

# What Is Martha's Vineyard?

Martha's Vineyard is an island off the coast of Massachusetts. Today, it's known as a summer destination, but in the 1700s–1800s, it was a farming and fishing community—and a key place in the early history of signed language in America.

From the 1600s through the 1800s, many of the island's early settlers came from the Kent region of England, where a genetic trait caused a high rate of hereditary deafness.

- This gene was passed down through generations.
- As a result, by the 1800s, Martha's Vineyard had one of the highest rates of deafness in the U.S..
- In some towns, like Chilmark, as many as 1 in 25 people were Deaf (compared to about 1 in 1,000 today).

What made Martha's Vineyard special is not just the high population of Deaf residents, but the way the community responded:

- Both Deaf and hearing people used sign language daily.
- Deafness was not seen as a disability—it was simply a part of life.
- Children grew up bilingual, using both speech and signs.
- Farmers, fishermen, storekeepers, and teachers signed.
- People even signed across fields or from boats!

This unique situation created a fully integrated signing community, where Deaf people were included and active in every part of daily life.

The sign language used on the island became known as Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL).

- MVSL was a natural, local sign language.

- It developed over time as Deaf and hearing people communicated across generations.
- It was passed down through families and communities, just like a spoken dialect.

MVSL was different from French Sign Language (LSF) or home signs used elsewhere in the U.S.

So how did MVSL influence American Sign Language?

1. In 1817, the American School for the Deaf was founded in Hartford, Connecticut.
2. Deaf students from Martha's Vineyard attended the school.
3. At the school, MVSL mixed with French Sign Language (LSF) brought by Laurent Clerc and other local home signs.
4. Over time, this blend of languages formed the foundation of ASL.

So, MVSL is one of ASL's key roots—alongside French Sign Language and other regional sign systems.

By the early 1900s:

- Fewer Deaf children were born on the island.
- Improved transportation connected the island to the mainland.
- Deaf children started attending mainland schools where ASL was taught.

Over time, MVSL faded, and by the mid-20th century, it was no longer used. But its impact lives on—MVSL helped shape the ASL we use today.

- It was a unique community where Deaf and hearing people signed equally.
- It showed that signed languages thrive when Deaf people are included.
- MVSL helped form ASL, the main sign language used in the U.S. today.