For over 100 years, American Deaf clubs have provided spaces where people of a shared culture and language have gathered to be entertained, share news and information, food and drink, laughter and laments. They have been sources of friendship and community, just as ethnic halls, barbershops, churches, bars, and eateries have for other social groups. Similar to “third places” claimed by other horizontally transmitted cultures, Deaf clubs create rare spaces where Deaf people can socialize in environments designed for their unique culture, community, and language. Yet, in the twenty-first century, the need for centralized, informal gathering places for Deaf people has largely dwindled, especially for younger generations. Once found in cities and towns, large and...
small, Deaf clubs have slowly disappeared. The only Deaf club listed on the National Register of Historic Places—St. Paul, Minnesota’s Charles Thompson Memorial Hall, open since 1916—faces many challenges. With new options for connecting and communicating, its relevance has been tested. Compounding Thompson Hall’s challenges are the daunting costs of making the building ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant, racial tensions, and a worldwide pandemic.1

Places to Freely Sign and Gather

Deaf people have always loved to gather as a community. In 1869 they partied until eight a.m. through a “violent” Boston snowstorm. Chicago’s Pas-a-Pas Deaf Club held a bunco party in 1929, attended by hundreds, despite freezing weather. The Allen-town Club for the Deaf in Pennsylvania hosted a summer festival in 1928, where hundreds made merry long into the night. Yet Deaf spaces are historically, and contemporarily, very rare. “There are a very few ‘places’ Deaf people can call their own,” writes Carol Padden. “For most of their history in the United States, they have occupied spaces built by others and largely controlled by others.” As a result, the dwindling number of Deaf clubs is concerning.2

One reason for the dearth of Deaf spaces is that the American Deaf community is small. Approximately 4 percent of the population is identified as profoundly deaf, with over 90 percent of deaf children born to hearing parents. But a crucial reason is tied to history. Prior to the nineteenth century, deaf antebellum Americans were largely scattered and isolated until the American School opened in 1817 in Connecticut. Minnesota opened its first school for the deaf in 1863 in Faribault. The increasing number of state schools led to the growth of a national language, American Sign Language (ASL), and American Deaf Culture. This sparked a contentious debate over educational pedagogy and language choice, which continues to this day.3

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, American Oralist advocates—endorsing exclusive articulation—argued that deaf children should primarily be educated in the common language of the nation, spoken English. The prevalent belief was (and is) that deaf people must speak to succeed. While we currently have extensive research proving that sign language aids in language acquisition for deaf children, it was long presented as juvenile and backward as it was not yet academically recognized as a language until William Stokoe’s
landmark 1965 publication. Consequently, by the end of World War I, only 20 percent of deaf children had access to sign language in schools. Not only was sign language explicitly forbidden at several educational institutions, but deaf teachers were fired, deaf immigrants rejected at the border, and deaf people dissuaded from marrying other deaf adults throughout the twentieth century. One of few safe places Deaf people could freely sign and gather was at Deaf clubs.4

Because the experience of being deaf is most often not shared by a person’s family, classmates, or coworkers, Deaf clubs were critical to alleviating social isolation. They were “places of respite where Deaf people could find companionship away from the loneliness of the workplace where many Deaf people worked alone,” first in artisan jobs, later as factory labor, frequently far from home. “Clubs served as socializing institutions, places where one could go to learn to be Deaf, to enjoy the company of other Deaf people and the ease of communicating perhaps for the first time in one’s life.” Paddy Ladd has called them “the traditional cornerstones of the community.”5

Lacking such a cornerstone prior to 1916, Deaf Minnesotans living in or near the Twin Cities met in saloons, said Gordon Allen (1902–1996), who served on Thompson Hall’s board of trustees from 1945 to 1996. Thompson Hall fulfilled a need for an accessible, fixed location. For young people who had attended schools for the deaf, it was an extension of their enculturation process. For those who had attended mainstream schools, the impact was more dramatic. It opened their eyes to a new world.

Older members would teach younger ones, explicitly or implicitly, about deaf values, customs, knowledge, language, stories, jokes, and history. Members could find out about events in the world and community, and about employment and friends. It was also a safe place for relaxation, easy conversation, and entertainment. Many members regarded the deaf club as their second home.6

“The Original Deaf Gatsby”

Most of what distinguishes Thompson Hall from other Deaf clubs can be traced to its namesake. Charles Thompson was born deaf into one of St. Paul’s most prominent families on March 15, 1864. His father, Horace Thompson, amassed his wealth pri-
“Clubs served as socializing institutions, places where one could go to learn to be Deaf, to enjoy the company of other Deaf people and the ease of communicating perhaps for the first time in one’s life.”

Roberta “Bobbi” Cordano, a Deaf Minnesota resident who served as a trustee before becoming president of Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, noted that the Thompsons’ wealth allowed them to “preserve a community that they understood and loved at a time when sign language was the most under threat in the United States.” She added, “They left Thompson Hall with the resources it needed to continue on into the future.”

