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FEATURED

Traveling statewide exhibit tells of deaf village near Edinburg

By Josette Keelor The Northern Virginia Daily
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Deaf historian Kathleen Brockway signs to a crowd at Shenandoah County Library in Edinburg on Thursday as she explains research of the Lantz Mill Deaf Village in Shenandoah County. A traveling display on the deaf community will be featured at the library through Nov. 1.

Rich Cooley/Daily

EDINBURG — Denise Drake remembers when she learned why her family used the same word in American Sign Language for “court” as they did for the town of Woodstock.

Her grandfather, Cleveland Christian, had grown up in the Lantz Mill Deaf Village west of

Edinburg, one of several large communities around the country that includes a significant number of residents who are deaf or hard of hearing.

In learning about the 18th- and 19th-century community from her grandfather, Drake discovered that the regional sign language of her ancestors used a hand sign for nearby Woodstock that was synonymous with the ASL word for court — because, even to this day, Woodstock is the only town in the vicinity that has a courthouse.

This was one of several stories from the community's history that Drake told using ASL on Thursday while attending the opening event of a traveling exhibit at Shenandoah County Library. The exhibit, offered through the Library of Virginia, has made its first stop in Edinburg because that is where the Lantz Mill community is. The exhibit will remain at the library at 514 Stoney Creek Blvd., Edinburg, until Nov. 1.

"Deaf community history is really an underrepresented part of our county's history," said library archivist Zachary Hottel.

"It's very exciting to not only share that there was a deaf community here in Shenandoah County but also a shared sign language that they developed," he said. "Basically, it was its own language that was developed in Lantz Mill."

Also at the exhibit opening were at least eight others who identified as "cousins" of the Lantz Mill community. Additional attendees included those from the American deaf community as well as current residents of the village who aren't deaf.

Many in the American deaf community know of the deaf village in Martha's Vineyard, said presenter and deaf historian Kathleen Brockway, but most don't know that Edinburg had one too.

Brockway, who signed using ASL for attendees and also spoke through a vocal interpreter, said she partnered with the state library after doing extensive research on Lantz Mill, interviewing current and past residents for a book she's planning to have published.

"I realized there's over 250 years of silence," she said of the village.

The mill sits on land originally purchased by Petter Hollar Sr., who moved to the area in the 1760s and later sold the village grist mill and land to Samuel Morrison Stuart who, in 1824, sold it

to the Lantz family, according to Brockway's booklet, "The Lost Shared Signing Community of Lantz Mills and Shenandoah County, Virginia." The first-known deaf person in the Hollar Sr. family was Barbara, born in 1740. Another daughter, Catherine, was also deaf. The booklet was commissioned by the Shenandoah County Historical Society as part of the county's 250th-anniversary celebration this year and provided at Thursday's presentation.

Another prominent businessman was local deaf entrepreneur William Christian, who moved to the village of Lantz Mill from three miles away to open a funeral and furniture business and was "one of the first know deaf-owned and run businesses in 19th century Virginia," the booklet says.

Christian opened Christian & Sons in 1877. The business ran for at least 80 years across three generations.

Lantz Mill, which has also been called Lantz Mills and Lantz's Mill, gets its name from the Lantz family.

There are a lot of similarities between the Lantz Mill Deaf Village and the one at Martha's Vineyard, Brockway said.

Both greatly relied on their own businesses and employment, she said, and both demonstrated a sense of community as a common theme.

Sometimes the presence of deaf family members skipped generations, she said, though often it didn't.

Children of one or more deaf parents are called CODA (Child of a Deaf Adult), she explained, whether or not they are deaf.

At least half of all cases of hearing loss in America are genetic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says at [cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/genetics.html](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/genetics.html).

"Hearing loss has many causes," the site says, "[but] 50% to 60% of hearing loss in babies is due to genetic causes. There are also a number of things in the environment that can cause hearing loss."

At least a quarter of hearing loss in babies is attributed to "environmental" causes, "such as

maternal infections during pregnancy and complications after birth,” the site continues.

“Sometimes both genes and environment work together to cause hearing loss. For example, there are some medicines that can cause hearing loss, but only in people who have certain mutations in their genes.”

One of the more interesting things about these communities, Brockway said, was the advent of a common regional sign language that deaf villages like Lantz Mill and Martha’s Vineyard passed down through generations because ASL had not yet been standardized.

Because of the need for family members to communicate with and translate for their loved ones, the village became a shared rural signing community where most everyone spoke a form of sign language, even those who could hear and communicate vocally.

Many of these regional signs aren’t used as much anymore since they were replaced by ASL words, but Drake demonstrated how her grandfather would have communicated “ice cream” in the Lantz Mill sign language, using two fists as if churning ice cream instead of the ASL sign that uses the action of licking an ice cream cone from a single fist.

Back in the day, “ice cream would be made in a tub,” Drake said. “So that gesture developed over time.”

The six-panel traveling exhibit features the history of prominent deaf villagers such as the Hollar and Christian families as well as deaf members’ involvement in local businesses. Each panel includes a QR code that links to ASL interpretation of the featured text.

Brockway, also a Lantz Mill descendant, said one of the biggest surprises people might discover when they come to the exhibit is how many residents still live there.

“The deaf population from this area has not petered out,” she said.

Contact the library at 540-984-8200. For more information about Lantz Mill, go to shenandoahstories.org. For more information about the commonwealth’s deaf culture, visit the Virginia Deaf Culture Digital Library at deaflibva.org.

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