

Deaf Culture

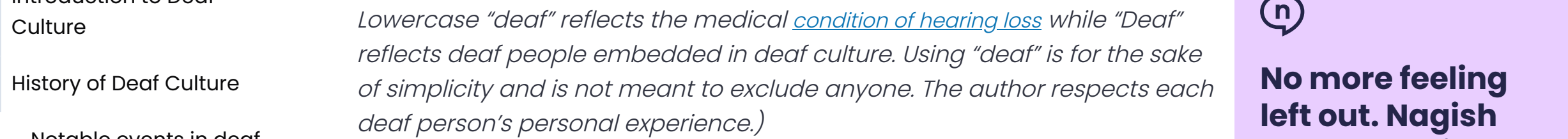
• June 14, 2023 • 6 Min

American Deaf Culture: Exploring a Vibrant Community

Curious about deaf culture? This guide provides insight into deaf people's unique way of life. Explore the deaf community and learn about deaf culture!



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(Note: We use “deaf” to signify all deaf people including the Deaf. Lowercase “deaf” reflects the medical [condition of hearing loss](#) while “Deaf” reflects deaf people embedded in deaf culture. Using “deaf” is for the sake of simplicity and is not meant to exclude anyone. The author respects each deaf person's personal experience.)

Deaf culture is unique as it's not bound to any country or nation, and relies [on visual communication and expression](#). It's a culture with its own language and values, with a strong sense of community and identity. The primary language of the U.S. deaf community is American [Sign Language](#) (ASL).

In this article, we explore the rich and fascinating history of deaf culture. By gaining a deeper understanding of this vibrant culture, we can foster greater respect and inclusivity of deaf people in mainstream society.