“ONLY INSTITUTION OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD”

Margaret Thompson tapped Olof Hanson, widely considered the first signing Deaf architect in America, to design the building. Born on a farm in Sweden in 1862, Hanson started to lose his hearing at 11 years of age and became progressively deaf within a few years. He suspected the cause of his deafness was prolonged exposure to the extreme cold weather. He moved to America at 13 with his hearing family and spent the formative years of his childhood not knowing “there were other deaf people” like him. At age 16, Hanson attended the Faribault deaf school, where he was first exposed to sign language and deaf people, including Thompson, who became a lifelong friend. In addition to being an architect, Hanson was a prominent advocate for the Deaf community. He served as president of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) prior to designing Thompson Hall and later in life became an Episcopal priest.

Designed and constructed in less than a year, the building was dedicated on November 5, 1916. “Invitations were sent to all deaf Minnesotans whose addresses were known, as well as to many hearing friends.” To a crowd of around 500, Thompson Hall was heralded as “the only institution of its kind in the world.” Hanson told those gathered that Margaret Thompson provided very clear instructions. “She wanted this building to be for the use of the deaf alone, a place where they could go and feel at home and feel that it is their own.”

Thompson Hall was the first clubhouse designed by and for the Deaf community in America, leading to it being added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2011. Jay Cooke Howard noted its historic significance at the dedication ceremony:

As you inspect this fine Memorial Hall, erected to the memory of our friend, Charles Thompson, who was deaf, provided by his widow, who is deaf, planned by a thoroughly competent deaf architect, and under the care and direction of a house committee, all of whom are deaf, it is hoped you will come to feel that the deaf are not the helpless, inefficient, and afflicted people they are often supposed to be.

While the house committee was, as Howard noted, composed entirely of deaf members, all but one member of the initial board of trustees were hearing individuals. Since its inception, Thompson Hall has been run by a house committee and board of trustees, the former charged with overseeing day-to-day operations,
coordinating social events, hosting annual elections, and managing use of the hall by other groups and organizations, the latter responsible for managing the trust, ensuring Thompson Hall's financial sustainability. Beginning in 1951, when the last family member exited the board, it has been governed entirely by Deaf trustees, a lifetime appointment unless a person voluntarily retires or is voted out, unlike the house committee, whose members are elected annually.12

**DeafSpace Design**

Thompson Hall's design is another unique feature. Whereas most Deaf clubs have rented space in commercial buildings, often situated above downtown storefronts, constructed with no consideration for deaf people's needs, and lacking permanence, Margaret Thompson purchased property on a desirable, mostly residential thoroughfare. The intersection of Marshall and Fairview Avenues stood between two streetcar lines, with stops in front of the building.13

The four-story, classical revival, terra-cotta structure has been celebrated for its impressive design features and large quarters. On the first floor, guests originally found the dining room hall, ladies' parlor, and a social hall, which seated 100, along with the caretaker's private quarters. The second floor had the two-story auditorium with a raised stage and proscenium that comfortably seated 200. The auditorium has 17-foot ceilings, maple flooring, and a large stage to accommodate multipurpose uses such as moving picture nights and dances. Adjacent was a children's room and cloakroom. A printing office, projection room, and small dressing rooms above the stage were found on the third floor. The basement had small meeting rooms, a short-lived bowling alley, and a billiards room.14

Olof Hanson's design incorporated elements of what is now called

DeafSpace Design. Hansel Bauman, considered a leader in the field of DeafSpace architecture, writes, “Deaf people have developed an exceedingly practical and elegant means of adapting their surroundings to reflect their unique ways of being, often referred to as DeafSpace.”15 DeafSpace has been recognized academically within the past few decades as a design principle, but Deaf people have always innately known that they relate to their environment in a primarily visual way. This is evident in how Hanson incorporated design features in Thompson Hall to accommodate Deaf culture and sign language. He ensured that the building’s lighting was “first-class” with no visual obstructions or barriers, such as columns within rooms, and multiple windows to welcome sunlight. The

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basement was sunk merely three feet deep to leave room for outdoor light to flood through tall windows. Upstairs, the auditorium’s massive side windows created a light-filled, open space. To accommodate signers, Hanson designed a push button by the stage, not in back like traditional auditoriums. The strategically placed light switches allow presenters to control lights, including flashing them to get the audience’s attention. Hanson wrote that “the lights in the auditorium can be extinguished and relighted instantaneously. This is designed to call the assemblage to order in lieu of the ordinary gavel, which would make no impression on deaf ears.”

Another important feature of Hanson’s design: a large double-wide oak staircase connecting the first floor to the third, so that guests could communicate side-by-side while walking on the stairs, and peer down from the third floor to the first.

A GIFT TO ALL DEAF MINNESOTANS

Margaret Thompson had two rules, according to Gordon Allen, the longtime trustee, who knew her: “It was a club for Deaf people, and . . . it would never charge for membership. She wanted Thompson Hall to be a gift to all Deaf Minnesotans.” The building was to be “a social center for the deaf, free to all without regard to their race, religion, or politics; in fact, religious and political meetings are strictly forbidden. Also, Mrs. Thompson made it clear that she never wanted intoxicating liquor consumed there.” The clubhouse was built during the rise of the temperance movement in the United States, which promoted alcohol abstinence, and it was open during the Prohibition era, when there was a federal ban on the sale of alcohol from 1920 to 1933. Guests at Thompson Hall played pool, billiards, and bowling in the basement until a bar counter was installed sometime before the 1950s. The bar is now open for guests.

