Thoughts on the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of the Columbia Institution

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Description
The early history of Gallaudet University is intertwined into the broader context of American history, detailing the endeavors of the African American, Indigenous, and deaf communities. The author notes how there has always been tension between the majority's desire for the minorities' assimilation to mainstream culture and the resistance of these minorities to this pressure. The American deaf community thrived through this tension and Gallaudet University became recognized for their unparalleled education. Original English text.

Translation

Editors' Introduction

In this essay, historian James M. McPherson weaves the early history of Gallaudet University into the broader context of American history. He begins by arguing that President Abraham Lincoln signed the legislation founding the institution because he believed that all people should have "a fair chance in the race of life." McPherson attributes Lincoln's vision to historical events and ideas, particularly the American and French revolutions, the Second Great Awakening, antebellum reforms, and Jacksonian democracy. McPherson then moves on to discuss the rise of oralism and shows that it, too, was rooted in specific historical conditions, particularly post–Civil War attempts to assimilate immigrants, African Americans, and American Indians. McPherson argues that "the American majority has not always manifested a pluralist toleration for the integrity and value of minority cultures," but he concludes that "creative tension between conformity and pluralism has helped to make the American deaf community the best educated in the world and to make Gallaudet University an institution without parallel anywhere."

On the Fourth of July1861, President Abraham Lincoln delivered his first message to the United States Congress, which he had called into special session to deal with the Civil War that had begun three months earlier. Explaining what the North was fighting for in this war, Lincoln said: "This is essentially a People's contest. On the side of the Union, it is a struggle for maintaining in the world, that form and substance of government, whose leading object is, to elevate the condition of men—to lift artificial

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weights from all shoulders—to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all—to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life."[1] The artificial weights that

Lincoln mentioned referred in part to the weight of slavery on the shoulders of four million African Americans, even though another year would pass before Lincoln made emancipation of the slaves one of the North's war aims. Nevertheless, everyone recognized that the South had seceded and the Confederacy had gone to war to protect slavery from the threat it perceived in the antislavery movement out of which had grown the Republican Party that elected Lincoln president in 1860.

Yet, by lifting artificial weights and giving all people a fair chance in the race of life, Lincoln meant to include more than the question of slavery. The American venture of a republican form of government based on a democratic political system was a fragile experiment in that nineteenth-century world in which most other Western nations were governed by monarchs and based on theories of aristocracy and the inequality of social classes. Americans alive in 1860 had seen two French republics succumb to the elevation of emperors and the restoration of the monarchy. The hopes of European liberals for the formation of democratic governments in 1848 had been crushed by counterrevolutions. And now a democratic form of government in the United States was threatened by a civil war that, if it broke the nation in two, would likewise discredit the very notion of democracy and equal opportunity. "The central idea pervading this struggle," said Lincoln in 1861, "is the necessity of proving that popular government is not an absurdity. We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose"—as the secessionists were trying to do.[2]

Where did this passion for popular government, for democracy, for giving all a fair chance in the race of life come from? For Americans, one of the principal sources was the Revolution of 1776. Lincoln declared, also in 1861, "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence" with its ringing phrases that all men are created equal with inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—that pursuit being another way of describing a fair chance in the race of life.[3] Lincoln was well aware that many Americans did not enjoy equality or a fair chance. He also understood that the author of the words "all men are created equal," Thomas Jefferson, and the other signers of the Declaration of Independence, "did not intend to declare all men equal in all respects." They did not even "mean to assert the obvious untruth" that all people in 1776 were equal in rights and opportunities. Rather, said Lincoln, "they meant to set up a standard maxim for a free society, which should be constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."[4]

The second great influence that underlay the progressive currents that shaped nineteenth-century movements to lift weights from shoulders was the French Revolution, which drew part of its energy from the ex-ample of the American Revolution and part from the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment in France. That eighteenth-century philosophical movement challenged fixed social hierarchies of feudalism and the ingrained injustices found in dogma and tradition. Enlightenment thinkers urged rational programs and institutions to promote social and political progress. From these currents of thought in France arose, among other things, the best schools in the world for education of the deaf by means of French Sign Language, the direct ancestor of American Sign Language. In 1816 a product of these schools, Laurent Clerc, came to the United States to help a Congregationalist clergyman, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, establish a school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut—the first of several institutions founded on the same model during the next four decades.[5]

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet's role in founding what became known as the American School for the Deaf provides a segue for consideration of the third important source of progressive reforms in the first half of the nineteenth century, the Second Great Awakening in the history of American Protestantism. A crucial element in the Second Great Awakening was rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination by many Congregationalist and Presbyterian theologians and clergymen, including Gallaudet. Traditional Calvinism taught that God predestined salvation for only the chosen elect, who had little or no say in the process. Reform Calvinists, plus theologians in other denominations like the Methodists, argued instead that all people had free will to choose the path to salvation by proclaiming their faith in God and in Christ's teachings, renouncing sin, and placing themselves in a state of belief and behavior to receive God's grace.

