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Chasing Aleck: The Story of a Dorm

R. A. R. EDWARDS

Abstract: A student raised a hand in class and asked, “Why is this dorm named after Alexander Graham Bell?” On a deaf campus, this was a loaded question. Bell was an oralist, opposed to sign language. He was a eugenicist, opposed to deaf marriages. Indeed, the more I thought about it, the better this question got. Why did the school name a dorm after him? Unfortunately, I hadn’t the foggiest idea. With apologies to that student, I offer this article as a belated answer.

Key words: Deaf history, campus history, eugenics, cultural geography

As a historian, I really should know better. No question is ever truly simple. Why I thought this one would be is just one of life’s little mysteries. Oh, the simple question? A student innocently asked in my deaf history class, “Why is one of the dorms on our campus named after Alexander Graham Bell?” Why, indeed? I was forced to admit to the class that day that I hadn’t the foggiest idea. Not exactly a satisfying teaching moment, to be sure, and, honestly, a bit embarrassing for a historian of deafness like myself. I should know the answer to this question, I thought. This is a bit of local knowledge I need to track down. After all, it is neither an unreasonable nor an unpredictable question on this campus.

“This campus” is that of the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). The Bell Dorm is located within the complex of buildings that houses one of RIT’s eight colleges, specifically that of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

As a place to start my quest for an answer, I decided to go over to the building to read the plaque mounted there. Now, I know that markers rarely tell us the whole story. James Loewen has taught us all not to put blind faith in historical markers, on roadsides or buildings.¹ But this was a logical place to begin. What explanation for its name does the building itself provide?

The plaque on the building reads as follows: “Only six years before his death, Alexander Graham Bell looked back over his amazing life and wrote: ‘Recognition of my work for and interest in the education of the deaf has always been more pleasing to me than even recognition of my work with the telephone.’ A brilliant and innovative teacher of the deaf, Bell dedicated a great portion of his life to help deaf children develop their potential for listening, speaking, and lipreading. Today, NTID emulates the ideals for which Alexander Graham Bell worked.”

I have to admit, this was not what I expected. It came as something of a shock for me to discover that “today, NTID emulates the ideals for which Alexander Graham Bell worked.” I stood there, staring. Really, it does? I knew I was going to have to do a lot more digging to find a way to understand this statement.

Readers at this point can be forgiven for wondering what all this fuss was about. The plaque’s platitudes might seem banal to members of the hearing community, the community I assume most readers call home, and the one where Bell is mostly remembered only as the inventor of the telephone. His historical reputation rests so heavily, in fact, on his invention of the telephone that history textbooks, a place many hearing students encounter Bell and where, it could be argued, Bell’s name is preserved into the collective national story, mention little else about the man. An admittedly unscientific poll of the ten major American history survey texts I have in my office revealed that nine textbooks mention Bell by name.² Of these, only four texts note his work in deaf education, as a way of explaining his interest in acoustics, which in turn led to the development of the telephone. The rest refer to him simply as the inventor of the telephone.

But if the phone is what gets him into history books, the phone was not what Bell wanted to be remembered for, if our building marker is to be be-

1. See James Loewen’s *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) for an analysis of the politics of historical markers.

2. The texts I have are: Robert A. Divine, et al., *The American Story* (New York: Penguin, 2007; 3rd ed.); Mark C. Caines and John Garraty, *The American Nation* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006; 12th ed.); Jacqueline Jones, et al., *Created Equal* (Pearson/Longman, 2006; 2nd ed.); Carol Borkin, et al., *Making America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999; 2nd ed.); Joseph R. Conlin, *The American Past* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004; 7th ed.); John Mark Faragher, *Out of Many* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003; 4th ed.); Edward L. Ayres, *American Passages* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004; 2nd ed.); Carl Abbott, et al., *The American Journey* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007; 4th ed.); John M. Murrin, et al., *Liberty, Equality, Power* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1999; 2nd ed.); and Irwin Unger, *These United States* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2007; 3rd ed.); *The American Story*, *The American Nation*, *The American Past*, and *These United States* are the only texts that mention Bell’s connection to deaf education.

lieved. As it explains and as four textbooks tantalizingly hint, Bell had strong connections to deaf issues during his lifetime. Though the hearing world might not remember, the Deaf world cannot forget that Bell was a staunch oralist. That is, he was a believer in and propagator of an educational philosophy that sought to ban the use of sign language in classrooms for the deaf, to conduct the education of all deaf children with speech and lipreading. More broadly, oralists attacked the use of sign language in classrooms because they wanted to secure the extinction of sign language outside the classroom. They hoped that by eliminating sign language from educational settings, by literally keeping it out of the hands of a new generation of users, they would over time succeed in driving sign language out of existence entirely.

Why this hostility to sign language? That is a story told well and at length in Douglas C. Baynton's *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language*.³ In short, late-nineteenth-century oralists, like Bell, worried that sign language users were akin to other unassimilated foreigners, threats to the social order, undermining cultural unity and stability with their cultural and linguistic difference. As Darwinian biology slowly spread into Darwinian sociology, which in turn gave rise to eugenics, sign language users were increasingly understood to be genetic throwbacks, using a language form, gestures, which had long since been supplanted in evolutionary terms by the far superior form of language, speech. Refusing to speak, or, put more positively, preferring to sign, made deaf people culturally dangerous. Questioned about the true value of speech for deaf people, Alexander Graham Bell himself replied in astonishment, to "ask the value of speech is like asking the value of life."⁴