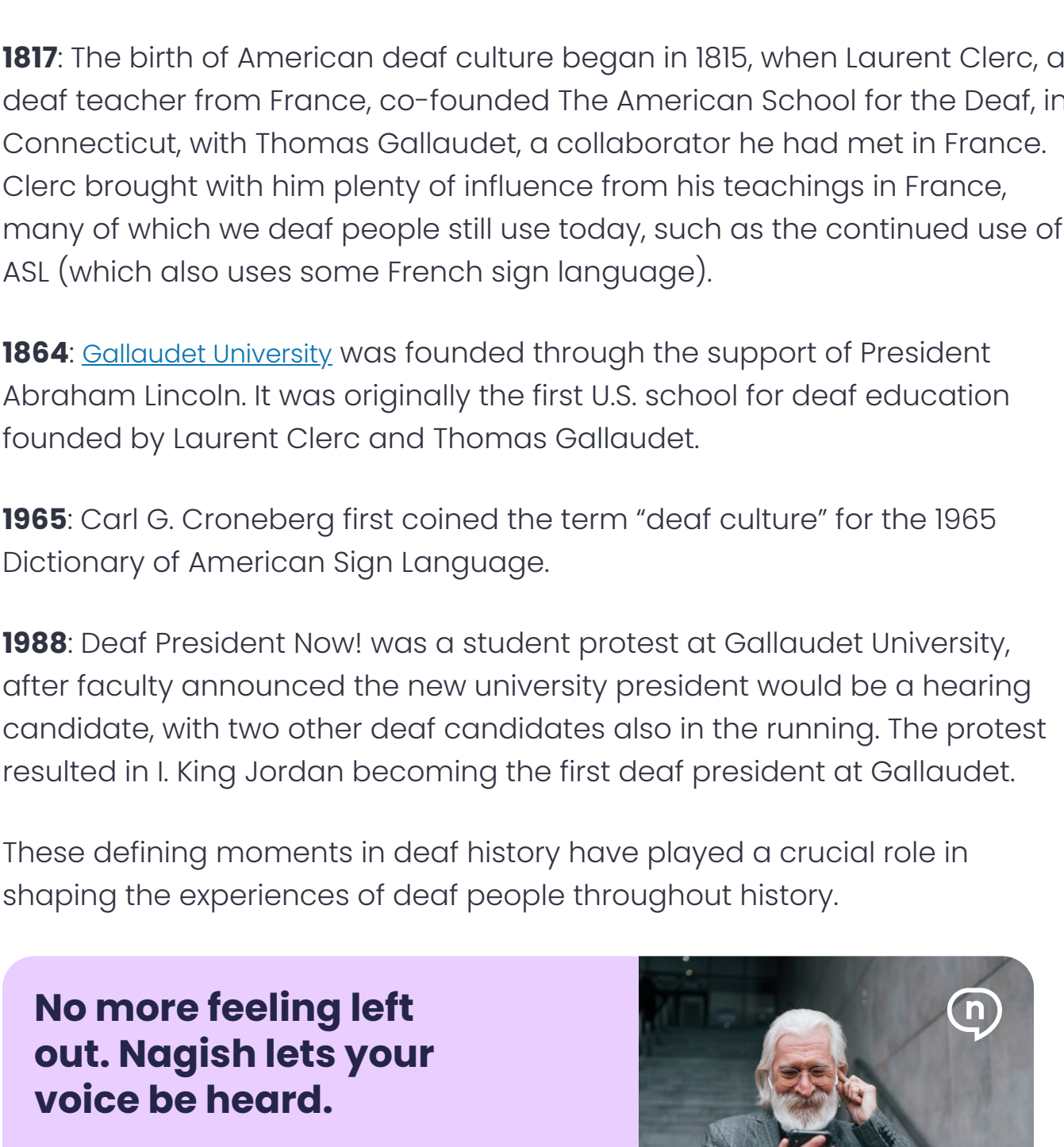
Introduction to Deaf Culture

Merriam-Webster defines “culture” as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” Viewed through the lens of deaf culture, this means the primary use of sign language as a communication method and the sharing of common experiences, as well as a strong pride in being deaf. The deaf community is a linguistic minority in the U.S., which means a group of people that share a common language that's not used by most people in a specific area or country (e.g., ASL as a minority language while English is a language spoken by the majority).

History of Deaf Culture

Deaf culture has its roots in the early deaf communities when many deaf people lived in specific geographic areas throughout the U.S. Often, there were schools for the deaf in these areas which encouraged the use of sign language and development of strong social relationships.

The earliest indication of the use of sign language was in Ancient Egypt, in a written text. Yet Greek philosopher Aristotle believed deaf people couldn't learn without hearing, while an Italian physician in the 16th century believed the opposite. This clearly shows conflicting views on deafness during these early periods.



Young girl on a playground swing. She is wearing a hearing aid.

Notable events in deaf culture history

17th to mid-20th century: One of the first early deaf communities was Martha's Vineyard in the late 17th century. For 200 years, the inhabitants, who were both deaf and hearing emigrants from England, used sign language to communicate and it was considered the norm. There were no barriers and many deaf people were independent; in fact, being deaf was so common that one in 155 people was born deaf. This was believed to be due to a genetic mutation originating in England; the community dwindled when Vineyard residents started moving to the continental U.S.

1817: The birth of American deaf culture began in 1815, when Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher from France, co-founded The American School for the Deaf, in Connecticut, with Thomas Gallaudet, a collaborator he had met in France. Clerc brought with him plenty of influence from his teachings in France, many of which we deaf people still use today, such as the continued use of ASL (which also uses some French sign language).

1864: [Gallaudet University](#) was founded through the support of President Abraham Lincoln. It was originally the first U.S. school for deaf education founded by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet.