This was an activist faith that rejected the passiveness of waiting to be chosen by God; to put it in vernacular terms, it was a belief that God helps those who help themselves. This activist faith not only generated evangelical crusades to convert individuals to Christ, it also spawned a host of reform movements against social "sins"—the sin of prostitution, the sin of drunkenness, the sin of holding slaves, the sin of denying an equal chance in the race of life to any group, and many other movements. Most of the reform movements we associate with the antebellum era in the United States—most prominently the abolitionist movement and the women's rights movement—grew out of the ferment of the Second Great Awakening. The same is true of the movement for education of the deaf. Educators like Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet considered the inability to hear to be a weight on the shoulders of the deaf—not an artificial weight, to be sure, but nevertheless a weight to be lifted or, perhaps more accurately, to be circumvented by teaching deaf people to communicate in sign language and eventually to read and write the English language. Of equal importance, Gallaudet and his fellow evangelical reformers wanted to educate deaf children in order to enable them to open their hearts and minds to the knowledge of the Bible and the teachings of Christ. Just as the Puritan settlers of New England had established a system of public education to

enable people to read the word of God, the early educators of the deaf founded schools for the same purpose.

A fourth current of social and political thought that provided an impulse for lifting artificial weights from shoulders was Jacksonian democracy. Emphasizing the political equality of all white males and attacking what they considered institutions of monopoly and privilege such as the Second Bank of the United States, Jacksonians injected a theme of egalitarianism into American politics. In some ways Jacksonianism ran counter to the evangelical reform movements, for many of the white males it empowered were opposed to freedom for slaves and equality for women. But we are talking general currents or impulses of thought, not necessarily of specific reforms, and the egalitarian impulses of Jacksonian democracy contributed to the Lincolnian desire to provide all with a fair chance in the race of life.

To the point of education for the deaf, one of the foremost Jacksonian Democrats was Amos Kendall, whose donation of land and money made possible the funding and growth of the institution that became Gallaudet University. In 1857 Kendall persuaded Congress to charter what was called the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and Blind and to appropriate funds for it to begin operations. (Blind students were later transferred to their own school in Maryland.) Under the leadership of Edward Miner Gallaudet, the son of Thomas Hopkins, the new school grew and prospered. Edward soon began lobbying Congress to grant his institution a college charter. He succeeded in 1864, when, even though the Civil War was raging, Congress took time to incorporate the Columbia Institution as a college and to authorize it to grant degrees. President Lincoln signed the bill without comment, but had he offered any observations, they likely would have included some words about lifting weights from shoulders and providing a fair chance in the race of life for students in this first institution for higher learning for deaf students in the world. Exactly thirty years after Lincoln signed the bill, the collegiate department of the Columbia Institution was renamed Gallaudet College, in honor of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet.*

Gallaudet College was not only a pioneer in higher education for deaf people. Its founding as the Columbia Institution in 1857 also established a precedent for direct federal aid to education. This precedent soon spread to other educational efforts. In 1862 Congress passed and President Lincoln signed the Morrill Land-Grant College Act, named for Congressman Justin Morrill of Vermont. This law granted thousands of acres of public land to the states to create what were called agricultural and mechanical colleges to provide opportunities for higher education and advanced technical training to the children of farmers and workers for whom such opportunities had not been previously possible. This, too, at least in part, helped lift some weights from shoulders.