Honoring an oralist at a campus brimming over with signers would be one thing. But there's more. Readers also need to know about Bell's other connection to the deaf community, the fact that once made a Deaf student in my Deaf History class memorably comment, "He's the Hitler of deaf culture!" Yes, it is a remark made with the drama a nineteen-year-old can easily muster, but the fact remains that the comment set off a wave of vigorous nodding throughout the class. Scholars may moan that this is not a fair characterization of Bell, but I would suggest instead that this characterization of the man points to the difference between a collective and largely hearing memory and the subaltern memory of the Deaf community. In the Deaf community, as in the hearing community, Bell's name is remembered; but in the Deaf community, it is also reviled. Why?⁵

Bell was a eugenicist. In his defense, so were a lot of other prominent Americans and Europeans of his time. Eugenics was a popular movement, as a wave

3. Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

4. Bell, as quoted in Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 55. The comment was made in 1884.

5. The capitalized Deaf refers to those people who are physically deaf and who are also identify themselves as members of Deaf culture. The lowercase deaf is used to refer simply to those people who have an audiological hearing loss.

of recent historiography on the topic has made abundantly clear.⁶ Most hearing people do not know about this darker aspect of Bell's career, as most are unfamiliar with the history of eugenics. To turn once again to my unscientific textbook poll, seven of the ten texts in my office offer some consideration of eugenics, though most give the topic literally a sentence or two.⁷ Many references largely prefer to use the term "the eugenics movement," which allows them to discuss the history of a bad idea without blaming anyone for its propagation; somehow, we had eugenics without eugenicists. Bell's name is nowhere connected with this body of thought.

But, in point of fact, he was the most famous eugenicist specifically to attack the deaf community in his now infamous address, "Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race," a paper originally delivered, to widespread acclaim in the scientific community, to the National Academy of Sciences in November 1883.⁸ Here, Bell publicly worried about the formation of a deaf variety of the human race and tried to pinpoint why such an outcome could occur. He told the gathered crowd that he would show that "sexual selection is at work among the deaf and dumb. . . . Those who believe as I do, that the production of a defective race of human beings would be a great calamity to the world, will examine carefully the causes that lead to the intermarriages of the deaf with the object of applying a remedy."⁹

What factors caused deaf people to intermarry? First, Bell singled out manual education and the continuing use of sign language, because these worked together to encourage the deaf to marry each other and to discourage hearing people from seeing the deaf as marriageable partners. Second, Bell pointed to the institutions of the deaf community, well established by the late nineteenth century, such as deaf clubs, deaf churches, deaf associations and

6. The literature on eugenics is vast and getting vaster. For places to start, see Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999); Elof Axel Carlson, *The Unfit: The History of a Bad Idea* (New York: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 2001); Christine Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985); and Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7. In fairness, one, *Created Equal*, provided quite good coverage of the topic.

8. The address was published as Alexander Graham Bell, *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race* (n.p.: Alexander Graham Bell Association of the Deaf, 1969). I choose to focus exclusively on Bell's *Memoir* for several reasons. It addresses the deaf community specifically. It is the piece that Bell is remembered for within the Deaf community today. It is what my student had in mind, in other words, when he declared Bell to be Hitler. I know that Bell's relationship to eugenics was quite involved and lengthy. After *Memoir* was published, he would go on to serve on the Eugenics Committee of the American Breeders Association, for instance.

9. Bell, *Memoir*, 41. The foreword to this edition declares that, although the reader should keep "in mind that it was written long before the age of complex statistical methodology, sophisticated genetics and molecular biology," nonetheless "many of Bell's perceptive insights and challenging questions merit the same careful consideration as if they had appeared in 1969 instead of 1883."

organizations, such as alumni groups, state associations, and national groups, like the National Association of the Deaf, founded in 1880. Such institutions, Bell warned, have “the purpose of promoting social intercourse between the scattered deaf-mutes of the country.”¹⁰ Third, he blamed the deaf press. Deaf people, he discovered, founded deaf newspapers and journals. Such periodicals “give full accounts of the deaf-mute conventions and reunions, and keep their readers informed of the movements of deaf-mutes, their marriages, deaths, &c.”¹¹ These enabled formerly disparate deaf individuals to think of themselves as members of a community, interested in their own affairs and separate from hearing people.

What was to be done? Bell recommended various measures which he divided into two categories, “repressive” and “preventive.” Repressive measures would include legislative action. “The first thought that occurs in this connection,” said Bell, “is that the intermarriage of deaf-mutes might be forbidden by legislative enactment.”¹² These would include laws to forbid the marriage of congenitally deaf people as well as laws to prohibit the intermarriage of persons “belonging to families containing more than one deaf-mute. . . . This would cover the intermarriage of hearing persons belonging to such families.”¹³ Bell acknowledged the various objections that could be lodged against such kinds of legislation and concluded, “A due consideration of all the objections renders it doubtful that whether legislative interference with the marriage of the deaf would be advisable.”¹⁴

Bell viewed the fact that he had raised doubts about the legislative route as a kind of renunciation of the idea.¹⁵ But the Deaf community, it should be noted here, did not view it in this way at all. They viewed Bell as having launched an assault on their right to marry whomever they chose.¹⁶ Bell accused deaf people of being such poor readers of English that they misinterpreted him. “The *Memoir* was addressed to the highest scientific body in the land, and the language used is therefore probably beyond the comprehension of a large proportion of the deaf,” he mused. “This perhaps may be the rea-

10. Bell, *Memoir*, 42.

11. *Ibid.*, 42.

12. *Ibid.*, 45.

13. *Ibid.*, 45.

14. *Ibid.*, 46.

