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Sophia Fowler Gallaudet, Eliza Boardman Clerc, and Deaf Domesticity:  
A Case Study of Intersections of Gender and Disability in the Nineteenth Century United  
States

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## Introduction

On December 10, 1913, which would have been Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet's 126<sup>th</sup> birthday, a sketch of Sophia Fowler Gallaudet, Gallaudet's wife, was read at the pulpit of the newly built All Souls' Church in Philadelphia, the first church built for the d/Deaf<sup>1</sup> in the area. The sketch was comprised of biographical information; essentially it was meant to relay Fowler's life story.<sup>2</sup> It was read aloud to commemorate the new church, celebrate Gallaudet's birthday, and briefly mention the fundraising efforts for a small plaque that would be installed in the church at a later date to honor Fowler. The sketch was later published in *The Silent Worker*, a Deaf periodical.<sup>3</sup> Fowler is described there as charming and motherly, with the article mainly focusing on her relationships with her husband, and two of their children, both male, who became leading figures in the Deaf community.<sup>4</sup> The article describes Fowler as an example of ideal femininity and asserts that "she shone brightest as a mother [...]" However, it fails to mention any of Fowler's other accomplishments, mainly her successful service as matron of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Deaf" refers to people who identify with the Deaf community/culture, while "deaf" refers to people who have hearing loss/impairment. "d/Deaf" refers to all people with hearing loss, whether they identify as Deaf or not. "deaf" refers to a clinical diagnosis of hearing loss while "Deaf" refers to an identity. Being "Deaf" means using American Sign Language, embracing Deaf culture, and being a part of the Deaf community. A more in-depth definition can be found in: Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon, UK; Multilingual Matters, 2003): xvii. I have used both versions of this term throughout my writing. I have chosen to refer to people before the advent of American Sign Language as "deaf" because Deaf culture did not begin until there was a common language to found it on. I use the term "d/Deaf" to refer to historical figures that have not explicitly stated how they relate to their deafness.

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to refer to Sophia Fowler Gallaudet and Eliza Boardman Clerc by their maiden names for two reasons: first, because I reference their husbands throughout this project, it seemed more clear to me to have a continual distinction; second, my main goal for this paper is to highlight Fowler and Boardman as individual historical subjects and I wanted them to stand alone without the influence of their husbands (or their names) overshadowing them.

<sup>3</sup> The author and reader of the sketch was referred to as Mrs. George T. Sanders in the article. In the sketch, Mrs. Sanders claims that her parents were close friends of the Gallaudet's. There is no other information in the article to identify the author's real name or who she was.

<sup>4</sup> *The Silent Worker* Vol. 26 No. 5 February 1914 (1914).

Columbia Institution for the Deaf (now Gallaudet University) in Washington D.C. for nine years, during which time she headed departments and influenced curriculum taught at the school. Fowler also frequently met with members of Congress and other politicians to garner both political and financial support for the Columbia Institution.<sup>5</sup> This description of Fowler’s motherhood and womanhood is echoed in most contemporary works that mention her. Additionally, no work, or even a portion of a work, has been solely dedicated to Fowler. In many cases, scholars simply present Sophia Fowler as the wife of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet<sup>6</sup> and rarely ever actually discuss her role within the community or its history.<sup>7</sup> A similar pattern can be seen in the historical memory of Eliza Boardman Clerc. Aside from a portrait she and her daughter sat for, there is very little mention of her other than the wife of Laurent Clerc.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the paucity of scholarly work that includes significant historical information on Sophia Fowler and Eliza Boardman, they are founding members of the Deaf community and key historical figures within its history. Their demonstration of the

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<sup>5</sup> “Sophia Fowler Gallaudet - Gallaudet University,” January 16, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was a hearing Presbyterian clergyman and Yale graduate that is best remembered as the creator of American Sign Language and deaf education in the United States. He is a popular historical subject and is considered a benevolent paternal figure in the Deaf community. For a more in-depth biography, see Edna Edith Sayers, *The Life and Times of T. H. Gallaudet* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989); John V. Van Cleve, ed, *The Deaf History Reader* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007); Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language* (University of Chicago Press, 1996); John V. Van Cleve. “A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States (Review).” *Sign Language Studies* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 226–33. There is a spectacularly brief mention of Fowler’s “heroinism” in Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Susan Burch, eds, *Women and Deafness: Double Visions* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Laurent Clerc was a d/Deaf Frenchman that assisted Gallaudet in creating American Sign Language and deaf education in the United States. For a more in-depth biography, see Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York: Random House, 1984).

behaviors associated with the ideals of American femininity helped to legitimize the Deaf community as a valid part of mainstream society in the United States. Additionally, excavating Fowler's and Boardman's existence as d/Deaf women fulfilling the roles of wives and mothers represents a shift in perspectives on both deafness and gender roles during the nineteenth century in the United States. By interrogating existing and readily available archival evidence, including newspaper articles, personal letters, and biographical information, piecing together information from contemporary Deaf history works, and using analysis of larger historical social and cultural trends to fill in the blanks, a clearer version of Deaf history comes to fruition; one that acknowledges the lives of American d/Deaf women during the nineteenth century and the contributions of Fowler and Boardman.

As white, wealthy, heteronormative, d/Deaf women, Fowler and Boardman challenge the ideals of American femininity. Their race, class, sexuality, and gender enabled them to navigate obstacles imposed by societal notions of disability. Their demonstrations of the behaviors associated with the ideals of American femininity also provided examples of the d/Deaf community's validity. Despite their adoption and modification of their own individual Deaf Domesticities and deafness, Fowler and Boardman have been remembered as marginal subjects in Deaf history.

### **Historiography**

Eliza Boardman and Sophia Fowler have very little historical scholarship written about them. In most cases, they are briefly referred to in terms of their relationships with prominent male figures of the Deaf community. Very rarely are their own individual lives

or contributions to the community and its history discussed within secondary scholarship. Omitting d/Deaf women's contributions is a common occurrence when studying Deaf histories.<sup>9</sup> Susan Plann claims in *The Spanish National Deaf School: Portraits From the Nineteenth Century* that "As Deaf people took their rightful place in Deaf history, the spotlight shone first on the Deaf elite, and important Deaf people (generally men) moved to center stage."<sup>10</sup> Though Fowler and Boardman both became part of this "Deaf elite" through marriage, their husbands quickly became the main focus for historians of Deaf history. The beginnings of Deaf history scholarship were incredibly androcentric and left little to no space for female historical subjects. In their book *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*, John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch discuss in, what seems to be, immense detail the development of residential schools for the deaf and how these schools became catalysts for what is now the Deaf community. While the two authors provide fascinating information about the struggle of the deaf to create a life for themselves in mainstream (hearing<sup>11</sup>) United States, they fail to mention anything regarding gender.<sup>12</sup> The authors provide a very narrow perspective of United States Deaf history. By choosing to not include any discourse involving gender, the authors are not only marginalizing d/Deaf women but are also ignoring the influence that

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<sup>9</sup> In a previous project, I have researched and written about Alice Cogswell in which I concluded that she was infantilized within her own history. The creation myth of American Sign Language, in which Cogswell is represented as a marginal, agentless character, is dependent on her subordination and serves to produce her continued marginalization.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Plann, *The Spanish National Deaf School: Portraits from the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2007): x.

<sup>11</sup> A person who is not d/Deaf is referred to as hearing. Society outside of the Deaf community is referred to as the mainstream/hearing world. This includes people who do not identify as d/Deaf or hard of hearing.

<sup>12</sup> John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989).



gender and gender roles had on the schools, their founders and curriculum, and, therefore, Deaf history.

