

**John, Frances, and Henry: An Intimate Look at the Relationship of a Nineteenth-Century
Deaf-Mute Artist and Prominent Political Couple**

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Fall 2016
HIS 458
Capstone Paper

In the year 1842, John Carlin arrived in Auburn, New York, at the home of the Seward family.¹ As Carlin was welcomed into the Seward house, pieces of paper and writing instruments were set out on a table, because Carlin, an acclaimed nineteenth century artist, poet, and writer, was "profoundly dumb... totally deaf."² In the nineteenth century, dumb was not used to refer to intelligence, but speaking ability. Being "deaf and dumb" meant a person could not hear or speak. Deaf-mute is a similar nineteenth-century term that was widely adopted.³ Carlin did not know the cause for his deafness; he wrote that he was born with no "idea of vocal sounds" so Carlin communicated with his new friends, the Swards, by writing.⁴ The thirty-seven pages of the written conversation from Carlin's visit in 1842 have been preserved along with the years of letters ranging from 1842 to 1874.

The correspondence between a deaf-mute artist and prominent political family reveals a fascinating glance at the life of a disabled person in the nineteenth century. The pages of written conversation and years of letters share how a deaf-mute became the intimate friend of a profoundly hearing couple, which expands our perception of how hearing people befriended deaf-mutes. Their relationship stands as unique because it does not compare to other

¹ Carlin wrote to Frances Seward in 1843 about how it was "already a year" since his visit so this helps us date the papers from Carlin's visit at Auburn to 1842. The preserved papers from the visit do not list the length of stay or which months Carlin visited. We also can place them in Auburn because he told Frances it was "a year since your mansion, whose genial glow of hospitality I now still feel its warmth; and since I departed from Albany" where he traveled after visiting in Auburn.

² Edward M. Gallaudet, "The Poetry of the Deaf," *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* 29, no. 3 (January 1859): 202. According to Deaf historian Jack Gannon, the roots of "deaf and dumb" can be traced back to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who believed that without language, the deaf were incapable of learning. By the nineteenth century, the word came to refer to the "silence" of deaf people, their inability to speak. For more information, see *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* by Jack Gannon.

³ Modern references to Deaf people often use the capital D in "Deaf" to refer to the cultural and social immersion of the Deaf person. However, to retain an emic approach, this paper will refer to Carlin as deaf-mute to reflect nineteenth century attitudes. I refer you to the "Ethnicity, Ethics, and the Deaf World" article by Harlan Lane for an understanding of the "Deaf-World." Also, see "Talking Culture: Deaf People and Disability Studies" by Carol A. Padden which explains how, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Deaf people stopped referring to themselves as deaf-mute or deaf and dumb to challenge the perception of themselves as silenced or simple.

⁴ Gallaudet, "The Poetry of the Deaf," 202.

“benevolently paternalistic” or repressive relationships between the deaf and hearing.⁵ The Swards did not subscribe to the belief that deafness equaled inferiority; they saw John Carlin as a peer and friend. In a time where attitudes towards disability portrayed the deaf as feebleminded and promoted forcible sterilization, the deaf and hearing rarely developed such intimacy as we find in this relationship. The Swards’ unconventional view of people and Carlin’s uniqueness as a deaf person made their friendship possible. John Carlin forces us to reconfigure our understanding of what it meant to be deaf-mute in the nineteenth-century and his uncommonly intimate relationship with the Swards adds a missing dimension to the historical conversation about friendships between the deaf and hearing.

John Carlin worked his way up from the streets of Philadelphia to sit at the Seward House. He was born congenitally deaf in 1813 to a poor and bankrupt family. His father worked as a cobbler, barely making enough to support his growing family, much less provide for his deaf-mute son.⁶ Limited to rudimentary language, Carlin was not admitted to public school and spent his days roaming the streets of Philadelphia. When he was seven, David Seixas came upon Carlin as he played on the streets.⁷ Seixas, a well to do hearing businessman who fostered fourteen other deaf children, took Carlin under his wing.⁸ Carlin received his education at the

⁵ See “Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet: Benevolent Paternalism and the Origins of the American Asylum” by Phyllis Valentine in *Deaf History Unveiled*, edited by John Vickrey Van Cleave. Valentine writes about Gallaudet’s benevolent paternalism. Gallaudet saw himself as the “father” of deaf children, responsible for disciplining and supporting them. His paternalism was cloaked in benevolence, as the deaf were not his peers, but his “children.” While paternalistic, Valentine writes about Gallaudet urged the hearing to see the deaf people as family members instead of outcasts.

⁶ Most of the published research on Carlin claims that he had a younger Deaf brother, Andrew. Carlin never refers to his brother in any of his letters to the Swards and I am not yet able to find primary sources supporting this so I refrained from including him in my paper.

⁷ Jennifer L. Nelson and Kristen Harmon, eds., *Deaf American Prose: 1830-1930* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2013), 55.

⁸ The Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb is now known as Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. It is the third oldest school founded in the United States for the education of the Deaf. Founded in 1820, Seixas operated the school for the first year out of his home and later moved the school to a state-sponsored school building. Notable teachers at the Institution included Laurent Clerc. Carlin credited Clerc as one of his most important influences and later painted a portrait of Clerc, which currently hangs at the Kentucky School for the Deaf.