15. Brian H. Greenwald, in his essay “The Real ‘Toll’ of A. G. Bell: Lessons About Eugenics,” similarly argues on Bell’s behalf, claiming that Bell, “although vilified for his *Memoir*, may have actually shielded Deaf people from negative eugenics” (41). Even if this is true, and I admit my skepticism, I view it as irrelevant. He may have shielded the community from even more damage from other eugenicists, but he did quite enough all on his own. Greenwald’s essay is included in John Vickrey Van Cleve, ed., *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2004), 35–41.

16. For a transnational analysis of the Deaf community’s response to Bell and to other eugenic assaults on their right marry, see Joseph J. Murray, “‘True Love and Sympathy’: The Deaf-Deaf Marriages Debate in Transatlantic Perspective,” in *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness*, ed. John Vickrey Van Cleve (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2004), 42–71.

son why the deaf, as a class, have relied upon second hand information concerning its contents.”¹⁷ Perhaps.

But even as Bell tried to correct the Deaf community in person, he only muddied the waters further. Accepting an invitation to speak at the National College of Deaf Mutes (now Gallaudet University), he admitted, “I know that an idea has gone forth and is very generally believed in by the deaf of this country that I want to prevent you from marrying as you choose, and that I have tried to pass a law to interfere with your marriages. But my friends it is not true. I have never done such a thing, nor do I intend to. . . . I have no intention of interfering with your liberty of marriage. You can marry whom you choose, and I hope you will be happy.”

This statement would seem to have settled the issue. But then Bell went one step further, in an attempt to explain to his audience what he actually did believe about the issue of deaf marriage. Bell announced, “It is the duty of every good man and good woman to remember that children follow marriage and I am sure that there is no one of the deaf who desires to have his affliction handed down to his children.”¹⁸

Just like that, from the Deaf community’s point of view, Bell was back where he started. He tried to renounce his plan to legally ban deaf marriages, but he gave the game away by admitting that he did not actually want to see deaf people marry each other, or to marry hearing people whose family held a history of deafness. He just hoped that their decision to restrict their right to marry would be voluntary, not legally compelled. What Bell failed to grasp was that many Deaf people did not consider theirs to be an affliction at all. Culturally Deaf people largely valued their membership in the Deaf community and sought marriage partners from within that community. In fact, a massive study of deaf marriage in the nineteenth century undertaken in the 1880s, a study Bell knew was underway, revealed that deaf people were more likely to marry other deaf people than to marry hearing people, that those marriages were overwhelmingly unlikely to produce deaf children, that deaf-deaf marriages were widely believed to be happier than mixed marriages (at a minimum, the divorce rate was significantly lower), and the common social and cultural background of the partners was believed to be as much responsible for that happiness as the ease of communication.¹⁹

Even if Bell had succeeded in fully distancing himself from the repressive measures he initially offered, there was still the matter of the preventive mea-

17. Bell as quoted in Richard Winefield, *Never the Twain Shall Meet: Bell, Gallaudet, and the Communications Debate* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1987), 93. He offered this explanation for the continuing controversy in 1890.

18. Bell, as quoted in Winefield, *Never the Twain Shall Meet*, 93–94. The quote was from an unpublished speech delivered at Gallaudet on March 6, 1891.

19. The study reported that there were 4,471 marriages involving deaf partners from 1800–1894. Among deaf-deaf marriages, 90% reported no deaf children. The study was undertaken by Edward Allen Fay, the editor of *The American Annals of the Deaf*. See Edward Allen Fay, *Marriages of the Deaf in America* (Washington, DC: Gibson Brothers, 1898).

sure he continued to advocate. These measures, he was confident, offered the best chance to prevent the development of a deaf variety of the human race, a development he still adamantly opposed and feared. The preventive approach recommended isolating those factors which caused deaf people to marry each other and eliminating them.

Bell's preventive plan sketched three lines of attack: first, mainstreaming deaf children into their local public schools, in order to minimize their contact with other deaf children and maximize their exposure to hearing people; second, use only the oral method and ban the use of sign language; and third, eliminate deaf teachers from deaf education as they represent "another element favorable to the formation of a deaf race—to be therefore avoided."²⁰

Although he may have tried to backpedal from the repressive measures, Bell never renounced his devotion to the preventive measures he outlined. Even his support of these strategies would have been enough to earn him the contempt of the Deaf community, a community which staunchly supported residential schools for the deaf as important sites of Deaf culture, deeply valued sign language, strenuously opposed the oral method, and worked tirelessly to keep deaf teachers in deaf education, in order to provide deaf children with positive deaf adult role models. The battle of the Deaf community's fight against the oralist agenda in these years is recounted in Susan Burch's *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900–1942*.²¹

So, we are still left with the "simple" question: why Bell? I anticipate that one line of explanation readers might advance is that no one knew of the darker aspects of this history at the time NTID was founded. The histories I have directed readers to have only been published within the last ten years, after all, and deaf studies as a field is quite young, too, twenty-five years old at a generous dating.

Let's explore that line of inquiry. First, we need to reconsider the question regarding the NTID dorm, who knew or did not know this history? In fact, Bell's history was quite well remembered at the time of NTID's founding; it was remembered within and by the Deaf community. So even to advance the argument that no one knew this history in the 1970s is to privilege one community's memory, that of the hearing majority, over that of another, the Deaf minority.