In *Words Made Flesh*, R.A.R. Edwards writes about this same history by using the analytical lens of disability studies: "Disability studies, as a discipline, has fruitfully explicated the cultural roots of ableism: it is time to turn to Deaf history with this work in mind."<sup>13</sup> In *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, Paddy Ladd describes how the Deaf community began to identify itself not as a disabled group of people but as a cultural-linguistic minority in the 1970s. This distinction was made to validate the culture that Deaf people created within their community based on their shared language.<sup>14</sup> While this distinction was necessary to validate American Sign Language and the Deaf community, it has served to perpetuate negative stigmas of disability and kept the progress of multiple communities under the label of "disability" exclusive from one another. Approaching Deaf history with the lenses of disability studies allows for a deeper understanding of the influence of larger historical trends on the lived experiences of d/Deaf people. While Edwards applies a disability framework to a history that had previously not been associated with disability studies, she only includes less than five pages to discuss d/Deaf women where she argues that d/Deaf women like Fowler are trailblazers and should be recognized as such.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> R.A.R. Edwards, *Words Made Flesh Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture*, (New York: University Press, 2012): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ladd, xvii, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, 125.

Taking the study of disabled women further, Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchison theorize how to combine disability studies and gender studies and how this can benefit the study of both groups in their book *Gendering Disability*. They discuss how the cultural meanings of “disability” and “woman” run parallel with one another, referencing Aristotle’s theory of the one-sex model which states that women are the mutilated or underdeveloped versions of men: “the cultural function of the ‘disabled’ figure is to act as a synecdoche for all forms that culture deems nonnormative,” nonnormative meaning any person who is not a white, abled, heteronormative male.<sup>16</sup> The authors also merge intersectionality into their dialogue by comparing the discourses of gender, disability, race, and class, claiming that all people who are not white, abled, privileged males are perceived as dependent, helpless, incompetent, and in need of saving. The authors point out that because of our cultural expectations, when disabled women lead “normal” lives (i.e.: being mothers, succeeding economically) they are awe-inspiring, unique, and abnormal. This book emphasizes that disability and femininity do not mean weak and dependent. Our society and culture have forced this stigma onto disability and femininity. The feminist disability theory that Smith and Hutchison have developed within their book is an important tool for scholars when researching disabled women and their connections to society. In *Women and Deafness: Double Visions*, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Susan Burch use the intersections of disability and gender to solely focus on histories of d/Deaf women. The two editors of this collection write in the introduction that this book is the

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<sup>16</sup> Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchison, eds., *Gendering Disability* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 76.

first of its kind in Deaf history and gender studies because it is fully and completely dedicated to examining women, gender, and disability in relation to deafness: “gender studies has typically skirted deafness even as Deaf studies has largely skirted gender.”<sup>17</sup> Susan Plann asserts in her 2007 book that "Issues such as gender, race, and social class are now central to the interpretation of Deaf history"<sup>18</sup> However, I believe there is still ample opportunity and a distinct need to create scholarship that fruitfully and authentically engages with intersectionality.

### **Methodology**

As discussed previously, United States Deaf history is overwhelmingly androcentric. Most Deaf histories of the nineteenth century focus on Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, the creators of American Sign Language, and their journey in building the Deaf community. While their contributions are integral to Deaf history and were appreciated by their students and are still appreciated by signers<sup>19</sup> today, the “heroic” story of these two men overshadow any other story of the time that should also be recognized. In *Deaf Persons in the Arts and Sciences: A Biographical Dictionary*, Harry G. Lang and Bonnie Meath-Lang express a similar concern: "Histories have for too long emphasized [...] the accomplishments of hearing people in the education of deaf students, with inadequate attention paid to those deaf individuals who created communication bridges and distinguished themselves as change agents in their respective

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<sup>17</sup> Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Susan Burch, eds., *Women and Deafness: Double Visions*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2006): vii.

<sup>18</sup> Plann, x.

<sup>19</sup> People who use sign language.

fields of endeavor."<sup>20</sup> Deaf history is mainly focused on hearing men and tends to neglect the histories and contributions of d/Deaf women. Lang and Meath-Lang push against this lack of inclusive scholarship through biography, a methodology that I have chosen to incorporate into my own writing. While biography may seem to be a limited, if not basic, method of history-telling, in this instance it is necessary. Because of the paucity of intersectional work in the field of Deaf history, historians must essentially “start from the ground up” to fill in the immense number of gaps, using biography as a historiographical building block.<sup>21</sup> In addition to this argument, Lang and Meath-Lang further explain that "the study of biographies, even viewed through the filters and limits of our own experiences, allows the reader access to other people's ways of knowing and appreciating the universe."<sup>22</sup> Kim E. Nielson, a disability historian who has written numerous biographies on disabled subjects, takes this assertion a step further by claiming that "Biographies of people with disabilities are uniquely suited to teach the intertwined nature of historical forces because of the complex lives of people with disabilities."<sup>23</sup> From her perspective, disability history and biography have the potential for a symbiotic and mutually beneficial connection: the lives of disabled people are uniquely found at the intersections of identities, hierarchies, and social structures in ways unexplored by most biographies. As Kathryn Kish Sklar describes her biography of Catharine Beecher, this project is “an effort to use the biographical density and motivational impulses of one

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<sup>20</sup> Harry G. Lang and Bonnie Meath-Lang, *Deaf Persons in the Arts and Sciences: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1995): 14

<sup>21</sup> Kim E. Nielsen, “The Perils and Promises of Disability Biography,” *Oxford Handbooks* (Oxford University Press, 2018): 2.

<sup>22</sup> Lang, 15.

<sup>23</sup> “Using Biography,” 42.

person to uncover and isolate significant questions about the relationship between women and American society.”<sup>24</sup> In addition to providing deeper understanding of large historical trends and events, biographies of disabled people also help scholars understand ever-malleable boundaries of disability and ability. As Nielson argues, “By revealing the rich and varied past of people with disabilities, biographers also recast the future and its possibilities.”<sup>25</sup> While this project is not a comprehensive biography, the methodology is still useful in retrieving information and showcasing historical subjects as case studies for larger historical trends.

In addition to biography, disability theory is an integral piece to the foundation of this work. Society has always been hyper focused on what Tobin Siebers has identified as the “ideology of ability,” or the preference for able-bodiedness.<sup>26</sup> Lennard Davis asserts that “our construction of the normal world is based on a radical repression of disability” and that “There is no race, class, and gender without hierarchical and operative theories of what is normal and what is abnormal.”<sup>27</sup> While the methodological approach of intersectionality does not outwardly include disability, disability is inherently a part of any intersectional analysis because the ableist view of society already permeates the identities addressed by intersectionality by rejecting and othering those people that are divergent from the “norm” (white, abled, heteronormative, and male). Disability is a socially constructed idea. However, the embodiment of disability (pain, health, aging)

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<sup>24</sup> Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973): xv.

<sup>25</sup> “The Perils and Promises,” 17.

<sup>26</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 2016): 8.

<sup>27</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London; New York: Verso, 1995): 22, 162.

necessitates a slightly different approach than would be used for race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. Siebers' "theory of complex embodiment" takes both the social construction of disability and the embodiment of disability as realities of a disabled identity and describes them as mutually transformative.<sup>28</sup> Simply put, disability is a form of human variation. The idea of complex embodiment significantly informs this project in that all the historical subjects are recognized for both the social construction of their identity and their embodied physical variation and how both influenced their lived experiences.

