

A LIFE IN EDUCATION HISTOIRE DE VIE SCOLAIRE

Teaching the “Children of Silence”: Samuel Greene and the Hearing-Impaired

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Samuel Thomas Greene (1845-90) was the first hearing-impaired teacher of hearing-impaired pupils to be employed at a recognized educational institution in Ontario, the Provincial Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Belleville (now the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf). Greene’s pedagogical essay, “The Proper Mode of Teaching New Pupils,” provides a rare and vivid glimpse of teaching and learning in a nineteenth-century special-education classroom.

Greene was born in Portland, Maine, on 11 June 1845.¹ He appears to have been born without hearing, and he seems to have not developed any speaking capacity, although precise details of his childhood condition are missing from the public record. Yet he was obviously a very bright child, for he attended the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, where he learned manual sign language, picked up a rudimentary education, and was influenced by two outstanding staff members to “consecrate my life” to the teaching of hearing-impaired children.²

One of Greene’s Hartford instructors was Laurent Clerc (1775-1869), then in the twilight years of a long career as a pioneer teacher of the hearing-impaired.³ His second Hartford mentor was Edward Miner Gallaudet (1837-1917), just beginning his equally illustrious career. After a brief tenure at Hartford, Gallaudet moved to Washington, D.C., as founding superintendent of the new Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and Blind (soon to be renamed the National College for the Deaf, later Gallaudet College, and today known as Gallaudet University).⁴

Greene followed Gallaudet to Washington about 1866 and enrolled in the National College’s new university-level program. The curriculum emphasized the written English language, but also featured Latin,

1 *The Daily Ontario* (Belleville), 17 Feb. 1890.

2 S.T. Greene, “The Proper Mode of Teaching New Pupils,” Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, *Thirteenth Annual Report 1883*, 47.

3 *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Scribner’s, 1958), II: 201.

4 *Ibid.*, IV: 110.

mathematics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, political science, moral science, and mental science. Greene was a member of the college's second graduation class, earning a bachelor of arts degree in 1870.⁵

That autumn, 25-year-old Samuel Greene moved to Belleville, Ontario, to join the teaching staff of the new Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. He was the only hearing-impaired instructor among the school's inaugural four-person staff.⁶ Greene later referred to the Belleville institution as "almost the only sphere in which I have laboured," and implied that all his education at Hartford and Washington had been directed to the end of teaching.⁷

The Belleville school's mandate during the 1870s and 1880s was to "impart a general education as well as instruction in some professional or manual art to all deaf-mutes of both sexes between the ages of 7 and 20 residing in the Province of Ontario," free of charge to all, provided they were "sound in mind and body."⁸ Only three pupils "made their appearance" on opening day, October 20, 1870, although the number increased to 70 by the end of the first session.

For the next twenty years, Greene usually taught a "class made up from among the children who have entered this term." Such annual assignments were reportedly "at his own request," for "he recognizes the necessity of building up the education of our pupils upon a good foundation."⁹ Although these pupils shared a common bond of newness to the institution, their wide age range would have challenged any instructor's ingenuity. But Samuel Greene seems to have been a first-rate teacher.

Under the title, "The Proper Mode of Teaching New Pupils," Greene wrote an amazingly precise and graphic account of his teaching methods some thirteen years into his job.¹⁰ "When I undertake the charge of a perfectly untaught class," he wrote, "I do not at once begin to teach them anything. I devote two or three days, or perhaps the first week, to studying them." All the while, he gained their confidence. "I try to teach them myself, who I am, that I am their friend, not their teacher merely, that I do love them good in every way, that their advancement is my

5 Edward Miner Gallaudet, *History of the College for the Deaf, 1857-1907* (Washington: Gallaudet College Press, 1983), 42, 100.

6 John B. McGann, another member of the inaugural teaching staff at Belleville, had earlier run private-venture schools for the hearing-impaired in Toronto and Hamilton, but there is no record of McGann employing any teachers who themselves were deaf. Hearing-impaired teachers may have taught in informal settings in Ontario prior to 1870, but Greene is certainly the first to be employed at a recognized educational institution.

7 Greene, "The Proper Mode of Teaching New Pupils," 47.

8 Charles J. Howe, *The Deaf-Mutes of Canada: A History of Their Education, With an Account of the Deaf-Mute Institutions of the Dominion, and a Description of All Known Finger and Sign Alphabets* (Toronto, 1888), 101.

9 Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, *Ninth Annual Report 1879*, 26.

10 Greene, "The Proper Mode of Teaching New Pupils," 47-50.

pleasure, and that their sorrows grieve me. In this way I encourage their confidence and try to win their affection.”

Gradually Greene began formal teaching. “My first step is to teach them thoroughly the manual alphabet, and to this end divide the pupils into four or five groups. I call the first group to stand, and teach them three characters at a time. Then I dismiss them, and call up a second group, giving them the same work, and so on.”