Although the ban on alcohol consumption ended long ago, Thompson Hall has continued to honor Margaret Thompson’s desire for a clubhouse with no membership fees. This has set it apart from other Deaf clubs, which have charged members annually to raise revenue for operating costs. Instead, Thompson Hall has solicited donations, rented the building, and invested.

That “the deaf of St. Paul and Minneapolis own a handsome clubhouse, under their own management,” is largely why Thompson Hall is recognized as a national Deaf landmark. Contributing to this sense of ownership, “much of the furniture of the house has been given by the deaf themselves or their friends.” A local Deaf couple donated the silver in the dining room, Margaret Thompson the seating for the first floor and the pool tables, another local family set up the grandfather clock, and the Noyes family hung a life-size portrait of Dr. Jonathan Lovejoy Noyes, superintendent of the Minnesota School for the Deaf from 1866 to 1896.

With no membership fees and its deaf-friendly design, residents of nearby towns and Upper Midwest states have flocked to Thompson Hall over the years. Recognized as “the finest club for the deaf in the world,” Thompson Hall earned a reputation for being “the social center” for the Minnesota Deaf community.

DANCES, MOVIES, PLAYS, AND EASTER BUNNIES

In its prime, the Deaf club regularly hosted social events such as dances and silent movie nights. A 1930s periodical described dances accompanied by a live orchestra and club members dancing to the beat of the drums. Saturday movie nights were especially popular. Club leaders purchased motion pictures for showings until the advent of talkies. Thompson Hall also hosted state association gatherings, guest presentations, religious lectures, vaudeville shows, and banquets. There were game nights,
sporting events, and Miss Deaf Minnesota pageants held at the club. Visits from a Deaf Santa Claus and signing Easter Bunny were among the special activities for children.20

As early as the 1920s, long before such classes were offered elsewhere locally, the Deaf club pioneered American Sign Language classes. Several new organizations for the deaf were spawned there, including the Minnesota Athletic Club and a local chapter of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf, also known as the Frat. The clubhouse provided a built-in network for spreading information about employment opportunities with job postings.21

For 45 years, beginning in 1957, the Thompson Hall Newsletter was a crucial source of local, state, and regional news. Mailed to subscribers and shared in-house, columns were devoted to news from Minnesota Deaf clubs in St. Cloud and Rochester. While news about Thompson Hall activities was featured, along with calendars of upcoming events, meeting minutes, and full-page promotions of events, such as Super Bowl and New Year’s Eve parties and Halloween, Thanksgiving, Kwanzaa, and Christmas celebrations, the newsletter’s scope was broad. Resembling a small-town newspaper, it featured birth notices, obituaries, engagement and retirement notices, stories about people’s travels, classified ads, church announcements, conference highlights, and sports pages. Each spring, congratulations were offered to deaf high school graduates by name. In later years it highlighted legislation and social issues, such as a requirement that teachers of deaf children be proficient in ASL, protests over the proposed closure of the deaf school, and problems posed by “deaf peddlers” (sellers of items such as ASL alphabet cards for money). Prior to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media, Thompson Hall was the local communications hub.22

Any language proficiency is welcome at Thompson Hall, but it is a space that values sign language. Entering the building, guests see sign language used everywhere. Today, new signers and interpreting students still come for coffee on Fridays to learn and practice. Others stop by on weekends for game nights or poker matches. They may stay for hours, sometimes well into the night, to talk and share gossip and stories. Thompson Hall has brought people together who would not otherwise see each other, whether it be for Deaf Night Out events or Vikings football games.

Many Deaf Minnesotans have developed lifelong ties. In 1966, while attending Gallaudet College in Washington, DC, Deaf students from Minnesota wired a telegram to the Deaf club in celebration of its fiftieth anniversary. Andrew Bjarnvold said that when Fridays roll around, “I still wish I was there at Thompson Hall even though I live in a different state now.”23

“IF THERE’S ONE PLACE I EVER WANT TO BE, IT’S THERE”

Given Thompson Hall’s place in Deaf history and culture, it is surprising how little research has been done on it. Outside of interviews with Gordon Allen and Doug Bahl conducted in the
mid-1990s, there appear to have been no recorded oral histories until now.

Bjarnvold, a Minnesota native, now a Maryland resident, became emotional as he recounted his personal history. He called Thompson Hall a “treasured place” and said, “if there’s one place I ever want to be, it’s there.” Born to hearing parents and with an older deaf sister, Bjarnvold was introduced to Thompson Hall only after transferring to the residential school in Faribault at age 13. It was “love at first sight.” That Thompson Hall was a multigenerational space was striking: “It’s one of the beautiful aspects of the Deaf club, because it passes on three and four generations deep the history and the stories and the lore.” What Bjarnvold loved most was hearing stories, especially stories shared by older people. It illustrated “how we share wisdom as Deaf community members.”