The Deaf community remembers these events so well because it tried to engage Bell on several occasions over the years. Through the community's official voice at the time, the deaf-founded, deaf-run organization, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), the Deaf tried to draw Bell into a conversation about deafness and get him to see things from their point of view. George Veditz, president of the NAD during these years, was aggressive in his efforts to convince Bell to change his views of the deaf. For instance, he

20. Bell, *Memoir*, 48.

21. Susan Burch, *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900–1942* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

wrote to Bell in 1909, saying, “I regret sincerely your inability to attend our [the NAD’s] Congress next summer. We should like to convince you—pardon the expression—of the ‘error of your ways,’ and bring you into concord with the aims of the vast majority of the deaf.” By 1915, Veditz was writing again, this time trying to convince Bell to turn his technological expertise to a device that might benefit the deaf community, “a sort of television that will do for the eye what the telephone does for the ear.”²²

The leaders of the Deaf community were forced to admit that their attempts to engage Bell in dialogue were unsuccessful. Upon Bell’s death, Veditz wrote that “the bitterest resentment of the deaf was brought about by Dr. Bell’s interference in their educational system” and concluded that “Dr. Bell’s influence upon the American deaf has been negative.”²³ Still, it was these very efforts at engagement that helped to sear the encounters between Bell and the Deaf community into the collective memory of the Deaf. This history was remembered, and quite negatively.

Second, we must understand how and when NTID came into existence. The act to establish a technical college for the deaf was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. A national selection process was then conducted by a twelve-member National Advisory Board (NAB) to find a host institution for the new college. The NAB included leaders in industry and in deaf education. Eleven of the twelve members were hearing. Two educational members, S. Richard Silverman and Mrs. Spencer Tracy, headed leading oralist organizations, the Central Institute for the Deaf and the John Tracy Clinic. Additionally, Silverman was the president of the Alexander Graham Bell Association.

The NAB announced that RIT had been chosen to host the new college in 1966.²⁴ The first class of 70 deaf students arrived in 1969.²⁵ The selection committee declared that no other “applying institution offered the combination of experience in education at the technical institute level and depth in understanding of the problem of deafness.”²⁶

After the selection process was complete, the future of NTID was handed over to the new National Advisory Group (NAG), whose mission was to guide

22. Both letters in the Alexander Graham Bell family papers at the Library of Congress. Available online in the American Memory: Technology, Industry Collections. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/bellhtml/bellhome.html> (accessed March 1, 2007).

23. George W. Veditz, “De Mortuis Nil Nisi Bonum,” *The Jewish Deaf* (October 1922): 13–15. The quotes are from page 14 and page 15, respectively. My thanks to my colleague, Patricia Durr, for bringing this citation to my attention.

24. For more on NAB and the process of establishing NTID, see Harry G. Lang and Karen K. Conner, *From Dream to Reality: The National Technical Institute for the Deaf, A College of Rochester Institute of Technology* (Rochester: Rochester Institute of Technology, 2001), especially 16–34. See also Ralph L. Hoag, *The Origin and Establishment of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf: A Report on the Development of NTID, a Special Federal Project Sponsored and Authorized by the United States Congress*.

25. Dane R. Gordon, *Rochester Institute of Technology: Industrial Development and Educational Innovation in an American City* (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 331.

26. As quoted in Gordon, *Rochester Institute of Technology*, 265.

the fledgling institution into existence and see that its mission statement was effectively implemented. As with the NAB, most members of the NAG were hearing, and, once again, some were declared oralists. For instance, George Pratt, the president of the Clarke School for the Deaf, the first oral school for deaf in the nation, was on the NAG. The members specifically addressed the issue of communication philosophy in its first meetings. Some promoted oralism, while others leaned toward Total Communication, a method which combined speaking and signing, that is, speaking English and signing in English word order. The NAG finally recommended that the new institute “would follow an eclectic communication policy, one that would accommodate students of all communication methodologies.”²⁷

This is the context in which to understand the question of the campus buildings, as construction began in 1970, and it was a contentious period in deaf history. Oral education had been in control of deaf education for nearly a century. The first pure oral schools were established in 1867. By the 1880s, most schools for the deaf were experimenting with oral approaches, and at the turn of the century, nearly 40 percent of American deaf students were taught exclusively with the oral method, and that number would steadily increase to reach 80 percent by 1920.²⁸ As Douglas Baynton writes, “Oralism remained orthodox until the 1970s.”²⁹ Over the course of the 1970s, that orthodoxy crumbled.

The collapse was fueled by a number of factors. First, William Stokoe’s breakthrough research into American Sign Language (ASL) established definitively that ASL was an actual language, with a complex grammar and syntax all its own. *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles*, the collaborative work of Stokoe, Carl Croneberg, and Dorothy Casterline, appeared in 1965 and provoked a surge of interest in ASL. Second, such linguistic studies in turn sparked pedagogic debate. If ASL was a real language, not a bastardized form of English on the hands as oralists had argued, why was it forbidden from classrooms? Could students not benefit from both signs and speech? Third, hearing parents of deaf children expressed increasing dissatisfaction with the education their children received. They demanded change and new approaches beyond pure oralism.³⁰ Fourth, Deaf adults used ASL with additional pride and demanded increasing respect for their language and culture.

Finally, there is some historical evidence to suggest that the black civil rights movement had an impact on the Deaf community, which began to demand its rights in turn.³¹ As Jack Gannon put it, “Black Pride became Deaf Pride

27. Lang and Conner, *From Dream to Reality*, 36.

28. Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 4–5.

29. *Ibid.*, 5.

30. See James P. Spradley and Thomas S. Spradley, *Deaf Like Me* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1978) for one account of this educational transformation from a parents’ perspective.