Gender studies also informs this work, particularly the concepts of ideal femininity and domesticity, or "the Cult of True Womanhood." "The Cult of True Womanhood" is, as Nancy Hewitt describes it, a "model of research and analysis" introduced to the field of women's studies by Barbara Welter in 1966 and has since become a foundational concept for gender historians.<sup>29</sup> In her article, Welter describes how circulated literature, mainly marriage manuals, encapsulated societal expectations of women and their behavior and how women most often reimagined these expectations to fit their needs as a form of resistance to the patriarchy.<sup>30</sup> Because of the age, wide usage of the concept, and its lack of intersectional discourse, specifically any interrogation of power dynamics based in racial differences, "the Cult of True Womanhood" can be and

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<sup>28</sup> Siebers, 25-27.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy A. Hewitt, "Taking the True Women Hostage," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 159.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 – 1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, part 1 (Summer 1966): 151 – 174.

has been perceived as no longer valuable.<sup>31</sup> There is also concern for its relevance because of Welter's strict adherence to the gender binary and literal interpretation of roles that were and are ever-changing.<sup>32</sup> In 2002, the *Journal of Women's History* invited various scholars of women's history, including Nancy Hewitt, Tracy Fessenden, Leila Rupp, and Mary Louise Roberts, to revisit "the Cult of True Womanhood." Rupp, for one, believes the criticism of Welter to be "unfair" and characterizes her work as "foundational."<sup>33</sup> Fessenden describes "the Cult of True Womanhood" as a "classic" and recognizes that it needs revisions, mainly the need to "restore specificity to the true woman," as her own work does.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, others before this such as Linda Kerber and Nancy Cott have recommended approaching "the Cult of True Womanhood" with caution: "One day we will understand the idea of separate spheres as primarily a trope, employed by people in the past to characterize power relations for which they had no other words and that they could not acknowledge."<sup>35</sup> In *The Bonds of True Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835*, Cott recognizes domesticity and the study of it as "an effort to make sense of women's lives in an era of social transformation in which we can recognize the outlines of our own time."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, "True Womanhood Revisited," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 150–55.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, 150.

<sup>33</sup> Leila J. Rupp, "Women's History in the New Millennium: A Retrospective Analysis of Barbara Welter's 'The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860,'" *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 149.

<sup>34</sup> Tracy Fessenden, "Gendering Religion," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 162.

<sup>35</sup> Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* (Bloomington, Ind.) 75, no. 1 (1988): 55.

<sup>36</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 18.

There are two important caveats to consider when using “the Cult of True Womanhood” as a model for analysis: it is based on societal ideals, not realities and it is dependent on the subjugation and othering of nonwhite, nonelite, nonheteronormative, nonabled groups of women. Fessenden argues that the female power gained through participating in “the Cult of True Womanhood” includes power over others and that “True Womanhood” figures “populations outside of the white middle class no longer as agents but solely as beneficiaries of evangelical reforms.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in *Fictions of Western American Domesticity: Indian, Mexican, and Anglo Women in Print Culture, 1850–1950*, Amanda Zink argues that white women’s domesticity in the American West was contingent on the “othering” of indigenous, black, and Mexican women: “the gendered categories some white women clung to were always already empty signifiers defined on other women’s bodies.”<sup>38</sup> While very much informed by “the Cult of True Womanhood” and those scholars that have studied it, Zink uses the term “domesticity” to represent the same ideals of American femininity. Zink also shows how domesticity, an ideal solely created for wealthy, white, heteronormative, able-bodied women, was adopted and modified by indigenous, black, and Mexican women in the American West to navigate colonial pressures and assert their own sovereignty.<sup>39</sup>

While the subjects of my research are wealthy, white, heteronormative women, a demographic that has largely been the focus of many previous discussions of “the Cult of

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<sup>37</sup> Fessenden, 164, 168.

<sup>38</sup> Amanda J. Zink, *Fictions of Western American Domesticity Indian, Mexican, and Anglo Women in Print Culture, 1850–1950*, First edition (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018): 4, 14.

<sup>39</sup> Zink, 14-17.



True Womanhood” and domesticity, their disability places them into a subjugated group that has not been the focus of research and analysis in many fields and changes their experiences of ideal American femininity. Between shifting societal norms and expectations and their own race, class, and sexuality, d/Deaf women like Fowler and Boardman, out of the necessity to legitimize the Deaf community as a valid part of American society, were able to adopt and modify the ideals of American femininity to gain the power and privileges that were previously inaccessible to them. I will refer to the ideals of American femininity as “domesticity” and the particular American femininity adopted and modified by d/Deaf women as “Deaf Domesticity.”

Because of the lack of documentation of d/Deaf women during the nineteenth century in the United States, it is difficult to fully encapsulate their lived experiences. To combat this difficulty, I use methods associated with micro-history.<sup>40</sup> I take pieces of primary documentation that are directly related to Fowler and Boardman, and those that interacted with them, and combine them with mainstream trends and societal expectations found in secondary scholarship. By combining these two elements, I am able to piece together examples of Fowler and Boardman’s lives into case studies of Deaf Domesticity.

Beginning to expand historical scholarship on d/Deaf women is one of the goals of this project. However, I must clarify that I am in no way attempting to present myself

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<sup>40</sup> Micro-histories are common practice when writing histories of marginalized communities when archives are either sparse or, in some cases, non-existent. For examples or similar strategies, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), and Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

as a savior for the d/Deaf or disabled. As Brenda Jo Brueggemann asserts, most histories of the d/Deaf are presented “[...] via the lips, and pens, of (typically hearing) others.”<sup>41</sup> I am a hearing person who is fluent in American Sign Language and has connections with the Deaf community through my work and service as an interpreter and as a friend. I have not and will not claim to understand the experiences of the people I study. As a nondisabled person, I recognize my own privilege and pay great attention to the power dynamics evident in the relationships between myself and my historical subjects.<sup>42</sup> In a sense, I find my work to help assuage the historical discrepancies that have led to the continued subjugation of disabled people. As Günther List asserts on the topic of hearing historians of deaf history, “[...] minority historians should not have to provide the necessary revision of the history of the majority.”<sup>43</sup> d/Deaf American history is American history. Despite the best efforts of many historians, d/Deaf American history cannot be removed from American history and vice versa.

### **Intentions and Research Questions**

This project is focused on how Fowler and Boardman helped to bolster the success of the Deaf community by adopting and modifying the ideals of American femininity to create their own Deaf Domesticity to navigate perceptions and expectations of an ableist society. I begin with a discussion of the changing elements of Protestantism

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<sup>41</sup> Brenda Jo. Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places* (NYU Press, 2009): 84.

<sup>42</sup> See “The Perils and Promises,” 14 for Nielson’s perspective on writing disability history as a nondisabled historian.

<sup>43</sup> Günther List, “Deaf History: A Suppressed Part of General History,” *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship*, edited by John V. Van Cleve (Gallaudet University Press, 1993): 116.

and nineteenth century United States perspectives on disability and gender which allowed the space for disabled women like Fowler and Boardman to be considered valuable members of society and receive education. Then I will discuss the foundation of the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, where Fowler and Boardman were students, where they received a gendered education, and where they met their eventual husbands. Next will be a discussion of the expected behaviors of ideal American femininity, or domesticity. The gendered expectations of the nineteenth century United States would have defined how Fowler and Boardman lived their daily lives, with an emphasis on motherhood and domestic acumen. This section will also include a discussion of how a d/Deaf woman would have combined race, class, disability, and gender into one identity given the still lingering and widely held opinions on what disabled people were capable of. This will introduce a reimagining of the politics of respectability. Following, I will discuss the lasting influences that the historical memory of Fowler and Boardman have had on other disabled women, both historically and currently. Lastly, I will explore the ramifications associated with the lack of representation of disabled women and consider how scholars can combat them.

This project is fueled by the following questions: Why have American d/Deaf women of the nineteenth century been cast aside from their history? Why do most American Deaf historians still choose to ignore the contributions of these women, only highlighting them as marginal historical subjects? How were white, upper-class, d/Deaf women able to take advantage of their privileges to place themselves among mainstream

women of their time? Why did they even want to be a part of the society which marginalized them based on both disability and gender?