The largest and most visible example of such efforts in the 1860s was the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau to aid the transition to freedom of the four million slaves liberated by the Civil War. Here indeed was a massive lifting of weights, the weight of

generations of slavery. Most of the support for the dozens of schools, some of them calling themselves colleges or universities, that were founded to educate freed slaves was provided by Northern missionary and philanthropic societies. But the Freedmen's Bureau, whose funding came from the federal government, furnished significant financial support. One of these schools, Howard University, received a large share of its funding from the government. It became the flagship institution of higher education for African Americans just as Gallaudet had become for deaf Americans. In tandem these two institutions grew and flourished, doing their best to provide two groups of Americans the fairest possible chance in the race of life.[6]

New directions in American development after the Civil War created a cultural climate that impinged both on the deaf community and on Gallaudet College. As a consequence of the nation's trauma and eventual triumph from 1861 to 1865, the war produced an intensified nationalism and an emphasis on creating institutions and sentiments of national loyalty. The first task was to assimilate the former Confederate states back into the Union. The war had been caused by the growing and increasingly bitter differences between the free and slave states over, the question of slavery and its expansion. The North and South were sharply because the name Gallaudet College – today university – is more familiar to most people, this name will be used from now on, even though it is an anachronism for the period before 1894. Different societies, generating what may be called an irrepressible conflict between two hostile civilizations of both North and South created a significant obstacle to assimilation of these two societies into one.

After a decade of Reconstruction in which the Northern-dominated federal government tried to remake Southern society in the Northern image, and the Southern whites resisted the portion of this effort that mandated equal civil and political rights for freed slaves, the two sides reached a sort of accommodation in the late 1870s. In this settlement the South yielded to Northern ideas of a unified nation, and the North yielded to Southern ideas of racial segregation and white supremacy. By the end of the nineteenth century, the nation was reunited on the basis of white supremacy and the acculturation of both races to the dominant values of capitalism and Christianity. African Americans as well as Southern whites subscribed to these values, even though African Americans were segregated as second-class citizens.[7]

In addition to absorbing ex-Confederates and former slaves into a unified nation after the Civil War, the United States confronted the task of assimilating the millions of immigrants who continued to arrive in growing numbers. That task grew more difficult as the immigrants' principal countries of origin shifted from northern and western Europe to southern and eastern Europe. By the 1890s many old-stock Americans feared that the multiplicity of languages, ethnic groups, religious faiths, and cultural habits would overwhelm American institutions and values. The response of old-stock Americans took two forms: efforts to restrict the number of immigrants, which finally succeeded in the 1920s, and efforts to assimilate them. The latter enterprise manifested itself in several ways: the banning of any language but English in the public schools of many cities and

states; the growth of the settlement house movement in cities; the development of outreach programs by churches and synagogues; and a barrage of writings and speeches emphasizing nationalism and Americanism in the national media (newspapers, magazines) and by politicians espousing the same ideals.[8]

What does all of this have to do with the history of Gallaudet and of the deaf community? The post–Civil War generation witnessed the rise of oralism in deaf education. This movement was in some ways a counterpart of the drive for the assimilation of other groups into the dominant American culture—in this case, a culture represented by spoken English. The deaf community, of course, was much smaller than Southerners (either black or white) or various immigrant groups. But a similar impulse caused many hearing Americans—most famously Alexander Graham Bell—to call for the assimilation of deaf people into the American mainstream by teaching them how to lipread and speak. Despite resistance by most deaf adults, who preferred to communicate by means of sign language, and despite the limited success of the oralist drive to teach the deaf to speak, the movement achieved a powerful momentum by the turn of the twentieth century—in tandem with the drive to assimilate and Americanize immigrants.[9]

Historians of immigration have labeled this model of Americanization "Anglo-conformity." Anglo-American culture was held up as the standard to which other ethnic groups were expected to conform. Borrowing from this terminology, we might label oralism as "hearing conformity." Just as some immigrants resisted the pressure for 100 percent American- ism or Anglo-conformity, many deaf educators and institutions resisted the pressures for hearing conformity. Immigrant spokespeople advanced a pluralist model of cultural mix, sometimes labeled—rather misleadingly—a melting-pot model. Likewise, some deaf educators and institutions—most notably Edward Miner Gallaudet and Gallaudet College— practiced what President Gallaudet called the combined method, a sort of melting-pot notion of oralism, or articulation, for those who could achieve speech, combined with manualism, or sign language, to sustain the natural means of communication for deaf people among themselves.

The closest analogy between broader cultural developments and the specific experience of the deaf community in post–Civil War America, however, was not the immigrant experience but rather the national policy toward American Indians. Soon after Gallaudet was founded, the government formulated its Indian policy, the consequences of which would carry indirect implications for deaf education.

Prior to the 1870s the United States government officially designated Indian tribes as foreign nations. The government signed treaties with these "nations," and the army fought wars with them. The designation of Indian tribes as nations became increasingly a legal fiction, however, especially as the government herded more and more of these tribes onto reservations. By the 1870s, although warfare against Indians was still going on in Western territories, liberal reformers in the Eastern states prevailed on the

government to adopt what they called a “peace policy” toward the Indians. The dominant features of this policy were, first, to cease treating Indian tribes as foreign nations, and second, to begin a process of missionary education on reservations and in boarding schools to assimilate them into mainstream society as American citizens.