31. See R. A. R. Edwards, “Sound and Fury; or, Much Ado About Nothing? Cochlear Implants in Historical Perspective,” *The Journal of American History* 92 (December 2005), especially 907–908.

and Black Power became Deaf power.”³² The National Theatre of the Deaf, an example of new visibility for ASL and Deaf culture on the American scene at this time, was founded in 1965. It featured theatrical performances in ASL, with voice interpreting in English for non-signing audience members. NBC brought the Connecticut-based theater troupe to the nation’s attention when it aired a NTD production in 1967.³³ Linda Bove, the Deaf actress, came to *Sesame Street* in 1971. Gallaudet University established a chair in Deaf Studies in 1972. The first ever “Deaf Awareness Week” was declared in Colorado that same year.³⁴

Meanwhile, back in Rochester, the construction of NTID was completed in 1974, and the opening dedication ceremonies brought Johnson’s widow, Lady Bird, to campus to celebrate.³⁵ At the time of the grand opening, however, the buildings were not named. Campus publications covering the dedication ceremonies refer simply to “the dining hall” and “the residence halls.” This fact came as a bit of a surprise to me, as I tried to find the answer to my “simple” question. I had, erroneously it turns out, assumed that the buildings were named in time for the grand opening. I spent a lot of time plowing through campus sources from the early 1970s before I realized my mistake.

That was not wasted time, however. The more I looked through materials from the early 1970s, the more it dawned on me that the unexpected explosion of Deaf culture and ASL onto the national scene as NTID opened was, in some ways, problematic for the new school. The institute was still beholden in many ways to oralism, both because oralists had a hand in opening it, and also because the oral method was still being vigorously promoted by NTID’s leaders, especially Dr. William Castle, who had been appointed dean of NTID in 1968. Castle was a speech pathologist by training, with a professional background in speech pathology and audiology, not education. He had a long-standing interest in oral interpreting, as opposed to sign language interpreting, and hoped to promote its use on the new campus.

At its founding, the school was perceived as largely oralist in its orientation. In the RIT archives, I found an undated editorial resource memoran-

32. Jack Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (Silver Spring: National Association of the Deaf, 1981), 377. Gannon’s work, especially pp. 317–418, provides useful information on the deaf community in the 1960s and 1970s.

33. For more on the history of NTD, see Stephen Baldwin, *Pictures in the Air* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1994). One should note that the televised program was not greeted positively by all. The Alexander Graham Bell Association wrote to NBC when they learned such a program was in the works, condemning it and begging NBC not to show it, because “this program will evoke unfavorable reaction from educators and parents and the informed public.” Next, NBC received letters from the Bell Association declaring, “We are opposed to any programming which indicates that the use of the language of signs is inevitable for deaf children or it is anything more than an artificial language, and a foreign one at that, for the deaf of this country.” Asking NTD for a response, director David Hays replied that the program would “show highly gifted deaf people working in a developed art form of great beauty.” NBC apparently agreed and aired the special. See Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 346.

34. Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 392–93.

35. *Ibid.*, 329.

dum, most likely from ten years earlier, from the RIT Office of Public Relations that offered what it called “facts about the National Technical Institute for the Deaf.”³⁶ It indicated even then that “the majority of NTID’s students communicate using oral and manual means, simultaneously. There are some students who prefer either manual or oral means, exclusively. Of this group, the majority prefer the oral method of communication.” As a self-described “strong oralist,” NTID student Richard McElwain wrote in 1969: “It is realized that not all deaf can master the oral method . . . but there must be a solution somewhere to the need for better communication. It is a fact that oralism is, and always will be, in great demand for the deaf by the general public and will not die in the near future.”³⁷

The Junior Deaf American, a publication of the National Association of the Deaf, devoted a special issue in May 1969 to NTID. Here, Mark Ellingson was quoted as saying NTID students were “very fine people” and the communication with them was described as “no problem for him.” The reporter noted, “He feels that there is no difference between the hearing and deaf—he was rather surprised to find that many of the NTID students were able to speak and lipread well.” The article reported Ellingson as saying, “The deaf students mingle with the hearing students so well that you cannot tell which is which!”³⁸

Ellingson was hearing. It is perhaps unsurprising that he gravitated to favoring a speech-based approach, as it was seen at the time as one that would allow the deaf to integrate more easily into the hearing world. But of course this kind of integration was to be done on hearing terms. Many deaf people at the time would not have been flattered to learn that they were indistinguishable from hearing people, for members of a newly emerging Deaf Pride movement were more interested in claiming, than in hiding, their deafness. As one young deaf man, Ronnie Rhodes, put it as he rejected hearing aids in 1969, “I want to be an original deaf person—not an artificial deaf person.”³⁹

Some deaf people on the new campus were not nearly as convinced that speech and lipreading would serve to integrate the student body. Robert Panara was deaf; he had been serving as an associate professor of English at Gallaudet University when he was picked to serve on the NAB. He was in fact the NAB’s only deaf member.⁴⁰ He later became the first deaf faculty member hired at NTID. He had quite a different take on communication issues on the new campus. Rather than put all the burden of communication on the

36. Although it is undated, the text refers to how the groundbreaking is planned for mid-1970 and tells readers that the pilot class of students entered in 1968. It would seem the document was written sometime in 1969.

37. Richard McElwain, “Looking Over the Campus,” *The Junior Deaf American* (May 1969): 9.

38. Kathy Froning, “RIT President Talks About NTID,” *The Junior Deaf American* (May 1969): 3.

39. Mary Jane Rhodes, “From a Parent’s Point of View,” *Deaf American* 22 (September 1969): 29. She recalls her son Ronnie’s words here.