Marcia Frazer, a third-generation Deaf woman, has deeper roots. Her grandfather saw the clubhouse being built, her mother grew up spending time there, and Frazer was introduced to Thompson Hall as a baby. “I remember when I was a little girl, just seeing so many deaf people socializing and talking with each other had a big impact on my life.” The Deaf club became “a second home,” just as it was for her parents. She met the man who would become her husband at Thompson Hall, and it was there where he proposed marriage, her fondest memory.

The son of Deaf parents, Herman Fuechtman, current board president, also has deep roots. With his father, Ralph, serving as board president for 40 years, and mother, Karen, the longtime social committee chair, Fuechtman carries a trove of childhood memories, including giggling while throwing balled up paper wads down the staircase and eagerly awaiting gifts from the Deaf Santa.

“A gathering of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf at Thompson Hall in June 1950.

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Michael Cashman, who was born to a hearing family and became deaf as an adolescent, knew nothing of the club until he transferred to the Minnesota School for the Deaf as a teenager. It was “a place to breathe” where he felt a powerful sense of belonging and came to identify with Deaf community and Deaf culture. It was also “the center for Deaf life and Deaf communication” in the days before technologies like the internet and FaceTime. Though small, “it was important in the community . . . we could share who’s the best doctor or best mechanic in town. If you needed information, you went to Thompson Hall. . . . [It] really lives and breathes the community’s needs.”

Jess Eggert, Deaf Blind, was diagnosed with Usher syndrome at age 10. Accustomed to feeling left out at home and school, Eggert “fell in love” upon visiting Thompson Hall during her high school senior year. “My first visit gave me hope for my future as a young teenager because I saw Deaf people working as servers and board members. . . . Thompson Hall immediately felt like my second home.” For six years, Eggert has worked as a server most weekends.

Thompson Hall has long been an important place for John Lee Clark, a nationally prominent Deaf Blind poet, writer, and blogger based in St. Paul. In an email exchange, Clark wrote, “I’ve hosted fundraising potlucks, used the auditorium for ‘Quiz Bowl’ tournaments, and so on. And when I graduated from high school, my parents decided to use Thompson Hall as the location for my ‘open house.’ Most recently I used some space there for ProTactile (PT) linguistics data collection.”

Del Anderson, a Maryland native who arrived in Minnesota from Georgia, serves as a Minnesota Deaf Queers (MDQ) event volunteer. Having grown up mainstreamed, she recounted being introduced to Thompson Hall by a friend. Finding it welcoming and accepting, Anderson eventually tended bar and held a cleaning position. Still, local LGBTQ+ bars, such as Rumours and Club Metro, were the “main meeting place; the Deaf (queer) community really grew there.”

Even though they had said the Deaf club is for everyone, not just for white folks only, we didn’t feel a sense of connection to the space anymore.” As a result, Black Deaf Advocates began seeking alternative venues.

Behavior is different around people of color right now

Long priding itself for being welcoming and inclusive, Thompson Hall was a highly gendered space in its early years, and those who identify as BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ in 2022 do not always feel welcome. As such, it has mirrored American culture. In the beginning, men and women were largely segregated from one another. Women would take care of the cooking, organize potlucks, and mind the children, while men played poker, smoked cigars, and voted. “Back in the day, women and men did not socialize together; typically that was done separately,” recounted Herman Fuechtmann. “They might briefly interact, but then they would separate, so the women would hang out upstairs and the men would hang out downstairs, and the basement had the smokers’ lounge . . . where [men] would smoke their pipes and cigars.”

Originally, only men were eligible to participate and vote in meetings, said Fuechtmann. Movable windows in the auditorium allowed women to tend to their children while watching the stage from the “cry room,” but they did not engage in decision-making. “There are stories about men meeting in that space and women not being allowed to enter and needing to wait outside and they could still watch through the windows . . . because ASL is a visual language, they could still see what they [the men] were discussing . . . At the end of the meeting, [the men would] come out and their wives would yell at them about ‘why are you talking about that,’ ‘why did you say that?’” Women were even barred from performing in productions, so men played all roles, said Bjarnvold. Women formed their own local chapter of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (#127) and organized their own sports teams, such as the Margaret Silents in the 1920s. While women can vote now and no one interviewed cited sexism as a problem in 2022—which does not mean it is absent—the same could not be said of racism.

Kim Wassenaar, a native Ohioan, who self-identifies first as Black, second as Deaf, and third as a woman, discovered she was hard of hearing as a child. When she moved to Minnesota in 1978, “the whole town was new to me at the same time my hearing had declined rapidly.” Wassenaar found herself wondering, “Where exactly do I fit in, as a Black Deaf woman, in this community? I didn’t see many Black Deaf people around.”
It was only after meeting another Black Deaf woman who, like Wassenaar, used sign language and spoken language simultaneously, that she was encouraged to become more engaged with the community. At the time, she knew nothing of Thompson Hall. “The Deaf club wasn’t my space per se as a Black woman, but it was a Deaf space, and so I was a little bit nervous about that; I didn’t know if they would accept me.” Unlike some other Deaf clubs in major US cities, Thompson Hall never implemented a formal policy enforcing racial segregation, but attendance at the club has been predominantly white.