Seixas-founded Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, where he proved himself a bright pupil by quickly learning literacy and sign language.⁹ Carlin graduated from school at the age of twelve with only four years of formal education.¹⁰ He returned home to find his family could not support him, so he entered the workforce at thirteen. Carlin worked odd jobs before becoming a “journeyman house and sign painter” at sixteen years old, working his way up to a position of Master House and Sign Painter at nineteen.¹¹ His pockets stuffed with Yellow Boys, he left America to travel and work his way around the world.¹² He sailed to Paris where he trained under Delaroche and then returned to America, searching for commissions.¹³ During the day he would paint and at night he would study, learning five languages.

John Carlin acquired sign language and literacy at the Pennsylvania Institution. Before his admission to the school, he had a limited grasp of language. Later, when Carlin was reminiscing to the Swards about his short years of schooling, he would bemoan the quality of education he received at the newly formed Institution as limited by the changing rotation of staff and differing methods of signs among teachers.¹⁴ However, for modern readers, it is nothing short of astounding how Carlin developed mastery of the language in such a short time. Antebellum America was a time where people were becoming increasingly literate and many “deaf people knew that achieving fluency was not an easy task” as literacy acquisition varied among deaf people.¹⁵ For many deaf mutes, unless they were fortunate enough to learn language at home, literacy exposure typically happened at a late age if they were admitted to school. In fact, many

⁹ Edward M. Gallaudet, “The Poetry of the Deaf,” 201.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 1841, Auburn, NY, page 18.

¹² Yellow Boys was slang for currency.

¹³ Paul Delaroche was an accomplished French artist. Carlin told William Henry Seward that Monsieur Delaroche of Paris was his French Master in page 25 of their written conversation.

¹⁴ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 18.

¹⁵ R. A. R. Edwards, *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture* (New York University Press, 2012), 80.

of the deaf mutes admired Carlin's literacy and how he wrote, "excellent like the speaking people."¹⁶ They urged each other to follow Carlin's example.¹⁷

As Carlin made his way through the world and slowly climbed up the ladder of success, his path crossed with the Swards. The Swards were a prominent political family. William Henry Seward served as a state senator, Governor of New York, U. S. Senator in the 1850s, and later as Secretary of State during the Civil War under President Lincoln. Henry's wife, Frances Miller Seward, was an ardent abolitionist and activist. Frances gave birth to five children, four of whom survived to adulthood. The Swards were a well-off family; their name came to be respected by many. They developed an intimate network of friends, with people around the world straining their necks for a peek at their inner circle. Somehow, John Carlin became friends with the Swards and the unlikely friendship between a deaf-mute artist and political couple was born.

While Carlin was in Auburn visiting the imposing yet cozy house the Swards called home, he connected with the Swards by writing. The Swards could not sign and while they had met other deaf mutes, Carlin was their closest link to the deaf-mute community. Carlin himself professed that he could not speak and he was uncomfortable using his unskilled voice, choosing to put his thoughts to paper. Carlin and the Swards wrote to each other about religion, education, and family. As they communicated, we are able to observe the changes in voice through changes in handwriting. If you look at the papers out of context, it could confusingly pass as a letter. However, as you read, their conversation conveys a sense that they were writing as they would have spoken orally. The sentence structure and open-ended questions resembled a transcript of a conversation much more than an epistle. With differences in ink and hyphenation

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

along with writings in the margins, sentences were sometimes messily and haphazardly written. They used abbreviations such as “Philadelp” for Philadelphian and “Miss. W” for Carlin’s soon-to-be fiancé, Mary Wayland.¹⁸ Their written conversations embodied characteristics of oral communication. Conversations veered off topic and thoughts sometimes petered out and then picked back up again. We can only imagine their proximity during writing, but we can assume that their writings were supplemented with facial expressions and gestures.

As they conversed on paper, it is justifiable to assume that being friends with the Swards required patience from Carlin. He had to write down his thoughts and wait for the Swards to reply in writing. As the family chatted and laughed around him— especially in large groups— he likely could not understand the reason until someone came to write to him. Even as they jotted down their thoughts or comments, it is easy to picture that he still missed bits and pieces of what was happening; as the deaf know it is not possible to write down everything. If he was with his fellow deaf-mutes, he would have full access to the conversation and be able to participate independently. Carlin likely had to accept this limitation of his relationship with his speaking friends and this friendship was able to succeed, in part, because Carlin was willing to assimilate within the hearing world.

As the days passed, Carlin grew closer to the Swards and the three of them— John, Frances, and Henry— developed a bosom friendship. Carlin felt comfortable enough to reveal his frustrations and desires to the Swards. In turn, the Swards treasured Carlin and valued his opinion. While Carlin was in town, Frances worried about the condition of little Willie’s eyes and Carlin mentioned how some used pierced ears as a remedy for eyesores.¹⁹ Frances readily considered his advice and evidently felt comfortable sharing her worries. As Carlin began to

¹⁸ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 1 and 4.