40. Lang and Conner, *From Dream to Reality*, 24.

deaf students, Panara encouraged RIT's hearing freshmen to "break the communication barrier" by using a "pad and pencil, by speaking more slowly and distinctly, by making greater use of facial expression, and by using pantomime." Communication, as Panara understood it, was a shared responsibility. He wrote, "Some of these Freshmen may even want to add finger-spelling and sign language to their repertory of communication skills—just as the deaf NTID student can improve his speech and lipreading skills by integrating with his fellow classmates."⁴¹

Pedagogical quarrels, philosophical differences, oralist stalwarts, manualist rebels, Deaf pride activists: all these combined to make communication questions a hot-button issue on campus. As the NAG slowly came up with recommendations for the names of campus buildings, all these pressures continued to grow. When at last, the names of the campus buildings were announced in October 1979, tensions between oralism and manualism were even greater than ever.⁴² More Americans than ever before were aware that oralism had a strident cultural agenda—to make deaf people over in a hearing image, and that Deaf people rejected this oralist image of their condition, thanks to the unexpected popularity of the play, *Children of a Lesser God*, which won the Tony Award for Best Play of the 1979–80 Broadway season.⁴³ In addition ASL was coming to the masses; PBS aired a Deaf-centric children's show called *Rainbow's End* in 1979 that featured Freda Norman as Supersign Woman.⁴⁴ Like Linda Bove, Norman was a well-known Deaf actress, best known for her work in National Theatre of the Deaf.

What statement would the school choose to make in 1979? I spent some time in the RIT Archive Collections, the campus repository for Institute history, trying to come up with memoranda or other documents that might indicate the thinking of a campus building committee. This proved frustrating; an Institute with eight colleges is a diverse place, and, as it turns out, not all the Institute records are yet centralized in one location. Some are still held in individual colleges, but what is where or why is not always transparent. Putting feelers out to campus sources, a memo from January 22, 1979 finally emerged.

The memo was from William Castle, dean of NTID from 1968 to 1979, to Richard Rose, president of RIT from 1979 to 1992. It states that a proposal for names of the buildings came to the executive committee of the NAG, and they unanimously endorsed the recommendations. The proposal "was based on discussions held at previous NAG meetings and input from deaf students."

A series of guidelines were drawn up to help the committee make its choices. It was decided that the possible names should not be limited to de-

41. Robert F. Panara, "What NTID means to RIT," *The Junior Deaf American* (May 1969): 4.

42. Lang and Conner, *From Dream to Reality*, 139.

43. Mark Medoff, *Children of a Lesser God* (Clifton, NJ: J. T. White, 1980). The play is far more politically astute than the movie version which starred Marlee Matlin.

44. Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 387–88.

ceased persons, and, more positively, that they should represent the deaf community, recognize the government sponsorship of NTID appropriately, and honor RIT leaders who worked to secure NTID's place at the Institute.

These guidelines explain most of the recommendations that followed. What had been known as "the academic building" became the Lyndon Baines Johnson Building, in honor of the president who signed the act that created NTID. The former "dining commons" became the Hettie L. Shumway Commons; Shumway was on the board of trustees at the Rochester School for the Deaf, a residential K-12 school, from 1941 to 1985, and was also on the Board of Trustees of RIT, serving on the Women's Council. With a foot in both schools, she worked hard to lobby RIT to compete for NTID, believing its presence would further the cause of deaf education more broadly in Rochester. She later served on the NAG from 1973 to 1976.

The Tower A dormitory was renamed Mark Ellingson Hall, after the RIT president who served from 1936 to 1969 and who made the decision to enter RIT in the NAG selection process. The Tower B dorm was rechristened Peter N. Peterson Hall, after a deaf vocational education teacher at the Minnesota School for the Deaf, who had discussed the need for more vocational training in the deaf community as early as 1930. He wrote an article that year for *The Vocational Teacher*, outlining his vision for the future. "A National Technical Institute for the Deaf, located at the center of population in a large manufacturing city, is what deaf young America needs more than anything else," Peterson wrote. "It would be a complement to Gallaudet College, and on a par with it in usefulness and influence. It would give all the deaf who wanted it a practical education that would lead to bread with butter spread thick upon it. A dream, you say. A wild, fantastic dream! Perhaps so. But more fantastic dreams than this have come true."⁴⁵

Additionally, and for our purposes significantly, the guidelines offered one last recommendation, namely that "the oral aspect of deafness should not be forgotten." And so it was that Tower C came to be called the Alexander Graham Bell Hall, because, as the memo put it, "the inventor of the telephone . . . was also a teacher of the deaf whose prime interest always lay in encouraging deaf persons to develop good spoken language."

An NTID news release on October 5, 1979 announced the new names of the buildings, and a formal naming ceremony was held on October 19, 1979. The campus paper announced the new names. Of the Alexander Graham Bell Hall, it reported, "Mr. Bell is noted for his commitment to helping the deaf children to develop their limited communication skills."⁴⁶ No mention is made of his commitment to making speech their only communication skill. And no

45. Peterson, as quoted in Lang and Conner, *From Dream to Reality*, 10–11.

46. "NTID Buildings Named," *Reporter* (October 19, 1979): 15. Note here the way that the paper equates "communication" with "spoken language." Deaf children are assumed to have trouble communicating, period. There is no sense that they may in fact communicate perfectly well using sign language and that they might simply need help expanding their communication repertoire to include English.

mention is made of Bell's negative reputation within the Deaf community, the community that was primarily going to be served by Bell Hall. The paper's sanguine tone aside, it seems clear that Bell's name was chosen quite purposefully. Bell was chosen precisely because of, and not in spite of, the fact that he was an oralist.

