

# Martha's Vineyard: a hidden Deaf history

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class · period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## THE SHORT VERSION

For more than two centuries, an island off the coast of Massachusetts had so many Deaf residents that nearly everyone — Deaf and hearing — signed. Martha's Vineyard Sign Language was a shared community language, and deafness there was not treated as a handicap.

## THE ISLAND

*A remote fishing village, a small gene pool, and a "Deaf utopia"*

### 01 ITS HISTORY

- 01 Martha's Vineyard is an island off the southeast coast of Massachusetts near Cape Cod.
- 02 It's probably most famous for being the setting in Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws*. However, it has a deeper history.
- 03 In the late 17th century, immigrants from Kent County, England moved to the island. These immigrants are considered the source of what has been described as a "Deaf utopia" on the island.

It has been determined that a hereditary gene mutation in that early population caused an above-average number of completely Deaf babies being born.

### 02 ISOLATION AND "VINEYARD DEAFNESS"

- 01 One of the biggest characteristics of an island is its isolation. This played a key factor in Martha's Vineyard's Deaf population, because its town of Chilmark, a remote fishing village with no port, was extremely secluded.
- 02 Because it was not easily reached, marriages stayed within the small community.

This led to the more frequent appearance of a recessive gene associated with "Vineyard deafness."

## A SHARED LANGUAGE

*What happens when the whole island signs*

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### 03 MARTHA'S VINEYARD SIGN LANGUAGE (MVSL)

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- 01 Believed to have been started in Kent County, England, MVSL was developed as the primary means of communication.
- 02 MVSL was used by both the Deaf and hearing residents on the island.
- 03 Knowing sign language was a life skill that many people acquired, and it was passed down through generations.
- 04 Despite being in common use, there is no record of sign language having been taught in the schools, and few knew of its existence off of the island.
- 05 Due to the lack of recorded images, films and documents, there is no historical record of MVSL available today.
  - When American Sign Language (ASL) became the standard, this location-specific language faded out of use, eventually becoming extinct.

### 04 DIFFERENCES IN LIFE

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- 01 Other than their unique form of communication, Martha's Vineyard also had a new approach to coexistence between Deaf and hearing residents:
  - Deaf people were integrated in all aspects of life, and deafness was not considered a "handicap" on Martha's Vineyard.
  - Beyond the embrace of sign language, Deaf students received proper schooling compared to some of their mainland counterparts.
  - This environment made cases where any hearing person could interpret for another when speaking at community gatherings.
  - Since all citizens were fluent in MVSL, instead of having one interpreter at events, family or friends would sit with and sign for their Deaf loved ones.

## WHAT REMAINS

*How the story was recorded, and whose voices are missing from it*

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### 05 A LASTING HISTORY

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- 01 For over two centuries, Martha's Vineyard was home to one of the largest Deaf communities in the United States.  

Sadly, as time went on, this anomaly began to disappear when the population increased and more individuals connected with others outside its borders.
- 02 A fictional play entitled *This Island Alone* focuses on the harmony between the Deaf and the hearing on Martha's Vineyard, and speculates on some of the challenges that threaten such peace.
- 03 There was also a book written by Nora Ellen Groce titled *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard*. Many people turned to the book for a deeper understanding and history of the island.
- 04 Martha's Vineyard's history with the Deaf community has also boggled modern minds, being mentioned on NPR's *Talk of the Nation*, with the podcast *Stuff You Missed in History Class* devoting a full episode to the topic.

### 06 A MISSING PIECE TO THE PUZZLE

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- 01 Even with the history that we know from Martha's Vineyard, there is still an important set of voices missing.  

The documentation of the Deaf community on Martha's Vineyard has primarily been shared and recorded by hearing individuals.  
There are key aspects of this story that will never fully be understood without the voices of the Deaf citizens at its core.
- 02 This missing piece is also proof that a utopia is more elusive than it may seem at the surface, but that does not prevent anyone from reaching for it today.

*People tended to think of the Deaf folks as individuals first and not about their disabilities.*

LIBRARIAN AT THE MARTHA'S VINEYARD MUSEUM · THE ATLANTIC

## 07 NAMES AND TERMS TO KNOW

| NAME OR TERM                | WHY IT MATTERS IN THIS STORY                                                                                |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Chilmark</b>             | The remote fishing village with no port whose seclusion concentrated the island's Deaf population.          |
| <b>Kent County, England</b> | Where the late-17th-century immigrants came from, and where MVSL is believed to have started.               |
| <b>MVSL</b>                 | Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, used by Deaf and hearing islanders alike and now extinct.                  |
| <b>"Vineyard deafness"</b>  | The name given to the hereditary deafness carried by a recessive gene in the island population.             |
| <b>Nora Ellen Groce</b>     | Author of <i>Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language</i> , the book many people turn to for the island's history. |

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer in complete sentences using what you read

## 08 WRITTEN RESPONSE

**01** Two things about Chilmark made the island's Deaf population unusual. Name them and explain how they worked together.

**02** Who used MVSL on the island, and how did people learn it?

**03** On the mainland, a Deaf person at a public event might need one interpreter for everyone. How was it handled on Martha's Vineyard, and why?

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**04** Why is there no historical record of MVSL today, and what caused it to fade out of use?

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**05** Most of what we know about this community was written down by hearing people. Why does that matter, and what might be missing from the story?

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**06** People have called Martha's Vineyard a "Deaf utopia." Based on what you read, do you think that word fits? Explain your answer.

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