¹⁹ William Henry Seward, Jr. was the youngest son of Henry and Frances, their fourth child born in 1839. He was three years old during Carlin’s visit.

count Henry and Frances among his cherished friends, he also became close with their children, in particular, Frederick.²⁰ Frederick was about twelve during Carlin's visit and Carlin took Frederick outside to play and watch deer. It is not astonishing that the Swards were friends with Carlin and welcomed him into the fold; what is remarkable is that their attitudes reveal that they saw him as their equal, a peer.

To understand why their friendship was astonishing, we should look at the social contexts that surrounded deafness in the nineteenth century, where negative attitudes portrayed those with disabilities as "less." Many, like a hearing teacher, wondered "whether sin had brought into our world any heavier affliction' than deafness."²¹ There was a national wave promoting eugenics of the deaf in order to reduce the number of deaf births, which received particular support from Alexander Graham Bell.²² American Sign Language was not yet recognized as an official language. Deaf-mutes could not own insurance because their hearing loss meant they were considered high risk until the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD) was founded in 1901 to provide insurance. It would not be until 1893, two years after Carlin's death, when states finally stopped referring to schools for the deaf as "asylums," but deaf institutions were still seen as "charitable" institutions.²³ The stigma towards disability meant the deaf and hearing typically lived and moved in different spheres of life.

The Swards' unique view of human differences helps explain how they bridged a friendship with Carlin over this cultural divide. The Swards were activists and their worldview held that all were equal. While Henry was fighting for abolitionism and using his political

²⁰ Frederick William Seward was the second son of Henry and Frances, born in 1830.

²¹ Douglas C. Baynton. "These Pushful Days': Time and Disability in the Age of Eugenics." *Health and History* 13, no. 2 (2011): 45.

²² Alexander Graham Bell has a complicated relationship with the deaf community. It is outside the scope of this paper to elaborate here, but for more information on Deaf eugenics and Bell see *Deaf History Reader* edited by John Vickery Van Cleave in which Deaf historian Brian Greenwald argues that Alexander Graham Bell supported eugenics but refused to enact or advocate for any programs limited marriage rights of Deaf people.

²³ Percival Hall, "The Deaf Man and Society," *Social Science* 1, no. 3 (May/June 1926): 236.

platform to shed light on the “irrepressible conflict” that slavery posed, Frances was sheltering escaped slaves in their home. The Swards believed that differences were to be embraced instead of dismissed and Henry was quoted as saying, “The color of the prisoner’s skin, and the form of his features, are not impressed upon the spiritual, immortal mind which works beneath... and bears equally with us the proudest inheritance of our race—the image of our maker.”²⁴ Their view of equality for racial differences extended to disability as the Swards believed all were equal in the eyes of God. We can see this when Frances told Carlin she was “thinking how high a degree of moral excellence it was possible for a man ~~of~~ with your powers to attain if he did not forget the purpose for which he ~~fel~~ was sent to this world.”²⁵

The Swards respected Carlin enough to take the time to put their thoughts to paper. They were under no obligation to accommodate Carlin by writing. They could have forced Carlin to lip-read or simply declined to write to him or even to have him as a houseguest. Rather, they worked with him to devise a viable means of communication, discussing animal magnetism, Frenchmen, Niagara Falls, and health concerns, among many topics as friends do. With accommodations, sometimes it becomes necessary to question the motives behind the act. Why did the Swards write to Carlin? Did they see him as a child who needed assistance? Did they see him as an inferior who needed them to spell things out? Without discernable traces of paternalistic or patronizing attitudes, the Swards accommodated Carlin because they genuinely treasured him as a person and friend. Their writings do not reveal an opinion of Carlin as a burden or “obligation.” Their sense of social justice did not just mean they could see past the stigma of disability to count Carlin as a friend, but it meant that Carlin could stand on equal footing with them.

²⁴ William Henry Seward, *Works of William H. Seward*, ed. George E. Baker, vol. 1 (New York: Redfield, 1853), 417.

²⁵ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 31.

Though they came from different stations in life, they were able to build an intimate relationship. They built their friendship slowly, disclosing inner thoughts. From religion, Frances wrote that she despised sectarianism and hoped Carlin and his fiancé, Mary, would become Presbyterian. To mental health, Carlin wrote candidly about his fears of one day turning “crazy, or say a ‘crack’d mind’” and about often feeling like a “fiddlestick for sorrows.”²⁶ Carlin questioned his sanity because he felt his artistic efforts impacted his family and he was at the risk of becoming a “confirmed Crazy Tom.”²⁷ They also touched on matters of the heart and Frances counseled Carlin to find a bride who would be a source of strength for him. Between the lines, we can see there was trust and mutual respect.

While their conversations touched on serious themes of marriage and religion, they also evidently took pleasure in each other's company. They chatted about health concerns and Carlin bemoaned a toothache as the “worst of all!” pain.²⁸ Before that, Henry told Carlin, still a bachelor, that Carlin received many compliments from the ladies at dinner the previous evening and Carlin replied, “unfortunately for me, I could not hear what they said.”²⁹ Carlin shared inside information when he told Henry that “the old mutes at Paris used to tell me that Sicard was generally detested by the mutes.”³⁰ Later, while discussing portraits, Henry offered to sit for Carlin to build his portfolio. Carlin readily accepted the offer and Henry warned him, “I am a bad very bad subject. I have been painted and taken in busts 14 times and none of the likenesses are satisfactory altogether to my friends.”³¹ Carlin later told Frances that he was “desirous of

²⁶ Ibid, 19.