Greene’s next step was to “write, in a plain, round hand, the letters on their slates, three at a time, and tell them to copy them as neatly as they can.” This was followed, in due time, by teaching the “names of objects in use in the room.” As soon as pupils could “write the names of about ten objects without any hesitation, short sentences may be taught.” After four or five months, the “best pupils will generally be able to write long and complicated sentences correctly.” He also taught his pupils to “count in figures and words both,” for he was “convinced that it is natural for the young deaf-mute to count.”

To “lessen the monotony of school-room drill,” Greene often “let a pupil play teacher while I become a pupil, and purposely make mistakes for them to detect.” Patience, kindness, and firmness permeated all of his efforts. “My experience has convinced me,” Greene concluded, “that to force or cram a deaf-mute pupil does him a positive injury.” At the same time, “if an affectionate kindness is to be maintained, it must go hand in hand with perfect firmness of discipline.”

Greene’s inspired teaching earned high marks from provincial inspectors. At first, praise was indirect and impersonal – “the record of this class is very good,” or the teacher deserved “much credit for the advancement [his] pupils have made.” By 1881, Inspector J.M. Langmuir confessed that he “was not prepared for such [good] results” in Greene’s class, “but it only shows what can be done if the teacher is alive to his work.”¹¹

A change in inspectors saw praise grow both more personal and more effusive. Inspector R. Christie was delighted in 1884 to find the “greatest sympathy between teacher and pupils.” In later years, he described Greene as “quick, lively and energetic and a first class teacher,” as well as a “wonderful pantomimist” who “makes his pupils ready and proficient in the sign language.” The inspector admitted that Samuel Greene “is a born teacher.”¹²

Outside the formal classroom, Greene proved a talented leader of extra-curricular activities. On one occasion, in “his inimitable pantomime style,” he fascinated a public audience by leading a group of girls “through a beautiful rendition in the sign language” of the Christian

11 Ontario Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, *Seventh Annual Report 1877*, 10; *Tenth Annual Report 1880*, 8; *Eleventh Annual Report 1881*, 11.

12 *Ibid.*, *Fourteenth Annual Report 1884*, 4; *Sixteenth Annual Report 1886*, 11; *Nineteenth Annual Report 1889*, 15.

hymn, "Nearer My God to Thee."¹³ Greene also played an invaluable role as informal counsellor and confidante to hundreds of hearing-impaired pupils. "Being a deaf mute himself," stated Inspector T.F. Chamberlain in 1890, Greene "was in thorough sympathy with those under his tuition and was looked upon by them as one of their best representatives."¹⁴

As co-founder and first president of the Deaf-Mute Association for the Province of Ontario, Greene's influence spread far beyond the classrooms of the Belleville institution.¹⁵ He presided over the association's initial convention at Toronto's Shaftesbury Hall in September 1886. With a registration of nearly 200 "deaf-mutes and their friends," every one of whom was enthralled by Greene's inspired "oration in the sign language," this first convention of the hearing-impaired in Canada was pronounced "eminently successful" by the local media.¹⁶

Two years later, Greene chaired the association's second convention at the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb in Belleville, where he proved to be the star attraction of the two-day proceedings. Greene's initial appearance was the "signal for mute but enthusiastic cheering." His presidential address was well received as part of a program to "lighten their burdens" and "cheer them on their way." In the evening, Greene entertained the convention with a spirited sign-language rendition of Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade." At the close of the convention, he was re-elected unanimously to a further two-year term as president.¹⁷

Unfortunately, Greene died a tragic death before the group met for its third convention. In early February 1890, he was seriously injured in an ice-boating accident on the Bay of Quinte. Greene lingered for about two weeks without regaining consciousness, then died in the early hours of February 17. His funeral was held two days later from the school, amid widespread grieving over the loss of a man who had done so much to "promote the well-being of the children of silence."¹⁸

Samuel Thomas Greene was survived by his wife, the former Caroline Wallbridge, granddaughter of a pioneer Belleville family, and by four children. He was buried in Belleville Cemetery, where "his mute and hearing friends" later erected a tombstone featuring his surname in "fingerspelling" as a tribute to his inspired work as a teacher of the hearing-impaired. Finally, his name is commemorated in Greene Street in the city's west end.¹⁹

13 Ibid., *Nineteenth Annual Report 1889*, 14.

14 Ibid., *Twentieth Annual Report, 1890*, 10.

15 William Nurse, a fellow teacher at Belleville, was the other co-founder (and first secretary) of the Deaf-Mute Association of Ontario.

16 *The Globe* (Toronto), 8 Sept. 1886.

17 *The Daily Intelligencer* (Belleville), 25 and 16 June 1888.

18 *The Daily Ontario* (Belleville), 17 and 19 Feb. 1890.

19 William Conley to Richard Alway, 8 Oct. 1991, private correspondence.