

PREFACE

The incessant cannonade at the Battle of Gettysburg in early July 1863 shook the earth at Henry Spangler's farm off Emmitsburg Road near the Confederate line. The deaf owner hid in the cellar for three days as the bloody battle raged. Spangler's barn was burned down, and his woods became the staging area for General George E. Pickett's blinding charge on Cemetery Ridge. Confederate artillery on Spangler's land fired shot after shot prior to General James Longstreet's assault on Federal troops. In a small village four miles west, windows rattled and walls cracked from the intensity of the battle noise. In Pittsburgh, 150 miles west, farmers could hear the distant rumbling of artillery, and they searched the skies for an approaching storm.

Yet strangely, at a distance of about ten miles from the battle, an eerie silence prevailed. "Acoustic shadows," the result of sound absorption, wind shear, and temperature gradients, prevented those who saw the flash and smoke of the guns from hearing the sounds, even at such a short distance. This phenomenon was reported a number of times during the Civil War, including at the battles of Fair Oaks (Southern name, "Seven Pines"), Iuka, Fort Donelson, Five Forks, Chaplin Hills (Southern name, "Perryville"), and Chancellorsville.¹ The Battle of Five Forks on April 1, 1865, took place only a few days before General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. It was fought between armies led by Union Major General Philip H. Sheridan and Confederate Major General George E. Pickett. Pickett's failure to hear the thunderous confrontation while standing less than two miles to the rear of his own line on the rolling terrain resulted in his responding too late to change the course of that battle.

As a deaf physicist with an interest in history, I became fascinated by this notion of not hearing sounds of such magnitude when the source is so near. This led me to a metaphor in my writing about the American Civil War. There were so many different ways that deaf and hard of hearing people participated in the war, yet awareness of their involvement remained in the "shadows"—until this first book on the subject was published. There have been analyses focusing on disabilities during and after the war, but there is no literature on the capabilities that made deaf people an integral part of the Civil War story.

The shadows hiding their participation may be partly due to the oppression they experienced. Deaf people were

often viewed as insignificant, ignorant, or inferior. It became clear to me that little was known about the extent to which deaf people put aside their own struggles with such attitudes, and the daily communication challenges they experienced, as they lived and fought during the turmoil of the Civil War.

Unlike most of my previous books, this study is not a biography of one person. It is not a single story. Rather, it is a collection of the diverse experiences of people whose deafness could be attributed to a variety of causes, with a range of ages of onset. They came from a variety of environments and held many different views on what a deaf person could or could not do in a time of crisis such as a civil war.

Every deaf soldier's story I found was unique. No two deaf men joined the same company or even the same regiment. Most deaf soldiers did not even know that other deaf men had enlisted. Members of the nascent deaf community did not work together to participate in any single war effort. By piecing together hundreds of individual stories, I have put into words the "deaf experience" during the Civil War.

The distinctive stories about deaf soldiers and civilians a century and a half ago reflect their diversity. One story involves a deaf university president from the North trapped in the South when the war began. Another describes a deaf woman war correspondent from Missouri who reported from Washington City. Still another story focuses on the battles of a deaf newspaper editor in Iowa to express his opinions freely while Southern sympathizers threatened his life. A deaf poet in Virginia details how she was imprisoned for espionage in support of the Confederacy. Some of these characters were acoustically deaf, but not culturally deaf. Others were deeply involved with the growing deaf community. This book is the first ever to describe in a collective manner the deaf experience during the Civil War. This alone is a worthy focus, as the informative compilation sheds new light on how a unique citizenry lived and fought during the war.

Second, there is a unifying theme that brings the stories together—the Civil War opened windows of opportunity for deaf people to become involved on a national level. In effect, the war gave deaf people an identity as American citizens. Contrary to the perception of deaf people as recipients

of charity who were considered needy or distressed “unfortunates” in society, deaf citizens are revealed in this book as people who were empowered by the crisis.

But just as military leaders during the Civil War appeared unaware of nearby activity because of acoustical shadows, the metaphoric shadows in which deaf people lived resulted in a lack of awareness about the extent of their participation in this epic crisis. In turn, this lack of awareness perpetuated a belief that deaf people were isolated from society. Perhaps this partly explains the disheartening movement after the Civil War to ban the use of sign language in schools for deaf children. That the use of sign language was considered a factor in the isolation of deaf people from hearing society has been well documented. Those who held this belief rarely gave thought to how society itself isolated deaf people, both those who signed and those who did not.

This unifying theme also focuses on how the lack of awareness of the contributions of deaf people in society has led to continued marginalization and discrimination. Even today, hearing society remains largely unaware of deaf people’s significant accomplishments in nearly every field of endeavor.