### **Fowler and Boardman: Biographical Details**

Sophia Fowler was born in Guilford, Connecticut on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1798 to middle-class farmers. Fowler was born deaf and, from the perspective of her parents, she would be shut from the world with no means of communication. Fowler lacked formal education and was described as having “developed into a splendid type of womanhood,” beautiful, and charming. Fowler yearned for the opportunity to learn. She enrolled as one of the first students at the Connecticut Asylum for the Education of Deaf and Dumb Persons at the age of nineteen in 1817. She is described as taking to education eagerly and quickly. In the Spring of 1821, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, the principal of the school at the time, proposed to Fowler. She initially was shocked by the proposal, thinking of Gallaudet as an educator or paternal figure, not a romantic interest. It is recorded that she begged to continue her education instead of getting married, with which her pursuer assured her that he would help her to learn more as her husband. She eventually accepted the proposal, and the couple was married on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1821. Sophia Fowler went on to birth eight children, two of which became important figures in Deaf history. In 1857, Fowler became the matron of the Columbia Institution for the Deaf at Washington D.C. where she worked for nine years, two of which she spent as a department head and had direct influence on the curriculum being taught. While working at the school, she met with members of Congress and rallied political and financial support for the school and the

future Gallaudet College. She retired in 1866. Sophia Fowler Gallaudet died on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1877 at the age of 79 of apoplexy. <sup>44</sup>

Eliza Boardman was born on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1792 in Bennington, Vermont. Very little information can be found about her childhood. Although there is no historical record of Boardman's upbringing, it can be assumed that she was born into a family of some substantial means because they had the ability to enroll her in a residential school. It would seem as though her historical life begins with her enrollment in the Connecticut Asylum in 1817 as its seventeenth student at the age of twenty-five. She married her teacher, Laurent Clerc, on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1819. Sources claim that the marriage between Clerc and Boardman was the first of its kind in the United States: d/Deaf marrying d/Deaf. She became a mother a year later with the birth of her first child, Elizabeth, and later gave birth to five more children. Boardman lived in Connecticut until her death in May of 1880. <sup>45</sup>

### **“Woeful Afflictions”: Nineteenth Century Perspectives on Gender and Disability**

Sophia Fowler and Eliza Boardman lived within the nineteenth century, but perceptions and societal expectations of eras before are relevant to how deaf people were perceived during their lifetimes. Before the Enlightenment, disability was equated with uncleanness and was perceived as punishment by God. Deafness, specifically, was

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<sup>44</sup> Amos G. Draper, “Sophia Gallaudet,” *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb*, edited by Edward A. Fay, 22, 3: 170–83 (Washington, D.C: Gibson Brothers, July 1877): 171; *The Silent Worker* Vol. 26 No. 5 February 1914 (1914); Gallaudet University, “Sophia Fowler Gallaudet.”

<sup>45</sup> Neil Pemberton, “Deafness and Holiness: Home Missions, Deaf Congregations, and Natural Language 1860-1890,” *Victorian Review* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 65-82; John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*, (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989); Diane Naranjo, "Laurent Clerc 1785 – 1869," Life Print (April 27, 2008).

attributed to maternal fright.<sup>46</sup> Mainstream society perceived disability as a lifelong affliction of misery and suffering. It was believed that disability was hereditary and therefore marriage between disabled people and marriage of disabled people was discouraged.<sup>47</sup> Protestants believed that because they “suffered” from deafness, deaf people were incapable of receiving the word of God, therefore needed more attention, more control, and more education to become “people” by Christian standards.<sup>48</sup> The Enlightenment brought the desire to teach people and explore their sensorial anomalies, beginning in Europe and eventually influencing thought in the United States. With the beginning of the nineteenth century, Christian and Enlightenment ideas of rehabilitation and education created a “[...] new context and cultural meaning for disability, that of suffering humans trapped within defective bodies and needing to be rescued by the earnest efforts of education.”<sup>49</sup> Religiously influenced ideas of benevolence during this time gave disabled people an opportunity to improve their perceived “desperate”

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<sup>46</sup> John V. Van Cleve, ed, *The Deaf History Reader* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007): 50. Maternal fright was a widely accepted “scientific” hypothesis that if a woman was frightened during pregnancy, it would in some way affect the fetus, most commonly with a disability.

<sup>47</sup> “Intermarriage and the Propagation of Deafness,” *Medical and Surgical Reporter (1858 – 1898)* 63, no. 13 (September 27, 1890): 375.

<sup>48</sup> Very much like the narratives of conquest of non-Western/European countries, nineteenth century society looked upon disabled people as infant-like beings and believed that they needed to be saved. Narratives of conquest commonly refer to the conquered people as child-like, innocent, unintelligent, in need of saving, etc. The conquerors were very often European (white) men and included clergymen. This parallels with the attempt by Protestants to “rehabilitate” deaf people, except now a new dynamic has been included along with the race/class/gender discussion: disability. Clergymen, like Gallaudet, took it upon themselves to save the souls of those who were perceived as in need of saving.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Klages, *Woeful Afflictions: Disability and Sentimentality in Victorian America*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999): 11.

situations. Protestants believed that "...[salvation] was the result of conscious choice, fervent dedication, and unremitting toil and effort...it was available to all"<sup>50</sup>

In addition to shifting perspectives on disability, changes in American Protestantism also influenced what it meant to be a religious person. Nancy Cott writes that "During the 'Great Awakening' of the early nineteenth century the orthodox view - that an individual's award of saving grace was purely God's work - relaxed, permitting new emphasis on the propriety and utility of human efforts to complement God's will."<sup>51</sup> For wealthy, white, heteronormative, able-bodied American women, this meant that their roles as wives and mothers now included being the moral superiors of the home.<sup>52</sup> Female moral reform movements positioned wives as responsible for curbing their immoral husbands, raising pious, patriotic children, and serving their religious community. In a sense, wealthy, white, heteronormative able-bodied, Protestant women were beginning to gain some semblance of God-given power within the confines of the domestic sphere.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Clifford E. Clark Jr., "The Changing Nature of Protestantism in Mid-nineteenth Century America: Henry Ward Beecher's Seven Lectures to Young Men," *The Journal of American History* 57, no. 4 (March 1971): 837.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835: With a New Preface* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 86.

<sup>52</sup> Cott, 130-132.

<sup>53</sup> Stuart M. Blumin, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 299-338. The emergence of a middle class during the nineteenth century in North America made reforms within society possible. This new economic class defined itself by grasping at and clinging onto social reform, creating a sort of national cohesion that cemented themselves into the social hierarchy. The middle class were the ones who sought out social change, their ranks including "...industrial moralizers, temperance advocates, missionaries, and family reformers." The middle class rallied around the Victorian idea of philanthropy and social/moral reform. They made the distinct shift in perceptions during the nineteenth century in North America possible.

Piety was the reasoning that was used to justify the expected behaviors that came with the ideals of American femininity. An American woman's role in society was God-given and she was taught that "...[the] world would be reclaimed for God through her suffering."<sup>54</sup> Not only was she responsible for her own salvation, but she was also responsible for the salvation of her entire family. This meant that any denial of her role was not only an insult to God but would also lead to chaos in the order of both society and the universe. Piety for American women meant raising good, Christian children. In a sermon given by Henry Ward Beecher, he preached "...the family's strength lies in the home which is run by the mother. It is a protected and isolated world, full of creatures of purity and refinement."<sup>55</sup> Familial responsibilities were initially centered around the home. Michael Gordon and M. Charles Bernstein argue that it was commonly believed that "The very nature and instinct of woman incline her to the private and the domestic..."<sup>56</sup> However, this God-sanctioned domestic role began to move outside of the home and took the forms of charity and benevolent work.<sup>57</sup> The work of benevolence by wealthy, white, heteronormative, able-bodied women was an already occurring phenomenon by the mid-nineteenth century, however Protestant leaders grew wary of the time this group of women were beginning to spend outside of the domestic sphere.<sup>58</sup> To

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<sup>54</sup> Welter, 152.