It should also be noted that Bell's oralism and even his eugenicism were also not completely unknown in the hearing community, at least among scholars, by this time. Robert V. Bruce's major biography, *Bell: Alexander Graham Bell and the Conquest of Solitude*, had appeared in 1973.⁴⁷ Bruce himself acknowledged Bell's interest in and support of eugenics, but claimed that "Bell never singled out any specific ethnic group as 'undesirable,' though it was commonplace in his day for self-styled eugenicists [sic] to stigmatize the Italians, Jews, Slavs, and others."⁴⁸ It should be noted, however, that this characterization of Bell's thought only holds up if you don't see the Deaf as one of those undesirable ethnic groups. Bruce certainly did not perceive them in that light; hence his view of Bell's kinder, gentler eugenicism. But Bell himself did see the Deaf in that light and wrote about them as undesirables. He castigated their language, their organizations, their press, and their cultural separateness. Importantly, the Deaf also saw themselves as members of an embattled cultural minority group, and they felt they were doing a lot of their battling against Bell and his supporters.

Therefore, one could argue that in the context of the times, the decade of the 1970s, the decision to name the dorm after Alexander Graham Bell can only be seen as a provocative move, designed to speak back to the cultural forces that were increasingly promoting Deaf culture and ASL usage. It was a statement about what kind of a place the college's leadership wanted NTID to be. There was a sort of throwing down of the gauntlet here; "the oral aspect of deafness," NTID announced, "should not be forgotten," even in an ASL-ascendant period. Bell worked tirelessly to encourage deaf children to listen, speak, and lipread, the building's marker reminds us, and "today, NTID emulates the ideals for which Alexander Graham Bell worked." In choosing this name, it seems to me, the dorm came quite literally to embody the tensions that roiled on campus as the 1970s came to a close.

Those tensions persisted well into the 1980s, and perhaps beyond. As 1982 opened, William Castle, still NTID dean, began his term as the first elected president of the Alexander Graham Bell Association of the Deaf (AGBAD). That same year, associate dean of NTID, Alan Hurwitz, became president of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). One can hardly imagine two more diametrically opposed organizations. AGBAD was founded in 1890, and

47. Robert V. Bruce, *Bell: Alexander Graham Bell and the Conquest of Solitude* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973). The metaphor of conquest is an old trope in oralist circles. Oralists are frequently depicted as conquering heroes. Ruth Bender's 1960 work was entitled *The Conquest of Deafness: A History of the Long Struggle to Make Possible Normal Living to Those Handicapped by Lack of Normal Hearing* (Cleveland: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1960).

48. Bruce, *Bell*, 418.

took its mission as promoting oral education, speech skills, and lipreading for all deaf children. The NAD was founded in 1880, and is the nation's oldest deaf-founded, deaf-run organization. Its mission was to advocate broadly for the deaf community and to promote awareness of deaf issues, especially the right to access to signed language.

As Castle took the helm of AGBAD, he described his organization's goals as promoting "the importance of education for hearing-impaired persons, with emphasis on good language, including the development of spoken language, a good ability to speechread, and use of residual hearing through optimal use of amplification. It also promotes the rights of all hearing-impaired children to have access to such education."⁴⁹

By contrast, Hurwitz's NAD had a very different mission. As Hurwitz put it, "The NAD emphasizes the acceptance of 'total communication,' the right of deaf people to use any and all forms of expression, including sign language, facial expressions, gestures, finger spelling, reading, speech, and residual hearing through amplification."⁵⁰ In addition, the NAD would try to "promote greater public awareness of deafness; to improve the accessibility of television and interpreting services to deaf persons; to increase the number of public TDDs; to advocate total communication."⁵¹

The two men therefore served organizations with diametrically opposed agendas. Or, put another way, NTID was home to those in both camps. Though the NAD had the stronger nationwide membership, coming in at some 17,000 in 1982, the AGBAD's nearly 6,000 members had the dean of NTID on their side.

Even an undergraduate reporter could see the potential conflict here, and asked Castle quite directly if there was "any conflict of interest between your representation of a so-called 'oral' deaf organization and your leadership of NTID, which advocates an eclectic approach to communication." Castle dodged the question, responding only that he recognized that total communication was here to stay, including, presumably, on the NTID campus.⁵² His goals as AGBAD president, however, were clear. "My primary goal," he stated, "is to encourage fuller cooperation among all organizations of and for the deaf now in existence . . . and to help restore an appropriate emphasis on oral/auditory skills."⁵³ Asked what was meant by "appropriate," Castle elaborated, "Among the educational institutions for the deaf there has been a tendency for the oral and auditory aspects of communication to get lost. This is, in particular, a propensity in programs that declare their support for total communication."⁵⁴ Castle hoped that by being involved in both institutions, he would promote oralism more widely. "I think there are energies within NTID that can be used

49. Emily Leamon, "Leading the Way," *NTID Focus* (Fall 1982): 3.

50. Hurwitz as quoted in Leamon, "Leading the Way," 3.

51. Leamon, "Leading the Way," 4.

52. *Ibid.*, 3.

53. *Ibid.*, 4.

54. *Ibid.*, 4.

importantly to foster the interests of AGBAD.”⁵⁵ Naming the dorm after Alexander Graham Bell was but one way of drawing attention to these energies, by making support for oralism on campus literally visible.

Castle and the AGBAD pushed oral education as the best adaptive tool for deaf children. Acquiring speech, they argued, would allow deaf children to flourish. Hurwitz and the NAD had quite different ideas about what would allow deaf children greater access to their world. He too wanted to harness energies at RIT, but Hurwitz had a different sense of what such energies could accomplish and where their efforts should be focused. He went beyond the struggle of one deaf child to articulate and instead suggested broader, community-based solutions to the problem of inclusion. “NTID has many talented people,” Hurwitz stated, “as well as a wealth of untapped resources which could be used to promote technological advancement in captioned television, creative arts, computers, hearing aids, communication devices, and other ideas which will remove architectural . . . problems of deaf people.”⁵⁶ In this view, inclusion was about much more than one individual’s communication skills. It was about leveraging technologies that would make Deaf life easier, regardless of whether or not one had speech skills. Communication, not articulation, was the goal.