My metaphor of “fighting in the shadows” during the Civil War, however, goes far beyond the notion of the invisibility of deaf people in this national crisis. The adventitious deafness experienced by many of the characters in this book (those who became deaf after birth) was also a “shadow” formed as they personally adjusted to a new way of living. Deafness, wrote the biographer of Frederick Augustus Porter Barnard, a Northerner who was chancellor of the University of Mississippi when the war began, “was to shadow his whole life.”² And the young Civil War newspaper correspondent Laura Catherine Redden, in her poem “Ten Years of Silence,” reflected on her profound deafness and “the dimming shadows by memory cast.”³ Her verse captured one of the challenges that many deafened individuals experienced—the gradual loss of acoustic memories over time.

Further, by “fighting in the shadows” I also include the anger and frustration that many deaf people felt as a result of general discrimination. “[Hearing people] are not satisfied with hearing,” stated the deaf Georgian John J. Flournoy five years before the Civil War, “nor with the usual mutual sympathies of their own class, but are banded and combined together in associations, open, and societies, secret, until they form a compact moral mechanism, that fairly by their majority, puts us in the shade.”⁴ “We are not beasts, for all our deafness!” he railed over this marginalization. “We are MEN!”⁵

Flournoy was an extremist who advocated not only the secession of the Southern states and deportation of African American people back to Africa or to Central America, but also the secession of deaf people from the larger society of hearing people through the formation of a commonwealth exclusively for the deaf population. Despite his mental and emotional struggles, however, this man held some valid opinions about the unfair treatment he and other deaf people were experiencing in the mid-nineteenth century.

Finally, the metaphor includes personal experiences and emotions of deaf people that paralleled those of hearing people during the war. The Civil War artist Conrad Wise Chapman from Virginia described the moment when he and his brother informed their father that they had decided to leave Italy and return home to join the Confederate army. “Go, my sons,” he told his boys, “and if I was not too old and deaf at that I would go also.” In reminiscing about his deaf father’s feelings, Chapman wrote that “a shadow passed across his brow and I knew at once he would have unsaid those words. It was too late.”⁶

Even the “benevolent institutions” that educated deaf children before the Civil War cast them into shadows of a different sort. As one school principal paternalistically stated in an annual report for a school in 1865, “With a bright world shining around them, their own spirits are shrouded in the darkness of ignorance. To remove this darkness and to introduce them to acquaintance with the things by which they are surrounded, to a knowledge of themselves and of that little world of thought within, is the great mission of this Institution. . . . These children of misfortune are intellectually and morally poor.”⁷

Yet, at the very moment this leader was expressing his opinion about the ignorance of deaf children, there were graduates of his school publishing in education journals. Some were establishing similar schools. Others were painting portraits of dignitaries, and many were working successfully in various trades alongside hearing persons. During the Civil War, there were graduates from his school supporting the armies in many ways. The “darkness of ignorance” he wrote about was rhetorical. These schools were making a difference in the lives of deaf children.

In the *New York Times* on April 11, 2011, Ken Burns, the director of the documentary series *The Civil War*, affirmed the relevance of the seemingly distant battles of the mid-nineteenth century to our twenty-first-century world. Using his own metaphor, Burns explained, “The acoustic shadows of the Civil War remind us that the more it recedes, the more important it becomes. Its lessons are as fresh today

as they were for those young men who were simply trying to survive its daily horrors.” Burns described an “emotional archaeology” compelling us to pursue new interpretations. He emphasized the importance of “bottom-up” stories of so-called ordinary soldiers and civilians, and the need “to revel in the inconvenient truths of nearly every aspect of the Civil War.”⁸

Such “bottom-up” stories about deaf people are what this book is all about. The stories about both ordinary and extraordinary deaf civilians and soldiers reveal their involvement in the war on many levels.

No matter what lens we use to examine the lives of deaf people in any period of history, we will find a disheartening measure of victimization and oppression. But when we dig deeper into the archaeology of a particular time, we can also find stories of leadership and heroics. This is true both for

culturally deaf people who communicated in sign language and began to form a social class during the antebellum period, and those who did not have the benefit of connections with a community of signers, but who tried to assimilate into society as best they could. All of these people faced attitudinal and communication barriers living among their hearing peers.

This book celebrates the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War in a unique way. It provides a new perspective on the deaf community at the middle of the nineteenth century. This is not a story of battling for survival and respect in a paternalistic world, but one of overcoming the barriers introduced by deafness, and joining forces with hearing citizens in order to shape the nation’s future. It represents the first comprehensive attempt to address the deaf American experience of the Civil War.