<sup>55</sup> Clark Jr., 841.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Gordon, and M. Charles Bernstein, "Mate Choice and Domestic Life in Nineteenth-Century Marriage Manual," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 32, no. 4 (November 1970): 669.

<sup>57</sup> Cott, 61-62, 67, 69. The idea of separate spheres was a newer concept necessitated by industrialization. The emergence of capitalism and the industrial workforce created a division of labor between men and women rendering the domestic sphere a form of preindustrial work. The home became a haven from sin and the toil of capitalism. However, the home did not oppose the outside world but rather tempered it, creating an opportunity for capitalism to continue without any interference from moral objections.

<sup>58</sup> Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990): 16.



combat this, a shift in doctrine was put forward by church communities to sanctify and support “female influence” to maintain control over women’s involvement in religious circles.<sup>59</sup> This group of women began to be touted by Protestant leaders as the moral and religious authorities of the home and “benevolent work merely extended the job of motherhood”<sup>60</sup>

Domesticity details a set of societal expectations and cultural norms that were in no way enforced and therefore were somewhat malleable and flexible. The ideals associated with American femininity were implicitly meant for upper/middle-class, white, able-bodied, heteronormative women who had the privilege of practicing and embodying this ideal femininity. The power gained from fulfilling the expected behaviors associated with ideal American femininity was contingent on the othering, subjugating, and exclusion of nonwhite, nonwealthy, nonable-bodied, nonheteronormative groups of women. However, all women needed to embody the ideals of American femininity “in order to claim subjectivity and Americanness.”<sup>61</sup>

d/Deaf women took on the roles associated with American womanhood despite the widely held beliefs that disabled women were incapable of doing so. While ideas of how to rehabilitate disability were shifting, disability was still treated as a deviation from and a threat to the “normal” human form. Legislation known as the “Ugly Laws,” found

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<sup>59</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865*, (Cambridge, Eng.; Cambridge University Press, 1981): 73.

<sup>60</sup> Ginzberg, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Amanda J. Zink, *Fictions of Western American Domesticity Indian, Mexican, and Anglo Women in Print Culture, 1850–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018): 14.

within legal code as early as 1867 but believed by Susan M. Schweik to be in force much earlier and more widely across the United States, policed disabled bodies and equated disability with vagrancy and criminality, assuaging the widely held fear of the possibility of disability being contagious by limiting the public movement of disabled bodies and sequestering them to asylums (or state regulated housing).<sup>62</sup> Disabled women, particularly, continued to be seen as more vulnerable and weaker than abled women or disabled men and would be assumed to not have access to the growing power available to some middle-class, white American women.<sup>63</sup> Cited within a court case concerning the “Ugly Laws,” a judge described the perceived “plight” of disabled women in the United States:

‘A crippled woman is in a worse condition than a crippled man [...]’ Not only did she lose ‘in the matter of physical attractiveness in respect of her chances of marriage’; her infirmity threatened her ability to support herself, because ‘the effect on her spirits and courage is more depressing, she feels the loss more than a man, and shrinks from the exhibition of her infirmity that is necessary to overcome its hindrances.’<sup>64</sup>

It was believed that disabled women particularly would not have been able to care for families, let alone be the moral authorities of the domestic sphere.

While Schweik’s arguments mainly consider physical disabilities of Civil War veterans, there is evidence that this type of legislation targeted deafness as well. Once it was eventually established, the Deaf community vehemently rejected this forced

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<sup>62</sup> Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009): 3.

<sup>63</sup> Esme Cleall, “‘Deaf to the Word’: Gender, Deafness and Protestantism in the Nineteenth-Century Britain and Ireland,” *Gender & History* 25, no.3 (November 2013): 594-595.

<sup>64</sup> Schweik, 145.

cloistering: “Deaf leader Laurent Clerc had had to crusade against the Ugly Laws when he addressed legislators in 1818: ‘The sight of a beautiful person does not make another so likewise ... Why then should a deaf person make others so also?’”<sup>65</sup> This heavily negative stigma of disability would have made it nearly impossible for disabled people at this time to permeate mainstream society and would therefore become a force of marginalization, a source of control that could have meant double the isolation for d/Deaf women, as they were expected to remain within the domestic sphere.

In addition to social perspectives and legislation, the deafness was targeted by educational movements. Oralism, an educational movement headed by Alexander Graham Bell, threatened to eliminate American Sign Language and the community that rallied around it for fear that the use of ASL would lead to a loss of English comprehension and a propagation of generational deafness.<sup>66</sup> Oralist education required that deaf people learn how to communicate using their voices and by reading lips. This was the sole form of education for deaf North Americans until the advent of American Sign Language and it was, and still is, incredibly ineffective.<sup>67</sup>

Ableist perspectives of disabled people as weak and helpless were sometimes internalized by disabled people themselves. Laurent Clerc wrote the following in his journal in 1816:

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<sup>65</sup> Schweik, 89.

<sup>66</sup> “Intermarriage and the Propagation of Deafness,” 375.

<sup>67</sup> Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

I talked a little with M. Wilder...about marriage. He asked me if I should like to marry a deaf and dumb lady, handsome, young, virtuous, pious, and amiable. I answered him that it would give me so much pleasure, but that a deaf and dumb gentleman and a lady suffering the same misfortune could not be companions for each other, and that consequently a lady endowed with the sense of hearing and with the gift of speech was and ought to be preferable and indispensable to a deaf and dumb person.<sup>68</sup>

Clerc is describing a particular ideal of a woman as attractive, young, God-fearing, and submissive. Her only fault is her deafness. He writes that a hearing woman would be “indispensable,” meaning that a hearing woman would not only care for him but would also become his connection to the mainstream world. She would serve as wife and interpreter. This journal entry represents a common societal perspective among both hearing and deaf people during the nineteenth century in the United States. Women, fulfilling their domestic role, were meant to care for their husbands. Because disabled people were signifiers of pity and desperation, the common perspective during the nineteenth century was that deaf people needed more attention and care. By marrying a deaf man, a woman’s duty of caretaker would become even more complex and difficult because she would also become his seemingly sole connection to the mainstream world around him. Clerc felt that a deaf woman would not be capable of adequately caring for him, neither as wife nor as interpreter.

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<sup>68</sup> Larry Hawkins and Sue Galloway, “The Beginnings of Deaf Education,” *The Endeavor* (Winter 2011), 35-41.

## **“A Place of Their Own”: The Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons**

Widespread support of education for women and rehabilitation of disability influenced the foundation of a school dedicated to educating deaf people, regardless of gender. As with many aspects of society, politics, and everyday life during the nineteenth century, the cultivation of the Deaf community and the advent of deaf education were heavily influenced by Presbyterianism. The main goal of Presbyterians to spread the gospel and the popular idea of rehabilitation (in particular, in educating disabled people) is what influenced Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, with the financial support of wealthy men, to create American Sign Language and, in 1817, found the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons in Hartford, Connecticut.