Wassenaar was pleased to find that she was warmly received at the beginning. Wassenaar’s relationship with Thompson Hall in the 1980s and 1990s was “really phenomenal, honestly.” She credited the social committee’s chair, Karen Fuechtmann: “We called her Mama F. She was the one who really made it a welcoming, warm, inclusive environment, very willing to work with us; it felt like a safe place.”

In 1997, Wassenaar founded the St. Paul/Minneapolis chapter of Black Deaf Advocates. Thompson Hall, under Karen Fuechtmann’s leadership, supported Wassenaar’s proposal to have the clubhouse host Kwanzaa celebrations organized by the Black Deaf Advocates, beginning in December 1998. “The media showed up, word got out about our very first Kwanzaa celebration event . . . and it was just amazing, the whole community came out for the celebration.” Potlucks, fundraising events, summer cookouts, and winter banquets, all held at the Deaf club, followed. Wassenaar enjoyed baby and wedding showers and game nights at Thompson Hall, too.

“When she [Karen Fuechtmann] passed away [in February 2010] it just seemed like a dark cloud came over the Deaf club.” Black community members who had been welcomed warmly were “deeply hurt” by attitudes that surfaced. There were accusations of theft and instances of the “the N-word” being directed at them. “Even though they had said the Deaf club is for everyone, not just for white folks only, we didn’t feel a sense of connection to the space anymore.” As a result, Black Deaf Advocates began seeking alternative venues—the public library, bookstores, facilities at Como Park.

“We don’t have a permanent location. Thompson Hall was that location for us, but it’s not any longer.” While her initial experience with Thompson Hall “was beautiful,” Wassenaar said, “It’s scary now.” Until racist behavior is addressed, Wassenaar said, she does not foresee returning.

Pam Burry, a Bronx native who moved to Minnesota in 1987 and serves as Black Deaf liaison for the group Minnesota Deaf Queers (MDQ), echoed Wassenaar. “A lot has changed,” she said. In recent years, beginning in 2015 or 2016—perhaps a reflection of what was happening nationally—Burry witnessed open name-calling and other forms of blatantly racist behavior at Thompson Hall. When she and others raised concerns, they faced resistance: “If there’s a point at which we try to bring up some of the bigger issues, people tend to avoid it.” This was troubling. “Behavior is different around people of color right now” than in the past, she said.31

The Margaret Silents basketball team, sponsored by the Charles Thompson Memorial Hall deaf club, 1921. In the front row, from left to right, are Nina B. Wright, Alta (Neal) Henneman, and Rosie Ploshinski. In the middle row, from left to right, are Mary Werner, Ethel Doran, Betty Ploshinski, and Helen Franklin. In the back row, from left to right, are Evelyn Coyne, Edna M. Hansen, and coach Paul Senkbeil.

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Going forward, Burry said, “I want to make sure that there’s mutual respect there, especially for people of color.” For her, that means, “People need to learn and change, and there should be a stronger response. Instead of a tap on the hand as a consequence, there should be something like, ‘You’re not welcome here unless you’re able to change your attitude,’ instead of allowing people to continue that inappropriate behavior.” Burry pondered launching a Black Deaf club. Historically, due to racial segregation, Black Deaf clubs have existed in some US cities, but not in the Twin Cities.

Jessalyn Akerman-Frank, who is white, has served as a member of the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens (MADC), founded the Deaf LGBTQI Annual Awards, worked as an MDQ organizer, and cofounded Deaf Equity, a Minnesota-based nonprofit that serves the Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing community. As a Deaf Equity board member, she has pushed for Thompson Hall, with its long history as a white-run organization, to undergo change. She emphasized that making Thompson Hall an accessible, more inclusive space is a very long process, but that change was happening. Black Deaf Advocates has helped develop a new inclusive policy based on a report spearheaded by Burry.

Board of trustees president Fuechtmann understands that there “is still more work to be done to raise awareness and racial tolerance within the community. . . . [T]he evolution and/or revolution regarding race relations within the Deaf community in the Twin Cities and Minnesota in general has not started yet.” He observed that a familiar tension found in other Deaf spaces is prevalent at Thompson Hall, as deafness is often prioritized at the risk of minimizing other identities, such as race. Fuechtmann acknowledged that “often deafness is addressed first” at the cost of excluding and marginalizing other communities.

**Accessibility, Both Needed and Expensive**

Designed in a pre–Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) world, Thompson Hall does not have an elevator, and because of that does not comply with ADA standards for accessible design. To be rented it must become ADA-compliant, but adding an elevator comes with a $3 million price tag.

After the ADA was enacted in 1990, groups that rented space and held events at the Deaf club no longer could. “Government agencies who used to rent out those spaces for workshops, for trainings, now can’t use our space anymore. . . . so that’s another place where we’ve lost rental revenue,” said Fuechtmann. This meant a significant loss of income—income necessary for continued operations.

Fundraising, to date, has brought in over $500,000, with efforts to raise the remaining funds well underway at the time this article was written. Everyone interviewed agreed that an elevator is essential, both because of rental income and because it is the right thing to do to welcome people with physical disabilities and seniors, who have long been the most active users of the space. Jessalyn Akerman-Frank said, “without an elevator, it does not feel like a second home. Without the elevator, we are encouraging an unused Deaf club.”