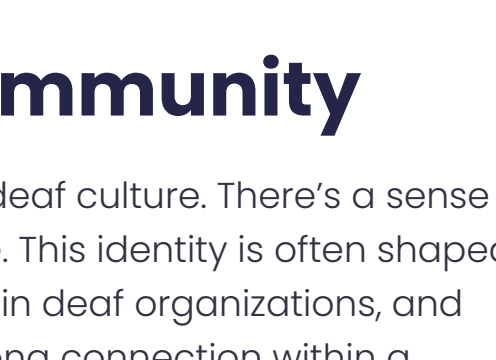
1965: Carl G. Croneberg first coined the term “deaf culture” for the 1965 Dictionary of American Sign Language.

1988: Deaf President Now! was a student protest at Gallaudet University, after faculty announced the new university president would be a hearing candidate, with two other deaf candidates also in the running. The protest resulted in I. King Jordan becoming the first deaf president at Gallaudet.

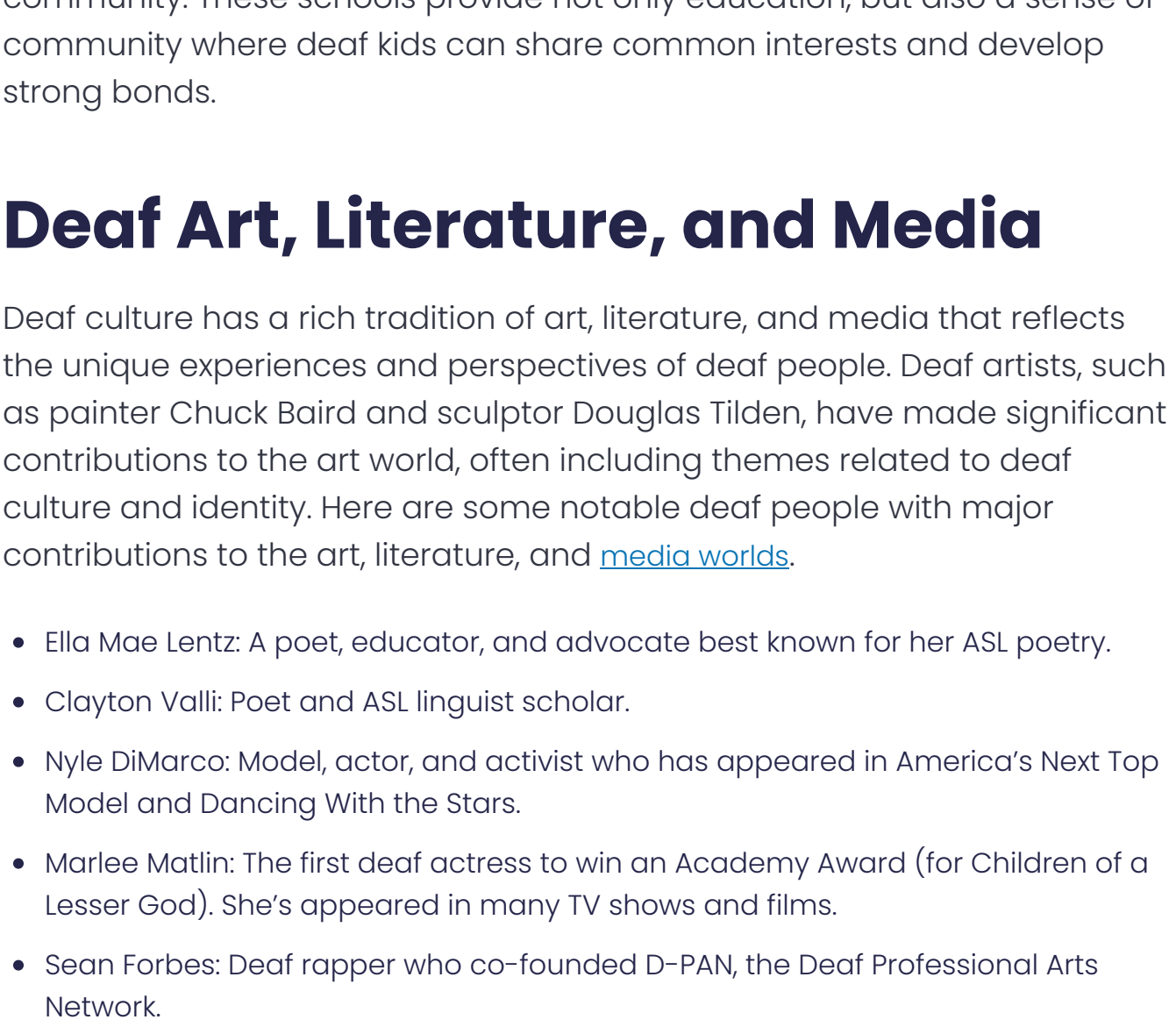
These defining moments in deaf history have played a crucial role in shaping the experiences of deaf people throughout history.