²⁷ Ibid, 19.

²⁸ Ibid, 2.

²⁹ Ibid, 2.

³⁰ Ibid, 16. Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard is a well-known figure in deaf education. For more information on Sicard, see *Abbé Sicard's Deaf Education: Empowering the Mute, 1785-1820* by Emmet Kennedy.

³¹ Ibid, 23.

rendering his likeness so good as to please his friends."³² Their conversations were flavored with touches of humor and joy.

Throughout their friendship, the Swards never expressed or implied an opinion of Carlin as feeble-minded or simple. Henry told Carlin, "you so much exceed all others with whom I have conversed that you frequently surprise me."³³ Henry praised mutes like Carlin because they often had a heightened sense of perception that was not found among hearing people. Carlin asked Henry if he "remarked a wide difference in the position of understanding between the mutes and the non-mutes. (I mean speaking persons)."³⁴ Henry disagreed and wrote I "cannot believe there is any deficiency of understanding" for mutes.³⁵ Even Frances told Carlin how she admired him and his moral excellence, "you write a thousand times better than I can."³⁶

Despite their high opinion of him, Carlin's insecurity shone through the pages. He frequently apologized for his grammar and limited education. Even after Frances wrote, "with your abilities you have no cause to despair," Carlin bemoaned his ability; "you will excuse me for making such miserable blunders in my grammar of which I am mortally sick; even too sick to look at it."³⁷ We know Carlin was born to a poor working family and spent his childhood on the streets. He gained means and success, but never on the level of the Swards. Carlin expressed a low opinion of himself that was nurtured by his sense of inadequacy despite the Swards' reinforcements.

As we examine their friendship, the realization slowly emerges that Carlin's friendship with the Swards was able to flourish not just because the Swards were accepting of

³² Ibid, 23.

³³ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 7.

³⁴ Ibid, 7.

³⁵ Ibid, 7.

³⁶ Ibid, 31.

³⁷ Ibid, 18 and 31.

differences, but also because Carlin was an uncommon deaf man. As we look at him from different angles and dissect his relationship with the Swards, it becomes clear that he had a complex identity.³⁸ Described by Joe, “a Jersey mute”, in a newspaper article, Carlin was said to have “the air of a well bred gentleman; talks fluently, and studies to please those with whom he associates.”³⁹ Joe hit the nail on the head when describing Carlin. Joe recognized that Carlin was a skilled chameleon capable of adapting to what the situation called for. Outside of his friendship with the Swards, Carlin was a full-fledged member of the deaf community. Carlin lived within different worlds and presented two different sides of himself, writing with hearing friends like the Swards then communicating in fluent sign language with his deaf peers.

As we further explore Carlin’s friendship with the Swards, it appears as a notable distinction that Carlin only referred to himself and other deaf mutes as simply “mute.” Variations in his writings appeared such as “thin-visaged Mute friend”, “a dmute”, “dear mute french friends,” “mute teachers,” even calling his deaf fiancé the “most learned of all mute girls.” Mute, but never deaf. While visiting the Swards, Carlin made references to mutes, but the only time “deaf” appeared was from Henry’s hand. Henry wrote that the Swards and their guests were accustomed to love “deaf ~~mutes~~ mutes much more.”⁴⁰

In other correspondence, Carlin mentioned “deaf” when he wrote to Henry about being in Washington, D.C. for the National *Deaf-Mute* College inaugural event.⁴¹ He refrained from identifying his deaf friends and family as “deaf mute” directly to Henry or Frances, preferring to

³⁸ John Lee Clark, *Deaf American Poetry: An Anthology* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2009), 38.

³⁹ The Cecil Whig published an article in March 15, 1851, titled “Literary Works on the Deaf and Dumb.” Carlin appears in the article as one of the frequent contributors to the *American Annals of the Deaf*. This article was written by Joe, self-described as a mute from New Jersey, who wrote about various publications and literary efforts being made by the deaf and dumb.

⁴⁰ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 25.

⁴¹ President Abraham Lincoln signed the 1864 federal bill into law, formerly creating the National Deaf-Mute College. In 1894, the name of the college was changed to Gallaudet College, in recognition of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, the father of Edward Miner Gallaudet. In 1986, it became Gallaudet University.

only use “mute.” In fact, he only wrote “deaf” to any of the Swards in the surviving papers when he wrote to Frederick in 1864 about job struggles. He expressed disappointment about trying to obtain a situation as “teacher of deaf mute” but “the mute teachers, as a general rule” were paid half, sometimes a third, in comparison to the salary of speaking colleagues.⁴² The other time “deaf” appears in his hand to a hearing person was when he wrote to a friend of the Swards, Thurlow Weed, in February 1874 desperate for a job in Congress, which “bestowed favors without stint on hearing and speaking persons, but never any single deaf mute.”⁴³ It becomes striking that Carlin only referred to himself as “deaf” in correspondence with his speaking friends during points of desperation. Yet, we know he readily identified as deaf-mute or deaf because of his writings to deaf audiences. He was a popular contributor to deaf publications like the *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* and *The Deaf-Mute Journal*.⁴⁴

Not only did Carlin refrain from using “deaf” with the Swards, he rarely expressed frustration about his lack of hearing. Instead, when addressing the Swards, he lamented the fact that he could not speak. He wrote about sign and fingerspelling, limiting himself to his muteness.⁴⁵ We can only infer, but this seems very much a conscious decision. He embraced his deafness with deaf peers while restricting himself to his muteness with speaking persons like the Swards. Carlin compartmentalized his identity; this may have been how he was able to socially engage with both communities. He seemed to understand that the Swards would never really *get*

⁴² John Carlin to Frederick William Seward, November 30, 1864.