Although being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, we’re eligible to receive different grants, some federal funding, some state funding, to be able to help with the cost of those renovations, and we just received a fairly large grant.”

**“Without Thompson Hall, where would I go?”**

The drive to raise funds for an elevator comes at a time when the number of Deaf clubs has declined dramatically. There were once over a dozen clubs in New York City alone. Now, only one, on Staten Island, owns its building in 2022. While Austin’s Deaf club is still operating, several others in Texas have shut their doors. A similar decline is reported in other places, as several European countries are struggling to attract Deaf youth to clubs.

Acknowledging that the introduction of new communication technologies, including the Tele typewriter and VideoPhone, is most frequently cited as the main reason for Deaf clubs’ declining popularity,
There’s just not as many people coming . . . before it was the place where you would meet and date people and enjoy each other.” In 2022, Google has the answers and TikTok has the friends.

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries point to other factors: “A more likely account is that Deaf clubs declined because of powerful shifts in Deaf people’s work lives leading to the growth of a Deaf middle class.” Noting that most clubs were started by people employed in factory and industrial jobs, they observe, “There was such a large influx of Deaf people in the city . . . that the club became the best place to meet friends and, for many young single Deaf men and women, a way to scout out possible marriage partners.” Clubs became less popular as Deaf men and women earned college degrees, advanced professionally, and became part of a growing middle class in the 1960s. “As cultural institutions and physical spaces, clubs became identified with an older way of life that held little attraction for the newly emerging professional class.”

This has decreased the need to gather at Deaf clubs as social hubs, “there’s just not as many people coming . . . before it was the place where you would meet and date people and enjoy each other.” In 2022, Google has the answers and TikTok has the friends, something not lost on Herman Fuechtmann:

I think there’s less of a reason to go to a Deaf club; people would rather stay home and watch TV or call somebody on the video phone. [They] aren’t as motivated to go out and meet other people. They would rather just socialize with people that they know which limits them to 10 to 15 people, whereas if they were to attend the Deaf club, they would meet many more people, interact with more people.

As this happens, Fuechtmann voiced concern that the Deaf community was fragmenting. “Each group will host their own events, but they won’t attend each other’s,” and this has consequences. “Some of Deaf culture is now lost because people aren’t getting that personal bond or developing that trust” by meeting outside of their social circles.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, many became cautious about visiting in person. Thompson Hall “has taken a big hit and people are not returning. . . . It seems people have found other avenues for their free time,” Fuechtmann said. Current attendance is roughly 30 percent of what it was before the pandemic, and it’s recovering very slowly, he reported. “Our revenues are currently less than our operating costs . . . hopefully we will see a boost in donations or rental income and start making a profit that can be used toward needed renovations.”

As with other Deaf clubs, those members who have remained most active have tended to be older. Thompson Hall’s survival depends on “winning over the minds and hearts of the younger generation,” warned Andrew Bjarnvold. Asked how he would feel if Thompson Hall disappeared, he said, “Now, if I were to see that Deaf club gone, that would be absolutely heart-wrenching.” If the club and deaf schools were to close their doors, Michael Cashman said, “we will see serious harm to the Deaf community. . . . Without those spaces, where will we expose deaf children to language, culture, and identity?”

Even those who have not always felt welcome at Thompson Hall, including MDQ members, mourned the thought that there could come a day when it closes. “The Deaf community wouldn’t have any place to go. It’s gotta stay,” said one member. A desire to see Thompson Hall remain open and foster a more accepting environment was voiced by Kim Wassenaar. “I want to see Thompson Hall function as a family reunion where people feel safe and welcome to come and leave.” Jess Eggert expressed a common concern: “without Thompson Hall, where would I go?”

Notes

1. Throughout this article, we will use the uppercase Deaf to refer to Deaf culture and community. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries coined the uppercase Deaf and lowercase deaf to distinguish between the audiological and cultural experience of being deaf. The uppercase Deaf refers to the cultural experience, denoting Deaf people who use sign language and are members of the Deaf community, whereas the lowercase deaf identifies the audiological condition of deafness: Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Ray Oldenburg, The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community (New York: Marlowe & Co., 1999), 16. Sociologist Oldenburg writes: “The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.”

American Deaf Culture has been identified as one of the very few cultures that is primarily transmitted horizontally, not vertically. Vertical transmission refers to a culture that is passed down from parent to child and through various social institutions such as the school or
government. By contrast, a horizontal culture refers to one that is shared among peers. For more, see Andrew Solomon, Far from the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity (New York: Scribner, 2012).

Carol Padden, “The Decline of Deaf Clubs in the United States: A Treatise on the Problem of Place,” in Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 175. Padden writes: “Now if one visits one of the few remaining Deaf clubs, it feels as if traveling back in time: the elderly sitting in meeting halls, playing cards perhaps, and gossiping about friends.”