In 1815, Gallaudet met Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, a wealthy and well-known figure among the elite of Connecticut. Cogswell’s daughter, Alice, was “deaf-mute” and he was in search of a formal education for her.<sup>69</sup> Cogswell, along with other wealthy men

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<sup>69</sup> If one has ever studied Deaf history, the most common narrative one will read is the “inspiring” story of Alice Cogswell. A “deaf mute” born into a hearing family, Cogswell was the ultimate image of sorrow, an image that the Victorian purview of sentimentality and reformation focused on intensely. As a young child, Cogswell was isolated from the world around her, described as being unable to communicate with even her family. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet met her and immediately felt an immense amount of pity for the young girl. He is said to have taught her the word “hat” by gesturing toward his own and writing the word in the dirt, supposedly her first time learning a word. Or so the story is told. I refer to this version of events as the creation myth of American Sign Language. In all reality, Alice Cogswell was already receiving an education from Lydia Huntley Sigourney and was using rudimentary forms of sign language with her teacher and family. She knew how to read and write and was excelling in her classes by the time she met Gallaudet. While she certainly benefitted from the education that she received at the Connecticut Asylum, this myth serves to forever infantilize and marginalize Cogswell as a perpetual child in need of saving and puts forward a notion that disabled people need to be saved by their non-disabled counterparts. See Emily Arnold McCully, *My Heart Glow: Alice Cogswell, Thomas Gallaudet, and the Birth of American Sign Language* (Hyperion Book CH, 2008), John V. Van Cleve, ed., *The Deaf History Reader* (Washington,

from his circle, convinced and funded Gallaudet to travel to Europe to seek out systems of formal education for the deaf. He first arrived in Britain where he was met with resistance. Gallaudet then moved onto France where he met Laurent Clerc, a student of French deaf education. After spending some time learning French Sign Language and the methods of deaf education developed in France, Gallaudet convinced Clerc to travel back to the United States with him to develop a sign language and educational techniques unique to the United States and its culture. Upon their return, the same wealthy group of elites that funded their journey began gathering resources to found a residential school that would cater to the northeastern United States.<sup>70</sup> The Connecticut Asylum (later known as the American Asylum) was the first residential school for the deaf founded in the United States and provided the model for deaf education for the duration of the nineteenth century with its two initial goals: education and evangelization.<sup>71</sup>

The Connecticut Asylum's educational goal was to teach its students American Sign Language and how to read and write in English.<sup>72</sup> However, Gallaudet, a Presbyterian minister, was sure to construct the lifestyle and curriculum at the school to be heavily influenced by his own Christian ideals.<sup>73</sup> As described by John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, Gallaudet "required pupils to attend chapel services twice daily during the school week, catechism on Saturday, and both twice on Sunday."<sup>74</sup> Strict

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D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2007), John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989).

<sup>70</sup> *A Place of Their Own*, 29-46.

<sup>71</sup> Edwards, 37-38.

<sup>72</sup> Edwards, 39.

<sup>73</sup> *A Place of Their Own*, 32-33.

<sup>74</sup> John V. Van Cleve, ed., *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship* (Gallaudet University Press, 1993): 62.

religious routine and teachings included and reinforced strict gender roles. This educational philosophy and curriculum reinforced these strategies with the idea that motherhood necessitated some kind of education that made the female student socially valuable in that she would be capable of raising and educating her own children.<sup>75</sup> Gallaudet, along with many other educators of the time, supported efforts to educate women because he believed that “a mother's impact on her child was 'inferior only to that of God; and she is the instrument whom He employs.'”<sup>76</sup> In the eyes of the Connecticut Asylum’s founder and first principal, education only bolstered a woman’s claim to her domestic and maternal duties.

The gendered curriculum of the Connecticut Asylum reinforced these ideas of ideal American femininity through education.<sup>77</sup> Deaf male students were taught academic subjects while deaf female students were taught homemaking skills such as sewing and cooking. Instead of giving them the same practical and valuable opportunities afforded to deaf male students, instructors at the school limited deaf female students to training that would make them suitable for marriage and motherhood. Female students typically did not have access to “master signers” as their educators, more often being instructed by female teachers who likely received a similar education to them and were limited to reciting poetry and hymns to practice ASL whereas their male counterparts had

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<sup>75</sup> Cott, 118-120.

<sup>76</sup> Cott, 120.

<sup>77</sup> Linda M. Perkins, “The Impact of the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ on the Education of Black Women,” *Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 3 (1983): 146.

opportunities to participate in public speaking competitions.<sup>78</sup> When a deaf female student graduated from the school, she was expected to fulfill the role of wife and mother. Jessica Lee writes that “Family and home defined girls' lives, inside and outside the classroom. They were born in one family, attended and graduated from a second, and achieved success when they started one of their own.”<sup>79</sup> Brenda Jo Brueggemann describes that for mainstream society and “members of the Deaf world, a ‘successful’ woman displayed domestic acumen...Deaf women [impressed] Deaf spouses and also [proved] to the mainstream (hearing) world that they are ‘normal’ citizens.”<sup>80</sup> Not only does this gendered expectation reveal a significant Christian influence, but it also reveals an anxiety of the early Deaf community to prove that they belonged within the larger mainstream society of the United States

These gender roles were also reflected in how the school was run. Matrons, the care providers for the students, were meant to display an example to female students of what an ideal woman was meant to be, Christian and motherly, while male superintendents and instructors were meant to be father figures, loving but firm.<sup>81</sup> Although Sophia Fowler and Eliza Boardman were already adults by the time they enrolled into the Connecticut Asylum, the curriculum would have reinforced the gender

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<sup>78</sup> Jessica Lee, “Family Matters: Female Dynamics within Deaf Schools,” Brueggemann, Brenda Jo and Susan Burch, eds., *Women and Deafness: Double Visions* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2006): 13.

<sup>79</sup> Lee, 16-17.

<sup>80</sup> Brueggemann, 14.

<sup>81</sup> Brueggemann, 14. The author also points out that this structure in schools was meant to give parents peace of mind when sending their children to live away from their families for months at a time. It was inconceivable to reunite the child more than this due to monetary factors and the fact that the Connecticut Asylum was the only residential school that serviced the entire east coast for quite some time.



expectations upheld by their families and would have provided a pathway for them to become influenced by a Christian faith that they had previously only had partial access to.<sup>82</sup>

Fowler and Boardman were two of the first twenty-one students enrolled at the Connecticut Asylum, both entering as adults. Initially, the cost of yearly tuition to attend was \$200 plus whatever travel expenses were needed to arrive in Hartford. The school would later receive government funding but would not primarily cater to “charity students” until 1828.<sup>83</sup> Anyone enrolled at the Connecticut Asylum in 1817 had to have significant financial resources to attend. Additionally, every student enrolled at the school for its first seven years was white. The first black student enrolled was Charles Hiller in 1825 and he is recorded as the only “free black student in the school.”<sup>84</sup> Between the years of 1829 and 1870, there were a total of eleven free black students that attended the American Asylum, despite there being abolitionists on staff the entire time, including Gallaudet himself.<sup>85</sup> When Fowler and Boardman were attending the Connecticut Asylum, the entire student body was comprised of wealthy, white individuals, including the two of them.

The Connecticut Asylum provided a community for people who had largely been disconnected from the world. As more deaf people began attending the school, a

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<sup>82</sup> “Sophia Fowler Gallaudet - Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Boston,” *Recorder*. January 2, 1819, 4.

<sup>83</sup> *Deaf History Unveiled*, 64. \$200 in 1817 is equal to \$4,347.50 in 2022.

<sup>84</sup> Edwards, 65.

<sup>85</sup> Edwards, 65-69.

flourishing community began to root itself in and around the school. For the first time in their lives, students and alumni were able to make connections with people that they had never experienced before. American Sign Language made efficient communication possible and made way for personal connections that deaf people were unable to have previously, even with their own hearing family members. As Van Cleve and Crouch detail, “Ultimately, schools brought deaf people together, forming a context within which they would develop their own cultural communities... These schools concentrated large numbers of deaf individuals, drawing them into regular contact with each other and creating shared experiences that transcended the merely physical aspects of their deafness.”<sup>86</sup> In a way, this new community may have made its own members aware of their own capabilities. As an example, Laurent Clerc may have been influenced by the success of the community to rethink his opinions on the capabilities of deaf women. In 1819, three years after he wrote in his journal that he could not marry a deaf woman, Clerc married Eliza Boardman.<sup>87</sup>

### **Deaf Domesticity in Practice**

Eliza Boardman and Sophia Fowler were able to adopt and modify domesticity, the ideals of American femininity, into their own Deaf Domesticities to showcase the legitimacy of the Deaf community in American society. In 1822, the Clerc family sat for two portraits: one of Laurent Clerc and the other of Eliza Boardman and her first child,

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<sup>86</sup> *A Place of Their Own*, 10.