⁴³ John Carlin to Thurlow Weed, February 19, 1874. Thurlow Weed was a Whig politician and newspaper publisher. He was a close political ally and friend of the Swards. For an autobiography on Weed, see *The Life of Thurlow Weed* Volumes 1 and 2 edited by his daughter, Harriet Weed.

⁴⁴ *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* is a journal that was first published in 1847 and continues to be published today by the Gallaudet University Press, under the title of *American Annals of the Deaf*. It is now a peer-reviewed academic journal, but in the nineteenth century, it started as a journal to discuss education and services for deaf-mutes. *The Deaf Mute Journal* was published between 1874-1938 as a monthly newspaper that was a widely popular journal offering news and articles in deaf voices.

⁴⁵ Manualists believe the best method of education for the deaf was through sign. Carlin, by contrast, was an oralist. See Harlan Lane’s *When The Mind Hears* for an in-depth look at the two methods. Carlin was not a bona-fide oralist as he used sign language himself and promoted visual fingerspelling along with systematic signs, but I will place him in the oralist camp because he encouraged the suppression of sign.

his deafness, as they were profoundly hearing people of means. He could share about muteness and language because they could relate to the idea of communication and expression of self.

Carlin was not a man of artifice, but a man trapped between two worlds.

During his visit, Carlin stayed at a nearby private boarding house and made trips to the Seward “mansion” to stay for the day and often dinner, sometimes spending the night.⁴⁶ Carlin switched from the cozy opulence of the Seward House to the simplicity of the boarding house. Not only was he crossing cultural boundaries; he was also blurring class boundaries. Christopher Krentz applies W. E. B. Dubois’s idea of double-consciousness— “the two-ness of being an American and Negro”— to Carlin as “this inner division could describe the mental state of many marginalized or minority groups.”⁴⁷ Carlin lived in two worlds and presented two selves, battling the stigma of deafness as inferior with his internalized sense of independence. Carlin told Henry that he considered himself fortunate “in gaining what I had much sighed for, yet I lack the perfection of the English language of which I have not yet obtained a total command... as well as of the mutes, our education is so different that of those who speak.”⁴⁸ His complex sense of self and desire to assimilate within the hearing world helps us build a deeper grasp of how his friendship with the Swards was made possible.

However, when we think we’ve gotten closer to unpacking Carlin’s identity, he becomes even more of “a baffling question mark” because as we read his writings about sign language, we find additional pieces of the puzzle that was his identity.⁴⁹ Carlin actually encouraged the removal of sign language in the classrooms, which was not a sentiment shared by his fellow deaf

⁴⁶ John Carlin to Frances Miller Seward, October 31, 1843.

⁴⁷ Christopher Krentz, “John Carlin and the Deaf Double-Consciousness,” in *A Fair Chance In the Race of Life: The Role of Gallaudet University in Deaf History*, ed. Brian H. Greenwald and John Vickrey Van Cleave (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2008), 13.

⁴⁸ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 7.

⁴⁹ Clark, *Deaf American Poetry*, 38.

mutes. He ardently supported fingerspelling and systematic signs, instead of sign language, which he believed would increase literacy among deaf-mutes as it provided information in “units.”⁵⁰ He wrote to Henry, “I am so strongly opposed to the language of signs which is so injurious to the common understanding. The mutes ought to learn by fingers exclusively in the same manner with which the speaking persons are learning by speech alone, the signs do not at all give any important assistance to the march of Intellect.” Carlin received his education at a school that used sign language, where he developed excellent English literacy, yet he strenuously pushed for removing sign language from the classrooms. He believed sign language was beautiful; yet he despised colloquial signs in the schoolroom.⁵¹ He was one of the major supporters behind the founding of the National Deaf-Mute College, the first and still only of its kind in the world, and saw no contradiction in suppressing sign in K-12 deaf education.

Carlin emphasized his support for systematic signs and fingerspelling to the extent he prompted the editor of *The Deaf Mute Journal* to write a disclaimer. The editor said that Carlin expressed “a peculiar interest” as a born deaf-mute who supported the removal of sign language in the classroom and bore the sore responsibility of his writings.⁵² Carlin expressed his support of oralism and fingerspelling to Henry who agreed, “your observation about the use of signs must be correct. There are many persons who speak very fluently, whose ~~conversation~~ education is

⁵⁰ The Deaf community will recognize this mirrors the Rochester Method, where fingerspelling was exclusively used in classrooms to educate Deaf students in the place of sign language. With this method, students and teachers would spell out everything on one hand and it became popular around the 1870’s in Rochester, NY. The Rochester Method was modeled on the idea of a universal alphabet called “Visible Speech” that gained national support with the backing of Alexander Graham Bell. These methods of education quickly replaced sign language in many schools as oralism became nationally prevalent. I refer you to *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language* by Douglas Baynton, which tracks the oralism takeover of deaf education in the United States and the national suppression of sign.