3. The US Census identified “disabling” hearing loss for around 11.5 million Americans, which is 3.5 percent of the population, while a 2016 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey identified 5.9 percent. Those percentages include all ages, including age-related hearing loss, so the percentage of Americans who are members of the American Deaf community is much lower: Catherine A. Okoro, NaTasha D. Hollis, Alissa C. Cyrus, and Shannon Griffin-Blake, “Prevalence of Disabilities and Health Care Access by Disability Status and Type Among Adults—United States, 2016,” Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report 67, no. 32 (Aug. 17, 2018): 882–87, dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6732a3.

We focus on US history for this article, but we recognize that deafness did not begin with European arrival. There were already deaf individuals living in various tribes across the nation. There were also already multiple systems used as a “signed lingua franca” among Native American communities in North America prior to European colonization. Signs were accepted as a sophisticated form of communication among many communities, so historians have found that Indigenous deaf were able to assimilate. For further reading, we suggest Kim E. Nielsen, A Disability History of the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012) and Jeffrey E. Davis, Hand Talk: Sign Language Among American Indian Nations (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

The first state-sponsored deaf school was the American School in Connecticut, founded by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. Prior to that, deaf children of means were either shipped to European schools or privately educated.

As deaf schools steadily opened across the nation, white Deaf children could now access education and literacy in large numbers, but Black Deaf children faced inequitable access. While some northern schools were racially integrated, that was not the case for southern states. West Virginia held out on funding a school for Black Deaf children until 1926, and Louisiana, until 1938. For more, read Susan Burch, Signs of Resilience: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II (New York: New York University Press, 2002). For more on the history of the Minnesota school, which started with eight students, we recommend J. L. Noyes, “The Hygiene of the Deaf and Dumb and of the Blind,” American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb 26, no. 3 (July 1881). It was not until 30 years after its opening that the first Black Deaf woman, Blanche Wilkins Williams, graduated from the Minnesota School for the Deaf and Dumb in Fairbault (now the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf). J. H. Cloud, “Mrs. Blanche (Wilkins) Williams,” The Silent Worker 38, no. 5 (Feb. 1926): 225.

American Sign Language grew from a combination of many signed systems at deaf schools. The language organically grew from the combination of student home signs, Martha’s Vineyard Signs, indigenous signed lingua franca, and Parisian Sign Language (LSF). Home signs refer to the gesturally based signs used at individual homes by deaf children, developed to communicate with their hearing families. Martha’s Vineyard Signs refers to signs deaf children brought from Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts, an island known for its high incidence of genetic deafness. Over the years, deaf students and staff blended those sign systems to form American Sign Language as we know it today. Black ASL also emerged during the nineteenth century, as segregated Black Deaf students developed their own variation of sign language: see Carolyn McCaskell, Cecil Lucas, Robert Bayley, and Joseph Christopher Hill, The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2020) for more.

4. For more on the rise of American Oratism during the nineteenth century, we suggest Douglas C. Baynton, Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Baynton explores how the pervasive desire for normalcy and assimilation encouraged fierce criticism against sign language. For more on the battle between Oratism and Manualism, we also recommend Edwards, Words Made Flesh.

Dr. Wyatte C. Hall has written extensively about the many benefits of bilingual exposure; see Wyatte C. Hall, “What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You: The Risk of Language Deprivation by Impairing Sign Language Development in Deaf Children,” Maternal Child Health Journal 21, no. 5 (2017). Hearing linguist William Stokoe, along with Dorothy Casterline and Carl Croneberg, published A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles (Washington, DC: Gallaudet College Press) in 1965. Prior to this, ASL was long presented as sophisticated gestures or pantomime. It was not yet seen as a language of its own, on par with spoken or written languages. Stokoe’s research legitimized ASL as a complex language with syntax and grammar, just like any spoken language—and led to a boom of linguistic research after the 1960s delving into the complexity of signed languages and the importance of language acquisition for Deaf children. See also Burch, Signs of Resilience, 5.


8. 75th Anniversary, 1916–1991: Charles Thompson Memorial Hall (St. Paul, MN, 1991), 8. Other Deaf people were attracted to the site of the Thompsons’ Lake Darling summer home and built on adjoining lots, earning it the description “Deaf Colony.” Thompson Hall National Register form, 10. Howard’s remarks were made at Thompson Hall’s dedication ceremony.


12. Douglas D. Bahl, “Charles Thompson Memorial Hall,” in Charles Thompson Memorial Hall 75th Anniversary brochure, 5; “Charles Thompson Memorial Hall: A Gift to the Deaf People of Minnesota by Mrs. Charles Thompson, as a Memorial to Her Husband, the late Charles Thompson,” The Companion 42, no. 2 (Nov. 15, 1916): 2–3, charlesthompsonhall.org/history/h-photos/the-companion-magazine. It was said that “In no other city has there been erected a club house for deaf-mutes.” Thompson Hall National Register form, 9, 10. Thompson Hall
was built at a time when Deaf clubs were beginning to flourish in large and medium-sized cities nationally.

