

## 1.45-2.15

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*A Philadelphia Story, Part I: Exploring the Origins of Philadelphia ASL*

Schools for the deaf are recognized as sources of linguistic variation in signed languages. Sex-segregated schools in Dublin likely led to differences in the Irish Sign Language vocabulary once used by men and women (LeMaster & Dwyer 1991). Regional variation in British Sign Language has been tied to the independent establishment of deaf residential schools across the UK (Schembri et al. 2010). Black ASL developed in part in the segregated deaf schools of the Southern US (McCaskill et al. 2020). Philadelphia ASL is thought to be a regional variety of ASL with origins at the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (PSD, est. 1820; Fisher et al. 2018). For example, Philadelphia ASL has unique signs for the months, whereas mainstream ASL uses fingerspelled abbreviations (e.g., D-E-C for December). When did Philadelphia ASL develop and what may have driven linguistic variation at PSD?

In this talk, we outline our research on the early American Deaf community; see Figure 1A. We then focus on the origins of Philadelphia ASL. We report demographic characteristics of the 759 PSD students who were admitted to the school from 1820 to 1853. 470 students (62.0%) matriculated at PSD from hometowns that were greater than 50 miles from the school. PSD's student body was like those of other early deaf schools, with which PSD had close ties through shared faculty and students—e.g., James Wheeler attended four schools, including PSD. PSD's catchment area likely contracted as deaf schools opened in surrounding areas, such as the Columbia school in D.C. (1857), the Western PA school near Pittsburgh (1869), and the NJ school in Trenton (1883); see Fisher et al. (2018). The Delaware school opened later in 1929. Our findings constrain the historical development of Philadelphia ASL and open the possibility that this sign variety may still be used in New Jersey and Delaware.

Fig. 1A. Hometowns of 4,539 students who attended 10 US schools for the deaf, 1817–1853. Colors indicate different schools. Fig. 1B. 289 students whose hometowns were within 50 miles of PSD (blue) and 470 students whose hometowns were greater than 50 miles from PSD (red).

References

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## **2.15-2.45**

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*A Philadelphia Story, Part II: Name Signs in the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (1821–1854)*

Records of signed languages are sparse prior to the invention of film and video. Early records of ASL include sketches of manual alphabets and signs (Akerly 1821) and prose descriptions of signs (Peet 1853). Supalla (1992) identified one instance of an ASL name sign in the admissions records of the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf (PSD). We examine all 550 name signs recorded for the 807 students admitted to PSD, 1821–1854. To our knowledge, this data set is unique. The sign descriptions in these records shed light on the history of ASL vocabulary and phonology and on the naming practices of PSD's early signing community. Historical linguistics of ASL. In their descriptions of name signs, PSD's records refer to handshapes and to parts of the hand that contact the body. These descriptions can illuminate historical changes to ASL vocabulary. The ASL sign 'ten' is thought to be derived from the French Sign Language (LSF) sign 'one' (Fischer 1996), which has an extended thumb. The modern ASL sign 'one' differs from LSF in that the index finger is extended, not the thumb. The modern sign is attested in three dictionaries from the 1910s and 20s; see [hsldb.georgetown.edu](http://hsldb.georgetown.edu). Descriptions of the name signs of five PSD students make it likely that the historical form of 'one' at PSD was a relic of LSF: e.g., Abraham Smith's (admitted 1846) name sign was "The hand shut, thumb extended as for one, the end of the thumb on the angle of the jaw under the

ear". These data suggest that the change in ASL from the LSF form to the modern sign occurred after 1854 and before 1918, when the first of the early ASL dictionaries was published. Other name signs reveal phonological changes. Modern forms of the D-handshape have an extended index finger and a circle formed by the thumb and middle, ring, and little fingers. Joseph Diamond's (admitted 1839) name sign suggests that the early form of the D-handshape included contact between only the thumb and middle finger: "The manual letter 'd' applied so that the nails of the thumb and middle finger touch the chin in front."

Name sign systems. Supalla argued that early European naming systems were descriptive of the person's appearance or behavior (descriptive name signs, DNSs) and that a new onomastic system (arbitrary name signs, ANSs) was imported to the US in 1817 when Laurent Clerc, a deaf Frenchman, helped found the American School for the Deaf in Hartford. This new system incorporated handshapes from the manual alphabet linked to an individual's written name. According to Supalla, Clerc introduced this new onomastic system to PSD in 1821-22, when he served as interim principal. From 1821 to 1833, the admissions records of only 37 of 286 students include a name sign; many are descriptive. Jacob Gross's (admitted 1824) name sign was "Striking the ring finger of left hand. He having lost the first joint of that finger." Entries for other name signs from this period refer to handshapes of the ASL manual alphabet, but without either a discernible descriptive basis or any apparent link between those handshapes and the student's written name. From 1834 to 1854, the records of nearly all students (513/520) include the description of a name sign. Apart from two students in 1834 and 1838, the regular practice of incorporating a fingerspelling handshape drawn from the letters of a student's written name began in Fall 1839, when 11 of 23 newly-admitted students had ANSs. We conclude that the ANS system was not introduced to PSD by Clerc but was adopted in the late 1830s.

#### References

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