⁵¹ John Carlin, “Words Recognized As Units: Systematic Signs,” *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* 11, no. 1 (January 1859): 13.

⁵² John Carlin, “Advantages and the Disadvantages of the Use of Signs,” *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* 4, no. 1 (1852): 49.

tolerable and yet for the want of practice they cannot write a sentence of English."⁵³ Carlin clearly was an enigma. He does not neatly meet the mold of a nineteenth-century deaf-mute product of a deaf institution, since he supported oralism. Nor does he meet the mold of an oralist; he promoted sign language and would give national speeches that were well received by his deaf peers because of his "most eloquent signs."⁵⁴

Carlin was an adept social chameleon and his writings magnify his inner frustrations. His famous poem, *The Mute's Lament*, reveals his deep-set bitterness and sorrow at his deafness.⁵⁵ Writing in the *American Annals* in 1884, Edward Miner Gallaudet, the first president of what is now Gallaudet University, named Carlin "the only deaf-mute poet the world has ever known."⁵⁶ Gallaudet, like many other hearing people, was awed at his artful prose and rhythm. Gallaudet expressed amazement and credited the editor of the *Annals*, who likened Carlin's skill to a blind man painting a landscape.⁵⁷ The first verse of the poem is "I move— a silent exile on this earth," where Carlin's deafness has become a "dreary cell" trapping him for life. Despite having a wide circle of friends, hearing and deaf, Carlin considered himself a cultural exile. His pen moved over paper eloquently to list different beautiful sounds such as a mockingbird's cry and the pensive song of a maiden, sounds that he did not hear. He despaired at his deafness and wrote about the joy of heaven, where

My ears shall be unsealed, and I shall hear;
My tongue shall be unbound, and I shall speak,
And happy with the angels sing forever!

⁵³ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 8.

⁵⁴ M. L. Brook, "The Semi-Centennial Celebration of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Deaf and Dumb," *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* 16, no. 3 (January 1859): 189.

⁵⁵ The Mute's Lament was first published in 1847 in the *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* and reprinted in Harper's New Monthly Magazine in 1884.

⁵⁶ Gallaudet, "The Poetry of the Deaf," 203.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 203.

Carlin's poem indicates *he* was the one who struggled with his deafness, not the Swards. The Swards embraced Carlin for who he was; they saw him as an accomplished artist and friend. They could see past his disability, while he continued to despair at his deafness. When Carlin told Henry that he presumed Henry noticed "a wide difference" in the intelligence of the mutes, Henry replied that "if you perceive a difference it must arise from an imperfect education I mean the imperfect education of those with whom you converse as we do now."⁵⁸ Henry himself underlined the "you" and this simple act speaks volumes. Henry did not perceive a lack of understanding, while Carlin seemingly absorbed nineteenth-century attitudes towards disability. We should not view Carlin as an insecure man, but a man who had to face the stigma of disability every day. This stigma bled into his thinking and he internalized the idea of himself as inferior. Despite being praised for his excellent literacy and professional success, he yearned to hear and speak—to fit in—which helps clarify why he supported the suppression of sign in the schoolroom and expressed insecurities about his grammar. He once told Frances he preferred criticism to praise because "severe criticism encourages Talent, and provokes artists to try better and better in their next works."⁵⁹ Carlin always tried for the elusive "better and better," but never seemed satisfied with himself in the moment. It becomes poignant how Carlin couldn't reconcile his current success as an accomplished deaf artist who had meaningful relationships with the cultural assumption of the deaf as inferior and feeble.

The Swards and Carlin were different in many ways, from class, culture, identity, and language. In the face of all their differences, their friendship was tightly woven and survived until their deaths. Their friendship was able to thrive because they both were unconventional and they both were willing to extend across the aisle. After Carlin visited in 1842, they were

⁵⁸ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 29.

separated for lengths of time and this physical separation did not mark the demise of their friendship as the series of sporadic letters show they continued to keep in touch over the years.

The letters shared important milestones in their lives, such as when Carlin wrote to Frances about his impending marriage. Carlin met the Swards as a bachelor exploring his options, checking out girls from Springfield, Massachusetts, whom he thought were as “pretty as peaches.”⁶⁰ He later became affianced to his bride, a distant cousin. During their courtship, he wrote to Frances, “the horrible mirror of Truth gives me to understand that I am decidedly improving—not in looks, for I am waxing every day older and older—but in size. In confirmation to its assertion, my coat’s buttonholes are obviously beginning to crack, and the buttons, to droop.”⁶¹ He accounted his budding corpulence to his forthcoming marriage. Carlin informed Frances that with the promise of domestic happiness dawning, he fed with “the composure of an ox in a pasture... for I am to lead my sweet blooming bride” to the altar.⁶² This was Carlin's second engagement, as he was formerly engaged to a woman who broke the engagement after growing tired of waiting for him to return from his travels in Europe.⁶³ Frances informed Carlin that she did not think such a girl was “worthy of your affection” and praised Miss Wayland as his choice of bride. His bride, Mary Wayland, was also deaf-mute, an alumna of the New York Institution of the Deaf and Dumb.⁶⁴ John and Mary married and raised five children, all of them hearing.