Bell’s life, it seems to me, may have been about speech, but it was not about communication. It was about control. He did not want deaf people to communicate; he wanted to tell them how to communicate. He did not want technology to enable Deaf lives; he wanted technologies to eliminate Deaf, and someday even deaf, lives.

The irony is that it is not entirely clear that Bell would be honored today to see his name on the dorm at NTID. After all, he was largely opposed to residential schools for the deaf, because they gathered deaf people together in great numbers, gave rise to cultural Deafness, and promoted deaf intermarriage. NTID today does all these things. Bell would also not appreciate the fact that NTID is home to a thriving community of sign language users. There are still oralists here, but all classes are conducted in sign language, and even the most fervent oral students must accommodate themselves to that campus reality.

So maybe the best way to please Alexander Graham Bell would be to take his name off the dorm. Or maybe I would just like to take his name down. That is entirely possible, I am willing to admit. But this has not been only my opinion. The story of one woman’s cranky quest would hardly be of interest to a wider audience, nor should it be. But this unhappiness with the dorm and its name goes well beyond me. In fact, the dorm’s name has been the source of campus tension on and off through the years. Harry Lang, a longtime professor at NTID, admits that he gets requests for an explanation about the

55. *Ibid.*, 5.

56. *Ibid.*, 5.

dorm's name "every few years . . . and sometimes a student or two will want to propose changing names."⁵⁷

Most recently, in 1999, there was a student-led movement on campus to change the name of the building. (Full disclosure: I participated in an open teaching forum on the issue on September 30, 1999. Then, of course, I did not know the story of how the dorm came to be named after Bell in the first place. I knew only that he was an oralist and a eugenicist, and those facts struck me as sufficient to make him an inappropriate choice to honor at NTID.)

The students were passionate in their objections to Bell and recounted the historical facts for the campus much as I have here. In an op-ed piece in the campus magazine, *The Reporter*, two members of the AGB Committee, B. Taylor Mayer and Daniel Millikin, argued that Bell's oralism alone should be enough to have his name removed from the building. But they also went further and discussed his support for eugenics and his opposition to deaf intermarriage. "Should RIT be honoring Bell by having a building prominently bearing his name? Furthermore, should there be a plaque pledging that NTID not only honors this man, but also seeks to emulate his ideals, as stated in the bronze? The Deaf community does not think so."⁵⁸

Interestingly, the draft of the op-ed had adopted an even more forceful tone. "To the R.I.T. Community," it began, "Can you imagine a university campus building being dedicated in the name of a tyrant? A merciless oppressor? The absolute truth is that there is one already dedicated to such a person on our very own campus. Buried in a dark corner . . . is the Alexander Graham Bell Building." After similarly recounting Bell's oralism and eugenicism, the draft concluded, "Perhaps some of you will agree that oralism is the prime educational tool, or that deafness is merely a medical problem that should be repaired. However, for the reason that Bell is regarded by many deaf people . . . as a foremost oppressor, Bell's name should be removed from the Rochester Institute of Technology building."⁵⁹

Looking at the dorm through the lens of this brief and, in the end, unsuccessful protest, several issues come into focus. First, the gap between the hearing community's memory of Bell and the Deaf community's memory is apparent. Both the draft and the final versions of the op-ed originated from Deaf student leaders. They already knew the story of Bell and his interaction with their community. They were trying to bring that Deaf story, through the campus magazine, to the hearing community, one which was not familiar with these particular historical facts. When historical memories clash, whose memory is validated? Whose is ignored? And why?

Second, the protest asked us to consider whom the building, and its name,

57. Lang to Edwards, private e-mail correspondence, January 12, 2006.

58. B. Taylor Mayer and Daniel Millikin, "Giving Faulty Praise," *The Reporter* (April 14, 2000), 4.

59. This unpublished draft is in my possession.

is for. The administration of NTID, through the years, has assumed that the building is there for them. The names on campus say something about the vision of the place as its founders and leaders imagined it. But the protesters suggested that the building is for the students, the people who use it daily. And they concluded that the name is inappropriate because it is an affront to them. Who are our public statements, especially about shared space, directed to? What statements are our public spaces making, and to whom? For whom? By whom? Who is empowered to speak in such spaces, and who is relegated to listening?

Third, the students wanted to expand the conversation beyond the campus. They wanted the dorm to be seen in a wider context, the context of the Deaf community and its history. Bell's role in deaf education was in fact remembered by NTID's leaders. It was simply remembered and interpreted from a hearing point of view. The students wanted to see Bell reinterpreted from a Deaf point of view. When different communities share a space, whose memory of history is accommodated and promoted? And by what mechanisms do we decide? Should some points of view be privileged more than others in some public arenas?

The real question, I suppose, is this: How do we, as a college community, a hearing community, a Deaf community, a city community, decide what's in a name? I cannot say that I have all the answers. But what I would hope is for all constituencies to learn more about why this name, Alexander Graham Bell's name, went up into our space in the first place and to consider whether or not the reasons that led to that decision are still reasons we affirm today. Is that original statement of 1979 still the statement we wish to make? Is it still indicative of our values today? Are Bell's ideals, in whole or in part, still ideals worth emulating?

As a historian, it is not for me alone to answer. It falls to me only to ask simple questions. And perhaps discover once again that there are no simple answers.

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