Genesis of the National Deaf-Mute College: High Classes in Schools for the Deaf

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I. Introduction

The founding of the collegiate department at the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind in 1864 had its seeds planted in the early 1800s. In this video, the origins of thoughts are examined to portray the emerging collective ideas of establishing higher education for deaf people, and how they culminated in the collegiate department. Primary sources on curriculum design, teacher qualification, and student admission are used as evidence for this historical research.

II. Early High School Reform

In 1821, the State of Massachusetts passed a law, establishing public high schools to help prepare students for college. As a result, public high schools were few, usually located in big cities, such as Boston, but they were not in high demand. Horace Mann, Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education from 1837 to 1848, did annual examination of school and society in the state. In his annual reports to the State of Massachusetts Board of Education, he promoted increased investment in high school expansion, as they would lead to better job placement, high quality of life and better health welfare.

III. Dialogue on Education Beyond Standard Education for the Deaf

Prior to 1850, the United States of America saw twelve fully-operational schools for the deaf in the United States. Deaf students attending the schools usually took language, arithmetic, history, and geography every year for four to six years. Sometimes they would take science in exchange for language. Graduates of the schools were academically comparable to those from the best class of hearing graduates in public schools; however, hearing graduates landed jobs with ease as opposed to their deaf peers. To break the societal assumption that intelligence depends on the ability of speech, deaf people needed to demonstrate their higher knowledge, skill and dexterity to perform at comparable levels as their hearing peers. Higher education would allow them to...
acquire those necessary skills, as knowledge is perceived as power.

In 1850, at the first American Instructors for the Deaf convention, Jacob Van Nostrad, a teacher from the New York Institution for Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb, gave a paper presentation, “Necessity of Higher Standards of Education.” In his presentation, he called for better and higher standards of curricular preparation for deaf students for job placement. The average five-year preparation was not sufficient, and deaf students needed appropriate additional guidance to pursue higher education. He recommended that a class of honor, or of merit, be formed to educate students to further their studies. The subjects of study included mental and moral philosophy, natural history, higher branches of mathematics, astronomy, English literature, and natural philosophy.

At the second American Instructors for the Deaf convention in 1851, William W. Turner, principal of the American Asylum for the Deaf gave a paper presentation, “High School for the Deaf and Dumb.” Turner outlined a plan for establishing a high school for the deaf that would provide college-preparation experience for deaf students. To promote equal participation from the existing schools for the deaf, he recommended that the high school be located outside the towns where the schools for the deaf reside. Well-rounded and intelligent deaf students from the schools for the deaf can attend the high school. The participants at the conference made supporting and opposing arguments for and against the plan. Collectively, they agreed that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet would make a strong candidate for directorship. Sadly, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet passed away one month after the conference.

III. Formation and Structure of High Class in Schools for the Deaf

With little progress made on the high school plan, William W. Turner decisively asked the American Asylum Board of Directors to pass an act that a high class be established at the school. The Board voted and passed the act, called The Gallaudet High Class, in honor of the late Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, on April 23, 1852. The high class commenced on September 15, 1852. Within a month, Harvey P. Peet established and led a high class at the New York Institution for Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb.

Both high classes at the first two schools for the deaf had similarities and differences. The Gallaudet High Class was a two-year program while the New York High Class required 2-3 years of study. Students in the Gallaudet High Class would take higher level of mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Natural History, Drawing, Foreign Languages, Astronomy, English Literature, historical and grammatical study and principles of Logic and special attention to English composition and reading. Students in the New York High Class took higher branches of English education (i.e., etymology, syntax, synonyms, idioms and colloquial and figurative expressions), Reading of popular English Literature, Astronomy, Drawing, Mathematics (i.e., Algebra, Geometry, and Logic), Natural Philosophy, Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, Foreign Languages, and History and Geography.

Henry Barnard, a well-known education reformist from Connecticut and Rhode Island, published his observations of higher classes in Hartford, NYC, and Philadelphia in Education in 1861, praising the higher standards of education for deaf students. In his observations, he saw a large
number of high class graduates becoming teachers of the deaf. Half of the first group of graduates from the New York High Class eventually became teachers.

IV. Call for The National College for Deaf-Mutes

In 1854, John Carlin, a graduate and intelligent orator from the Philadelphia Institution for the Deaf, visited high classes at both the American Asylum and the New York Institution. The high class scholars at both schools impressed him with their knowledge of higher education. He wrote of their drinking in the beauties of rhetoric, astronomy, chemistry, the Old Testament scriptures with reference to literature, history, civil polity ethics, history, geography and Algebra. Seeing potential for further human curiosity for higher knowledge, he proposed in his paper, “The National College for Mutes,” that a college for deaf people be established. Originally, he half-jokingly suggested to see such college in his childhood hometown, Philadelphia, but he ultimately called for it to be established in Fanwood, NY, for different reasons, such as transportation convenience, both, by river and by land, financial relief with use of older buildings which the New York Institution relocated from, aesthetic natural environment conducive for educational learning, and distance to the city square. With the college in existence, deaf students would be better prepared for job placement and participation in society.

V. Conclusion: Effects of the National Deaf-Mute College on High Class in Schools for the Deaf

With the high class seeds blooming to mature into better job placement and mobility, a strong and enduring college eventually emerged. In April 1864, Edward Miner Gallaudet, son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, founded the National Deaf-Mute College as collegiate department at the Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind in Washington, D.C. The College eventually overshadowed the smaller high classes by offering similar classes as in the high classes, thus leading to the closure of some high classes in schools for the deaf. The high school movement was just around the corner, starting in 1880. As the long and winding road finally led to the success and establishment of a respected institute, it would be apropos to mention in closing, John Carlin’s incorporation of a Latin quote in his 1854 paper: *Perseverantia Vincit Omnia* (Perseverance Conquers All).

**Bibliography**

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schools, grammar schools, academics, colleges, professional schools of theology, law, medicine, war, teaching, engineering, agriculture, mechanics and fine arts; with special schools for deaf mutes, blind, idiots, juvenile criminals and orphans, and supplementary educational agencies and libraries, lyceums, lectures, &c. In Eighty Years’ Progress of the United States: Showing the Various Channels of Industry and Education Through Which the People of the United States Have Arisen From a British Colony to Their Present National Importance; Giving in a Historical Form, the Vast Improvements Made in Agriculture, Commerce, and Trade, Banking, Insurance, Manufacturing, Machinery, Mining Interests, Modes of Travel and Transportation, Telegraphing, Fine Arts, Educational, Benevolent, and Humane Institution, &c., &c. With a Large Amount of Statistical Information Showing the Comparative Progress of the Different States with Each Other, and to some Extent This Country With Other Nations. Vol. 2. (pp. 337-457). Worchester, MA: L. Stebbins.


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