Herman Fuechtmann, interview by the authors, Feb. 2, 2022, and email, Aug. 24, 2022: “In 1919, the trustees began appointing members to a finance committee to manage the trust and the Deaf club’s portfolio, making prudent investments so that funds in the endowment grow. The first board members in 1916 when the building was completed and incorporated were Mr. B. C. Thompson (hearing nephew of Charles); president; Mr. Lawrence W. Hodgman (deaf friend of the Thompsons), vice-president; Mr. D. D. Smith (a hearing lawyer and manager of Margaret Thompson’s affairs), secretary-treasurer; Mr. Horace Thompson (hearing nephew of Charles); and Mr. William Brooks (hearing brother of Margaret). From 1916 to the late 1940s, the board of trustees had between two to four hearing persons and one to three deaf persons. In 1951, the last of Margaret’s family retired from the board, and since that time, the board was entirely deaf.”


14. Until the 1980s the building had a hearing, signing caretaker, in part so that someone who could make phone calls was available on-site. Now with videophones and the Video Relay System, the Deaf community can make their own calls, so they have since hired Deaf caretakers. As of this article’s publication, Thompson Hall still employs a deaf caretaker. The caretaker lives in the private quarters on the first floor with a living room, kitchen, and bathroom and is responsible for building upkeep and maintenance. William Robert Roe, Peeps into the Deaf World (Derby, England: Bemrose and Sons, Ltd., 1917), 111.


17. Allen interview; Wesley Lauritsen, “Charles Thompson Memorial Hall Serves Deaf for 50 Years,” Thompson Hall Newsletter (Dec. 1966): 5. Dr. Lauritsen was a board of trustees member. Herman Fuechtmann confirmed in an email that Margaret Thompson was a supporter of the temperance movement.


21. Thompson Hall National Register form, 14, and Fuechtmann email, Aug. 24, 2022. St. Paul order #61 was chartered in February 1917 and hosted a national convention in 1924. The purpose of the organization was initially for burial benefits. Life, sickness, and accident coverage was added.

22. The Thompson Hall Newsletter and Minnesota Deaf Newsletter are housed at the MNHS. In 2002, the final year of publication, Thompson Hall Newsletter became the Minnesota Deaf Newsletter.

23. Andrew Bjarnvold, interview by the authors, Feb. 15, 2022.

24. Marcia Frazer, interview by the authors, Mar. 18, 2022. Thompson Hall is where Frazer became aware of and involved with the Deaf community and culture: “that’s where I learned it.”

25. Michael Cashman, interview by the authors, Mar. 18, 2022.


28. Del Anderson, interview by the authors, Apr. 8, 2022.


30. Kim Wassenaar, interview by the authors, Apr. 5, 2022.

31. Pam Burry, interview by the authors, Apr. 8, 2022.

32. Jessalyn Akerman-Frank, interview by the authors, Apr. 8, 2022: “When it comes down to having dialogues or taking leadership positions and that kind of thing, that’s where you notice that it’s a very white-run organization that’s difficult to change, and so we’ve suggested that they take up an antiracism training, also LGBTQ trainings. It was only with more visibility that people became aware of an LGBTQ presence at Thompson Hall, she said: ‘We hosted one huge gala event for the LGBT awards. … [A]t one of the big events we had our rainbow flag … and I think some of the older people got a little bit uncomfortable or maybe bug-eyed about that.’ Those lacking knowledge were able to ask questions: ‘I think that’s where our community members have felt more pride and support.”

33. Herman Fuechtmann, email, Mar. 16, 2021.

34. The current estimated cost of construction and renovation is $3,153,400. Save Thompson Hall Renovation/Elevator Project, savethompsonhall.org/fundraising.

35. Akerman-Frank interview.

36. Fuechtmann email, Aug. 24, 2022: “For the renovations and elevator project (REP), we have received three Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage Grants from the Minnesota Historical Society. The first was a $10,000 small grant for Historic Structure Report (HSR) in 2015. Large grant of $116,000 for Construction Documents in 2019, and the current grant that was awarded in 2022 of $216,000 for restoration of the front porch. Where we stand in terms of fundraising and grants: We have collected approximately $600,000 towards the REP. The total for the entire project which consists of 10 specific projects and phases is $3.5 million which means we have $2.9 million remaining to raise.”


38. Padden and Humphries, Inside Deaf Culture, 87, 89, 95.

39. Thompson Hall National Register form, 15; Frazer interview; Fuechtmann interview.

For the impact of digital technologies, see Gill Valentine and Tracey Skelton, “Changing Spaces: The Role of the Internet in Shaping Deaf Geographies,” Social & Cultural Geography 9, no. 5 (Aug. 2008): 476. The authors devote much of their attention to the critical role Deaf clubs have played in the transmission of Deaf culture and values: “Prior to the emergence of the internet, Deaf communities were socially embedded in Deaf clubs. The rhythms of the Deaf club dominated Deaf people’s weekly routines because this was the main (and for some the only) space where they could communicate in sign language with other Deaf people and access information in their own language.”

40. Fuechtmann email, Aug. 24, 2022. Since the outbreak, Marcia Frazer, who is focused on caring for her mother, has refrained from participating in activities at Thompson Hall.

41. Bjarnvold interview; Cashman interview.

42. Wassenaar interview; Eggert interview.

Images on p. 120 and 127 from MNHS collections. All others from the Minnesota Commission of the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing.
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