Perhaps the greatest possible testament of Carlin’s enduring love for the Swards was when Mary gave birth to a daughter eight years after their marriage and they named the “family

⁶⁰ John Carlin to William Henry Seward, October 31, 1842.

⁶¹ John Carlin to Frances Miller Seward, October 31, 1843.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 3.

⁶⁴ Clark, *Deaf American Poetry*, 39.

pet” Frances Seward Carlin.⁶⁵ John and Mary easily agreed on the name, which uncovers how deep Carlin’s well of admiration and respect for Frances extended. To name your child after someone reveals abiding devotion and love, and Carlin wrote they decided on little Fanny’s name “as a testimonial of our admirations” for Frances’s “virtues, and amiability and purity of heart, also of our sincere regard and esteem for that one, to whom you pledged your heart and hand.”⁶⁶

Carlin continued to keep in touch with the Swards as his family grew, working as an artist. His letters over the years shared how he made ends meet as a miniaturist and portraitist. His clients were typically those from the upper crust of society, those who could afford portraits. He had to continually meet people to maintain a steady stream of jobs, as his livelihood depended on people requesting his services. Carlin, as a nineteenth-century deaf professional, faced challenges to network or develop professional connections with those clients. As a deaf-mute, it likely would have required a deep reserve of patience and determination on his part to socialize with hearing clients, as he could not easily start a conversation at dinner parties or walk into art galleries to present his work. Carlin once mentioned to Henry and Frances, “it requires me to practice writing and conversing.”⁶⁷

To find commissions for portraits, Carlin was actually armed with letters of recommendation from Henry and Thurlow Weed. Weed wrote a letter to the Congressman Joseph Trumbull, vouching for Carlin’s character.⁶⁸ Weed described Carlin as an “exceeding amiable and interesting young man. He is, too, an Artist of genius and promise.”⁶⁹ He asked Trumbull to consider aiding Carlin professionally, “for I have never met with a Youth more

⁶⁵ John Carlin to Frances Miller Seward, October 27, 1851.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 9.

⁶⁸ Joseph Trumbull was a Whig politician from Connecticut. His uncle was John Trumbull, the famed American painter who is known for his historical paintings.

⁶⁹ Thurlow Weed to Joseph Trumbull, October 13, 1842, Albany, New York.

worthy of the respect, protection and friendship of the good and fortunate.”⁷⁰ Not only did Carlin have the backing of Weed, a prominent politician; he carried letters of support from Henry Seward and Weed wrote letters vouching for Carlin’s character and he used them as professional references to persuade people to employ him. The two men were widely known and for them to write letters on Carlin’s behalf indicate they must have considered him reliable enough to risk their own reputations. They trusted Carlin to the point where they willingly and eagerly associated his name with theirs.

This is not to say that Carlin would not have succeeded without the support of the Swards or Weed, because his work, in its own right, was widely considered masterful and skilled. His paintings were collected by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The letters of support provided Carlin a chance to get his foot in the door and he did the rest of the work, proving himself as an accomplished artist.

Carlin’s letters to the Swards in the 1840s listed names of the clients he painted and the illustrations he crafted. Many notable people and their families sat for him, such as the grandchildren of Cornelius Vanderbilt and the son of Jefferson Davis.⁷¹ His miniatures were his bestselling work and his paintings were exhibited at the National Academy of Design and other premier galleries in New York. In 1843, right after his visit, Carlin wrote to the Swards that competing artists in Massachusetts were reducing his commissions so he took off to Newburgh and later Rochester to try his hand. Business was steady, though Carlin had to keep moving and networking to find new clients. Carlin later settled in New York City with his family to open his

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Vanderbilt, or "Commodore Vanderbilt," as he was known was a famed business magnate and wealthy philanthropist. This painting of his grandchildren is titled "The Allen Children" and can be found online at the MET museum website. Jefferson Davis was a Mississippi politician who became the first and only President of the Confederate States of America. See *Writing Deafness: The Hearing Line in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* by Christopher Krentz.

own studio and his masterpieces gained acclaim in the United States and France, among the hearing and deaf communities. However, by the 1850s, even as his fame grew, his job opportunities began to dwindle with the advent of photography. As photography slowly made miniatures obsolete, Carlin switched to landscapes and genre scenes. The encroaching challenge of photography led Carlin to write in a letter dated February 1861 stating that his career had become stagnant over the previous three years. With a wife and young children, Carlin was under pressure to provide for his family, who were dependent on him for the “sustenance of life,” so he turned to one of the few people he trusted, Henry Seward.⁷²