To implement this policy, President Ulysses S. Grant appointed members of the Quakers and other religious denominations as Indian agents and commissioners. Religious denominations established schools on the reservations to convert Indians to Christianity and to educate them in the English language. The underlying philosophy of these efforts was that American Indians would never survive and prosper unless they adopted the language, religion, and culture of white Americans. These reformers wanted to break down the Indians’ tribal allegiances and prepare them to become American citizens; they wanted to break down the nomadic hunting culture of the Plains Indians and turn them into farmers and workers.

This Indian policy was the counterpart of the efforts to absorb the South and the freed slaves into the American mainstream in the post–Civil War decades, and the similar effort to Americanize immigrants. It was also the counterpart of the oralist movement in deaf education to bring deaf people into the mainstream speaking culture.

It was more than a coincidence that the leading political ally of the reform advocates of this assimilationist Indian policy was Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts. For more than thirty years, Dawes was also a member of the board of Gallaudet College and one of the college’s chief supporters in Congress. Dawes was also the author of legislation enacted in 1887 that was called at the time the Indian Emancipation Act—a label that became ironic as the passage of time revealed its serious defects. This law provided for the dissolution of Indian tribes as legal entities and granted Indian heads of families the opportunity to acquire individual ownership of 160 acres of reservation lands as the first step toward becoming American citizens. For some Indians this policy worked as intended, and they became successful citizens. For many others, however, it was a failure. They lost their land to unscrupulous men and sank deeper into a kind of listless limbo between their once-vital native culture and the mainstream culture to which they either could not or would not assimilate. Finally, in 1934 the government admitted the failure of the Dawes Act and, while ensuring that all Indians remained United States citizens, reinvested the tribes with ownership of remaining reservation land and with considerable legislative authority over tribe members who remained on the reservations. Four decades later, in 1975, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination Act, which confirmed and amplified the self-government of Indian tribes.[10]

It does not seem too far-fetched to recognize certain parallels between the Indian policy of white reformers and the deaf education policies of hearing people during the same period (the 1870s to the middle decades of the twentieth century). Some deaf people learned to lipread and speak successfully, just as some Indians assimilated to the

dominant culture. But many other deaf people could not or would not assimilate to the mainstream hearing society and continued to sustain a separate linguistic community with sign language as the means of communication, just as many Indians retained their tribal allegiance and culture. And just as the government finally recognized Indian tribal authority and institutions in the 1930s and after, in recent decades the combined method of deaf education and the increased recognition of the validity of sign language and other non-oralist means of communication among deaf people has affirmed the cultural validity of the deaf community's indigenous forms of communication.

One other parallel in the endeavors for minority education is relevant here. This parallel concerns schools for African Americans and schools for deaf children. Most of the schools and colleges established for the freed slaves were founded by Northern whites associated with the abolitionist movement and Protestant missionary associations. At first, most of the teachers and all of the administrators in these schools were white. The black beneficiaries accepted white teachers and leadership in the early years of freedpeople's education because qualified black teachers and administrators were not yet available. But as time went on and the schools turned out a new generation of educated black people, the African American community began to demand more black teachers and more authority in these schools.

White administrators started to hire black teachers in the 1870s and 1880s, but the superintendents or presidents of most of these institutions remained white until the twentieth century. The presidents of flagship black universities were still white well into the century. This became an increasingly sore point among students, black faculty, and the African American communities served by these schools. Student demonstrations disrupted Howard University and other institutions. Howard and Atlanta University finally got their first black presidents in 1926 and 1929, respectively; Fisk University did not have a black president until 1946.[11]

One scarcely needs to point out the parallels to schools for the deaf and especially to Gallaudet University. However, developments in deaf education were influenced by broader social and cultural currents in American society. The United States has always been a pluralist nation, but the American majority has not always manifested a pluralist toleration for the integrity and value of minority cultures. There has always been a tension between the majority's desire for the minorities' assimilation to the mainstream culture and the resistance of various minorities to this pressure. At its best, this has been a creative tension in which each side has recognized and learned from the other. The history of deaf education has had its share of tensions and misunderstandings, but the creative tension between conformity and pluralism has helped to make the American deaf community the best educated in the world and to make Gallaudet University an institution without parallel.

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