church) moved to the Menemsha Crossroad in 1910. These changes completed the shift of Chilmark's village center from its old location (Stop #4) to its current one.



▲ Chilmark School

Stop #8

Squibnocket Beach

Squibnocket Rd., off State Rd., Chilmark

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many Chilmark fishermen used Squibnocket as a base of operations. The tiny post office at Squibnocket was overseen by a local farmer, George West. His wife, Dedamia Tilton West, was deaf, as were five of the couple's eight children—among them Josie West (Stop #2) and George West, Jr. (the subject, along with his wife Sabrina, of Thomas Hart Benton's painting "The Lord Is My Shepherd").

Squibnocket Post Office. ▲



▲ Mayhew House

Stop #9

Jared & Jerusha Mayhew House

251 State Road, Chilmark

Nearly hidden from the street by high hedges, this turreted Queen-Anne-style house is recognizable by its yellow-painted clapboards and red roof. Built in the late nineteenth century, it was the home of Jared and Jerusha Mayhew. A prosperous farmer, Jared—like his parents Benjamin and Hannah, his older brother Benjamin, his uncle Alfred, and his aunts Ruby and Love—was deaf. He is said to have been the last Chilmark resident born into a family where deaf children outnumbered hearing ones.



▲ Menemsha Harbor

Stop #10

Menemsha Harbor Basin Road, Chilmark

Chilmark residents travelling to New Bedford often departed from Menemsha, riding with friends or family members going to "The City" to bring fish and other products to market, or buy supplies. Many of the deaf children who left the Island to be educated at the American School for the Deaf likely took their first steps away from home on these shores.

Section VII: Additional Materials

Chilmark Deaf & Signing Vocabulary

anthropologist: expert in or student of the study of human societies and cultures and their development.

colleague: a person with whom one works in a profession or business.

congenital (of a disease or physical abnormality): present from birth.

deleterious: causing harm or damage.

diphtheria: an acute, highly contagious bacterial disease causing inflammation of the mucous membranes, formation of a false membrane in the throat that hinders breathing and swallowing, and potentially fatal heart and nerve damage by a toxin in the blood. It is now rare in developed countries because of immunization.

dominant (genetics): relating to or denoting heritable characteristics which are controlled by genes that are expressed in offspring even when inherited from only one parent.

dumb (dated or offensive): (of a person) unable to speak, most typically because of congenital deafness.

hereditary (of a characteristic or disease): determined by genetic factors and therefore able to be passed on from parents to their offspring or descendants.

pantomime: a dramatic entertainment, originating in Roman mime, in which performers express meaning through gestures accompanied by music.

- an absurdly exaggerated piece of behavior.

phenomenal: very remarkable; extraordinary.

recessive (genetics): relating to or denoting heritable characteristics controlled by genes that are expressed in offspring only when inherited from both parents, i.e., when not masked by a dominant characteristic inherited from one parent.

reverberate (of a loud noise): be repeated several times as an echo.

sociologist: an expert in or student of the development, structure, and functioning of human society.

smallpox: an acute contagious viral disease, with fever and pustules usually leaving permanent scars. It was effectively eradicated through vaccination by 1979. Also called variola.

tainted: affected with a bad or undesirable quality.

trait: a distinguishing quality or characteristic, typically one belonging to a person; a genetically determined characteristic.

For Independent Readers:

Show Me a Sign, by Ann Clare LeZotte: An excellent work of historical fiction, set in Chilmark in 1805 and focusing on the Deaf experience of the world at that time. Included in this packet is a list of historical errors made by the author, but those should not be considered a reason to disregard this excellent work, as the errors are relatively minor and do not detract from the power of the story itself.

Set Me Free is the sequel to *Show Me a Sign*. It is less Vineyard-centric, but still a vivid depiction of a young Deaf woman's experience in the hearing world of the 19th century.

Answer Key to Island of Many Languages Activity

1. Noëpe / Wôpanâak
2. Great Britain / English
3. Brazil / Portuguese
4. Lithuania / Yiddish, Hebrew, and Lithuanian
5. Ireland / English and Gaelic
6. Portugal / Portuguese
7. Cape Verde / Portuguese
8. Jamaica / English