Carlin once described himself as “always frank and blunt in my character,” so he asked Henry for a favor.⁷³ In this letter, he told Henry he originally shrank from asking Henry for a job because “I had and still have a holy horror of being taken for an office hunter.”⁷⁴ As his situation became increasingly dire during the Civil War, he gathered his “courage to cast the die” and sent the letter to Henry to await his decision.⁷⁵ Carlin reassured Henry that if he declined to employ him, it would “increase, instead of damaging, my respect for you.”⁷⁶ By December of that same year, business still had not improved and Carlin’s stress was mounting. He once again swallowed his pride, and addressed a letter to Frederick, then thirty-one years old.⁷⁷ His letter bemoaned his dying business and his anxious worries as the sole breadwinner of his household. He directed this letter to Frederick, instead of Henry, who was Secretary of State, “for the reason of his [Henry’s] mind being so absorbed in foreign affairs—and the Trent difficulty in particular—as to render it

⁷² John Carlin to William Henry Seward, February 1861.

⁷³ John Carlin, written conversation with William Henry Seward and Frances Miller Seward, 2.

⁷⁴ John Carlin to William Henry Seward, February 1861.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ John Carlin to Frederick William Seward, December 26, 1861. The Trent Affair was a conflict between the United States and Great Britain in 1861. The United States captured Confederate diplomats aboard a British ship. Britain was outraged because they were neutral in the war. President Lincoln released the diplomats and calmed the disaster.

improper even for his most intimate friend to disturb it.”⁷⁸ Carlin also implored Frederick to not take him “for an office seeker for, in fact, my nature revolts” at the favor he was asking of his friends.⁷⁹

Carlin was a proud man, who climbed his way out of the streets, so for him to humble himself before the Swards conveyed the severity of his financial difficulties. He hoped they would not perceive his requests as taking advantage of their friendship, but he was struggling to support his family under the “thumb of Giant Poverty.”⁸⁰ The letters evidently reveal Carlin’s desperation, but also a continued sense of intimacy. The letters also tell us that despite being increasingly separated over time and distance, they were still securely linked. Carlin was willing to put aside his pride because he trusted the Swards and knew they would hear him out. We do not have the responses from Henry or Frederick to Carlin’s letters seeking employment. Speculations can abound, so we will avoid making conclusions because research doesn’t yet inform us whether Carlin acquired employment with the help of the Swards.

Years passed and Carlin’s financial difficulties remained. Frederick gave Carlin a tip during a conversation in June 1864, when Carlin visited him in Washington where he was receiving the first Honorary Master of Arts degree from the National Deaf-Mute College.⁸¹ Frederick informed Carlin that Congress might commission him to paint a portrait of Daniel Webster.⁸² By late November of the same year, Carlin addressed Frederick with his concerns that Congress would decline to bestow patronage on him. He inquired about whether Frederick or Henry could influence politicians to invest him in governmental offices. He was clearly not comfortable asking favors of his most intimate friends. After writing his request, he told

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ John Carlin to Frederick William Seward, November 30, 1864.

⁸¹ John Carlin to William Henry Seward, June 29, 1864.

⁸² Daniel Webster was a popular Whig politician and served as a two-time Secretary of State.

Frederick “enough of this matter.” Though not comfortable, Carlin managed to find humor in the situation, when he added in his postscript, “the idea of my being employed as Special Bearer of Dispatches, to any part of the Earth, tickles me, for it would give me ample opportunity to write a book of Travel with illustrations.”⁸³

Their friendship survived various tests of time and demands as they each made their way through the world, with Carlin struggling to establish himself financially and Henry rising in the political sphere. After the Civil War, Henry sent Carlin a set of his “Diplomatic Correspondence” as Secretary of State and Carlin then replied with a poignant letter to Henry, “God bless you, my dear friend, for your noble and philosophical patience and forbearance!... Indeed your bosom companion, whom I learned to love and respect has gone away, and your only daughter has followed her to heaven.”⁸⁴ Written in April 1867, almost two years after Frances’s death, Carlin was thrilled to find Henry and his son, Frederick, “still in the land of the living.”⁸⁵ Seven years later, Carlin would receive word that Henry had passed away.

The unlikely friendship between the political family and deaf mute lived on in Carlin’s memory for the next nineteen years. In the spring of 1893, Carlin took his last breath after his diagnosis of pneumonia. At his death, obituaries poured in from various newspapers around the world mourning the loss of the acclaimed deaf-mute poet.⁸⁶ The obituaries identified him as a man familiar with most of the “leading men of the day.” Even in his death, he was not identified solely by his own accomplishments, but by his acquaintances. But we know that the Swards saw him as much more than an acquaintance. He was not simply a friend, but family.

⁸³ John Carlin to Frederick William Seward, November 30, 1864.

⁸⁴ John Carlin to William Henry Seward, April 6, 1867. Frances “Fanny” Seward died in the year of 1866 due to tuberculosis. She was fifth child of Henry and Frances and she died at the age of twenty-two.

⁸⁵ John Carlin to William Henry Seward, April 6, 1867.

⁸⁶ *The Saint Mary’s Beacon* in Maryland published an obituary of Carlin on April 30, 1891. Also see obituaries in *The New York Daily Tribute*, April 21, 1891, *Mower County* April 29, 1891 and *Little Falls* published May 1, 1891.

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