<sup>87</sup> “A Golden Wedding,” *Hartford Daily Courant (1840-1887)*, May 11, 1869.

Elizabeth, who by this time would have been about two years old.<sup>88</sup> The portraits were painted by Charles Willson Peale, a renowned painter of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States.<sup>89</sup> Peale's preference for portraits was to represent domesticity and intimate relationships of family life, believing that portraits were a symbol of domesticity and

encouraging subjects to include their children in the sittings.<sup>90</sup> The background of the portrait of Boardman and her daughter is a dark brown in the top left corner and fades into a tan in the bottom right corner. Boardman is wearing a white gown with ruffles around the neck and sleeves that reach her wrists. She also seems to have a



red shawl wrapped around one shoulder and her child's midsection. Her hair is curled and placed into an up-do, framing but not concealing her face. Her daughter is wearing a yellow gown and a coral necklace. The child's appearance is mostly androgynous, but her hair color matches that of her mother's: brown. She is curiously looking toward the

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Willson Peale, *Mrs. Laurent Clerc (Eliza Crocker Boardman) and Daughter, Elizabeth Victoria (Later Mrs. Beers)*, 1822. See figure A.

<sup>89</sup> Charles Coleman Sellers, *Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Ser., v. 42, Pt. 1 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1952).

<sup>90</sup> Sellers, 4, 7.

observer while her mother looks off to the right. Both mother and child have pale skin, that of upper-class nineteenth century Americans, but feature a healthy blush on their cheeks.

In personal notes and letters, Peale describes how he was only given two days to sketch the likeness of the subjects, a situation that frustrated him. It took him a total of thirteen days to complete the portrait in its entirety. The physical portrait itself is canvas and measures 25 x 21 inches.<sup>91</sup> The two portraits of the Clerc family were painted to be included in Peale's Museum gallery, the museum that would later be owned by P.T. Barnum. While the family was at first skeptical of being included in the gallery and possibly being seen as spectacles among the other curiosities that he had collected, Peale ultimately convinced them with his support of the deaf education that they had both benefited from, thinking that their presence in his gallery would further bolster support for the cause.<sup>92</sup>

At first glance, the portrait seems to resemble any other nineteenth century portrait but with further inspection and scrutinizing eyes, it is incredibly unique and telling. Boardman has her left arm securely wrapped around her child. She is using her right hand to sign the letter "E" in American Sign Language.<sup>93</sup> Interestingly enough, the notes included in *Portraits and Miniatures by Charles Willson Peale* make no mention of

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<sup>91</sup> Sellers, 55.

<sup>92</sup> Sellers, 6.

<sup>93</sup> "Manual Alphabet of the Deaf and Dumb," *American Annals of Education (1830-1839)* 4, no. 1 (January 1834), 53. See figure B.

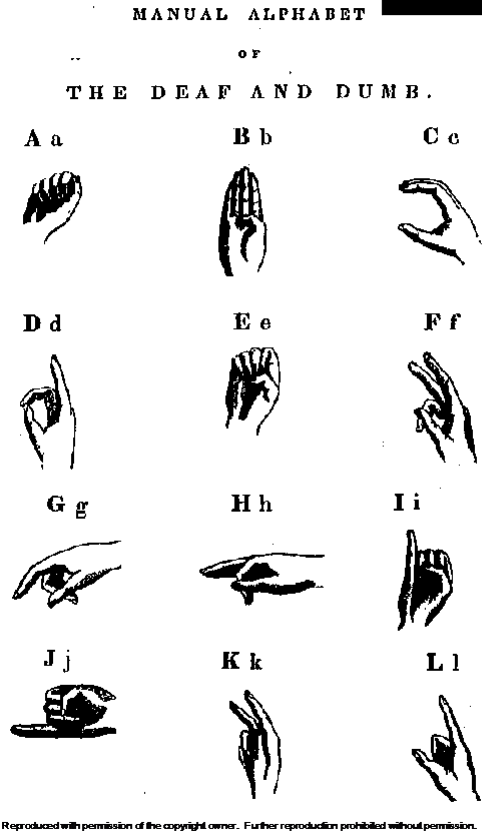
this unique edition, even though the portraits were created to display those that directly benefitted from deaf education.

Surely the intent of Boardman signing in the portrait was to use the American Sign Language sign for “E” to represent her and Elizabeth’s names. Regardless, this gesture symbolizes so much more than that. Boardman, whether through her own agency or as a direction from Peale, is forever documenting her deafness. She could have easily had both arms wrapped around her child and left her disability invisible to the world, but she intentionally chose not to. She is representing and asserting her. The inclusion of her daughter is also significant. She is showing the world, or at least to the attendees of Peale’s Museum, that a d/Deaf woman can be a mother and therefore can successfully perform domesticity while also providing evidence of the legitimacy of the Deaf community. This portrait serves as a physical signifier of Boardman’s Deaf Domesticity.

Eliza Boardman’s Deaf Domesticity was only accessible to her because of her race, class, and sexuality. As a white, wealthy, heteronormative woman, she was able to access the power and privilege associated with domesticity that had previously been

**MANUAL ALPHABET OF THE DEAF AND DUMB.**  
*American Annals of Education (1839-1839), Jan 1834, 4, 1; American Periodicals*  
 Fig. 33

**Figure B**



inaccessible to any disabled woman who would have ordinarily been thought of as weak, pitiful, and incapable of caring for herself, let alone others. Embodying her Deaf Domesticity allowed Boardman to navigate a world she would have otherwise not had access to. By accepting these standards of the patriarchy, she was ultimately benefitting, gaining her own agency and decision making. She may have been limited to a domestic sphere but within that sphere, she would have been in control.

Similarly, Sophia Fowler Gallaudet provides an example of Deaf Domesticity. Throughout her life she was described as a pious woman who always upheld her faith<sup>94</sup> by “exemplifying in an eminent degree all the virtues described by the apostle when he exhorted us to think on whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, and of good report”<sup>95</sup> She was admired for her encapsulation of domesticity: “The characteristics that mark a lady were hers – the self-poise, quiet responsiveness, and far-sighted consideration for the feelings of others, which place companions at their ease.”<sup>96</sup> Fowler is most often remembered and revered for “her motherly interest and charity and sympathy”<sup>97</sup> She was the first educated d/Deaf person to mingle in high society in the United States alongside her husband and, because of how people were so intrigued by her, she essentially became an example of why funding deaf education was important.<sup>98</sup> These perceptions place Sophia Fowler squarely into the ideals of American femininity and thus she fills the expectations that both mainstream society and the Deaf community

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<sup>94</sup> *The Silent Worker* 26, 93.

<sup>95</sup> Draper, 183.

<sup>96</sup> Draper, 176.

<sup>97</sup> *The Silent Worker* 26, 93.

<sup>98</sup> Draper, 177.

expected of her, which in turn would have provided her power and privileges unavailable to women not of her race, status, and sexuality.

Fowler was the authority of her home and an example of how deafness functioned in the domestic sphere. Fowler used American Sign Language and wrote in English to communicate. She never developed or used her own speaking voice.<sup>99</sup> Because of this, her household was a Deaf household, where even those who were hearing had to use ASL (either through their own fluency or through an interpreter) to communicate, including her husband. R.A.R. Edwards claims that "Gallaudet became bilingual and took as his wife a woman who was both deaf and Deaf, affirming as he did so that these two different communities could nonetheless dwell comfortably together in the same household."<sup>100</sup>

In 1828, Fowler wrote a letter to her husband, describing the happenings of the household while Gallaudet was away. She recounts her work spent teaching a house guest and how her eldest son fills in for her when she is occupied. Fowler also discusses another house guest that cares for her fourth child which turns out to be "a great relief" to her as she was "very busy at present."<sup>101</sup> Although she does not specify what is keeping her busy, this letter reveals that Fowler prioritizes work that is not related to her children. This may have been because she simply wanted to have time away from her children. However, based on her earlier desire for education and her later work as an educator and political advocate, I would argue that this work fulfilled a deeper need than just an excuse

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<sup>99</sup> Edwards, 24.