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Language and Communication



Black and white photo of woman signing the word “name.”

ASL is the primary language used in the U.S. deaf community. It's distinct from spoken languages and has its own grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. It's important to remember that sign languages (regardless of country) are not a signed version of any spoken language; they are unique.

For example, the sentence “I'm going to the store” is different in ASL, which would be signed as “Store I go.”

ASL is a rich and expressive language. Using ASL requires not just using manual signs but using expression of the whole body through facial expressions and gestures. This is essential for effective communication.

Clear communication and accessibility are highly valued in deaf culture. This includes the use of sign language interpreters, captioning services, and other accommodations to ensure that deaf people can fully participate in mainstream society.

Rules of behavior commonly followed in the deaf community

What's considered polite in the deaf community may not be so in hearing society. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- **Use [eye contact](#)** This shows the deaf person you're engaged in the conversation.
- **Be [direct](#)** Deaf people are known for being direct so they appreciate the same from hearing people. Don't mistake this for rudeness; this means not wasting the other person's time with wishy-washy language.
- **Use [your body](#)** to express yourself. A deaf person understands the context through reading your facial expressions and body language. If you're stone-faced, that's unhelpful and confusing.
- **Get [personal](#)**, if you dare. You don't need to air your dirty laundry but sharing some personal tidbits helps the deaf person to get comfortable with you. We tend to be upfront about our own personal lives!
- **Pointing** during conversation is normal for deaf people, and is part of using ASL.

Deaf Identity and Community

Deaf identity and community are central to deaf culture. There's a sense of pride in one's deafness, and a shared culture. This identity is often shaped by experiences at deaf schools, involvement in deaf organizations, and participation in social events. Having this strong connection within a relatively small group that shares ASL as the common language serves as a balm while navigating a hearing world.

Deaf schools also play an important role in fostering deaf identity and community. These schools provide not only education, but also a sense of community where deaf kids can share common interests and develop strong bonds.

Deaf Art, Literature, and Media

Deaf culture has a rich tradition of art, literature, and media that reflects the unique experiences and perspectives of deaf people. Deaf artists, such as painter Chuck Baird and sculptor Douglas Tilden, have made significant contributions to the art world, often including themes related to deaf culture and identity. Here are some notable deaf people with major contributions to the art, literature, and [media worlds](#).

- Ella Mae Lentz: A poet, educator, and advocate best known for her ASL poetry.
- Clayton Valli: Poet and ASL linguist scholar.
- Nyle DiMarco: Model, actor, and activist who has appeared in America's Next Top Model and Dancing With the Stars.
- Marlee Matlin: The first deaf actress to win an Academy Award (for Children of a Lesser God). She's appeared in many TV shows and films.
- Sean Forbes: Deaf rapper who co-founded D-PAN, the Deaf Professional Arts Network.
- Phyllis Frelich: First deaf actor to win a Tony Award.
- Sara Novic: Author, activist, and creative writing professor.
- Christine Sun Kim: Sound and performance artist.

Deaf Education and Employment

The history of deaf education has been marked by controversy. In the late 19th century, oralism, which teaches deaf people to speak and lip read, was seen to suppress ASL and focus more on fitting into hearing society. Today, bilingual education, which emphasizes both sign language and written/spoken language, is widely recognized as a more inclusive approach to deaf education.