<sup>100</sup> Edwards, 207.

<sup>101</sup> Sophia Gallaudet, "Letter from S. Gallaudet to Revd. Thomas H. Gallaudet" (October 13, 1828).

to escape the responsibilities of motherhood. It can be concluded that she is teaching a house guest ASL since her eldest child who took her place sometimes would have been only six years old. ASL would have really been the only subject that both mother and child would have understood to a similar depth. She also rallied political and financial support for Deaf education in addition to serving as a matron of the Columbia Institute in her later years, extending her responsibilities of Deaf Domesticity to outside the home.<sup>102</sup>

### **Resistance in Normalcy: Politics of Respectability**

During the nineteenth century, eugenics and evolutionary science became a mainstream explanation for the differences in phenotype found in the human species, including race, gender, sexuality, and disability. These “scientific” conclusions created discourse that non-white, non-male, nonheteronormative, non-abled bodies were uncontrollable and divergent.<sup>103</sup> These stereotypes were challenged by the African American community as early as the nineteenth century through the politics of respectability, a form of resistance used to create opportunities for upward mobility, unity, and security.<sup>104</sup> The education and, therefore, validated intelligence of people of color became an uplift for the entire community.<sup>105</sup> While the actual phenomenon was not named until over a century later, I would argue that the politics of respectability was in practice by a wider variety of communities, including the Deaf community.

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<sup>102</sup> “Sophia Fowler Gallaudet,” Gallaudet University.

<sup>103</sup> E. Frances White, *Dark Continent Of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics Of Respectability* (Temple University Press, 2001): 81-115.

<sup>104</sup> White, 11-14.

<sup>105</sup> Perkins, 145-146.



As described earlier, the main goal of educating d/Deaf girls in residential schools was to help them become successful wives and mothers. R.A.R. Edwards argues that "While espousing motherhood as a path to public respect and approbation may seem quite conservative, for disabled women [...] it was deeply radical."<sup>106</sup> Deaf Domesticity was, in a sense, a form of resistance for d/Deaf women. By accepting and adhering to elite, white, heteronormative, abled societal standards, d/Deaf women rejected the stereotypes associated with disability. In the cases of marginalized women, domesticity was a mode of survival, as Amanda Zink argues.<sup>107</sup> American d/Deaf women of the nineteenth century, such as Boardman and Fowler, became the evidence of the Deaf community's success in the United States. This success later translated to government funding of the Connecticut Asylum, the founding of more residential schools, both for the deaf and for other disabled communities, and the lasting presence of the Deaf community and American Sign Language in the United States.

### **Why Build An "Artificial Record?": Conclusion**

Two months after her death, the following was written of Sophia Fowler and her work at the Columbia Institution: "[...] the world may never know what anxious thought, what strenuous labor, what lonely vigils, what funds of vitality have gone to the gathering and organization of these resources. If it does, if ever the history of this College is written, then it will be known how much is due to Sophia Gallaudet for her lightening of these burdens."<sup>108</sup> Unfortunately, this prediction never truly came to fruition. Most

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<sup>106</sup> Edwards, 121.

<sup>107</sup> Zink, 14.

<sup>108</sup> Draper, 179.

histories that include information about Fowler only briefly mention her work at the Columbia Institution, characterizing that time spent as a hobby or volunteer position. In most instances, she is briefly mentioned as wife or mother to male historical subjects. In all reality, Fowler helped to legitimize the Deaf community as a valid part of nineteenth century United States society, is, as Edwards argues, a trailblazer for d/Deaf women of her time, and is a catalyst for a particular modification of the ideals of American femininity in the form of Deaf Domesticity.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, Eliza Boardman Clerc's contributions have been ignored. Boardman created her own Deaf Domesticity by combining her race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability to gain power as an individual and to help legitimize the Deaf community. Like Fowler, Boardman has not been recognized for her contributions to the Deaf community. During the nineteenth century, deaf women were perceived as incapable of caring for anyone, including themselves. Yet she married a d/Deaf man and went on to have a family. She also sat for a portrait that was used to garner support for education of the deaf in the United States and immortalized her Deaf Domesticity.

In addition to their shaping of Deaf Domesticity, disabled women like Fowler and Boardman also created space, both culturally and historically, for their future contemporaries to perform their own domesticities, an example being Helen Keller. Keller was a deaf-blind woman who was able to communicate orally and by using an early version of tactile American Sign Language. She was a dedicated philanthropist, travelling the world to help those in need and acting as a political advocate for disabled

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<sup>109</sup> Edwards, 121.

communities. Keller is often thought of as the first disabled woman to make history. However, she was born in 1880, almost a century after Fowler and Boardman were. Keller benefitted from an education that was being provided to d/Deaf pupils for decades and from the efforts of disabled women before her, like Fowler and Boardman, that challenged societal expectations.

Because of this inattention of and lack of interest in Fowler, Boardman, and others like them, there is a gaping hole in scholarship in the fields of disability studies, United States history, and Deaf history. However, the ramifications do not stop there. Unfortunately, this trend of marginalization is not isolated to the annals (or lack thereof) of history of disabled women. There are also very real consequences faced by disabled people daily. In many ways, as Rebecca Sanchez argues, American Sign Language is still not socially recognized or understood as a real language, characterizing those who use it as not fully human and therefore not worthy of study.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, in a study conducted in 1981, Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch determine multiple factors that contribute to the disadvantages experienced by disabled women: unemployment, low salaries, lack of romantic relationships, forced or coerced sterilization, and negative social and self-perceptions just to name a few.<sup>111</sup> While this study may seem outdated forty years later, the lack of similar studies since then speaks to the need for more research on the lives of disabled women.

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<sup>110</sup> Rebecca Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature* (NYU Press, 2015): 7-8.

<sup>111</sup> Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, "Disabled Women: Sexism without the Pedestal," *CUNY Graduate Center Publications and Research* (July 1, 1981): 233-235.

So how should disabled women historical subjects be remembered? Sophia Fowler has various monuments dedicated to her, including a building named in her honor at Gallaudet University.<sup>112</sup> And some have argued that the legacy of her offspring and the memories of her passed down through d/Deaf generations is “a monument far more enduring than any artificial record.”<sup>113</sup> Similarly, Eliza Boardman Clerc has a portrait that she can be remembered by. While this is a wonderful sentiment in a perfect world, I am inclined to disagree that any of this is sufficient. A few public monuments in a very concentrated area of the eastern United States seems unsatisfactory. Sophia Fowler and Eliza Boardman should have a more solid presence in Deaf history scholarship. They should be considered founding members and contributors of the Deaf community.

The lack of recognition for Sophia Fowler and Eliza Boardman is just one example of the many disparities found in scholarship on Deaf history. More work must be done in the field to be more inclusive and holistic. United States history in general lacks genuine analysis of the intersections of disability, gender, race, class, and sexuality. In a more general sense, Lang and Meath-Lang express the following: “We are distressed by the relative lack of minority deaf citations, despite innumerable hours of searching and inquiry, as a sad commentary on how much needs yet to be accomplished.”<sup>114</sup> While these authors lean toward a more pessimistic view of this lack of scholarship, I prefer to see it as an opportunity, both for scholars and for the historical subjects in question. In

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<sup>112</sup> “Sophia Fowler Gallaudet.”

<sup>113</sup> Draper, 171.

<sup>114</sup> Lang, 13.

many cases, Deaf history is wide open for historical discovery. There is so much left to research and explore. And there are many historical subjects waiting their turn.

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