Deaf people come from all walks of life and much of their experience of deaf culture depends on their upbringing. Since most deaf people are born to hearing parents, many are mainstreamed. Being mainstreamed as a deaf person means learning alongside your hearing peers, sometimes with a sign language interpreter.

Mainstream education

Mainstreaming of deaf children is intended to provide equitable education and development of social skills. Full inclusion means spending all day in a hearing classroom, with assistance provided (ASL interpreter). Partial inclusion means spending part of the day in the hearing classroom, and the rest of the day outside the classroom, with additional support.

However, a mainstream education often leads to isolation. For mainstream education to be successful, [deaf students may need additional support](#) and accommodations such as ASL interpreters, notetakers, and assistive technology (closed captioning).

Deaf employment

Although the Americans With Disabilities Act ([ADA](#)) was passed in 1990, deaf people still face challenges in the workforce. While many are highly skilled and capable, they often encounter [barriers to employment](#), such as lack of accommodations, poor communication, and general misconceptions about deafness. In 2017, more than 53% of deaf people ages 25-64 were employed, while nearly 79% of hearing people were employed.

Advocacy organizations, such as the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and CSD Works, help to address these challenges and promote equal employment opportunities for deaf people.

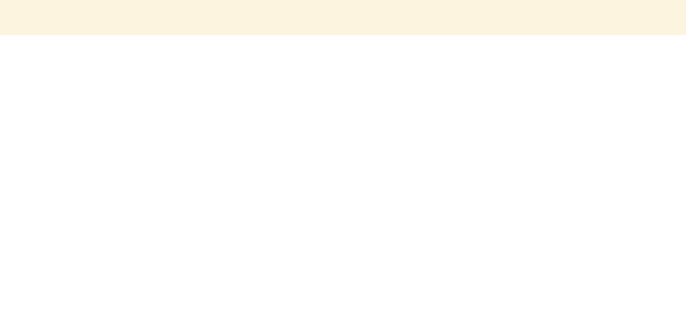
Conclusion

Deaf culture is a unique culture with its own visual language that relies on using the face and body for communication. Learning about its history and language can help you gain a deeper understanding of this underrepresented group. This understanding can encourage more inclusivity and respect.

Juana Poareo
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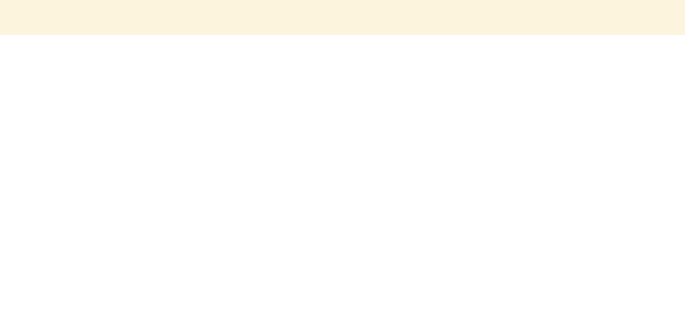
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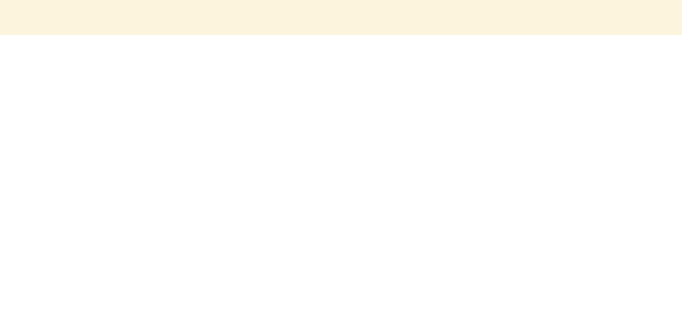
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