

Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL)

Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) was a village sign-language that was once widely used on the island of Martha's Vineyard from the early 18th century to 1952. It was used by both Deaf and hearing people in the community; consequently, deafness did not become a barrier to participation in public life. Deaf people who signed Martha's Vineyard Sign Language were extremely independent. They participated in society as typical citizens.

The first Deaf person known to have settled there was Jonathan Lambert, a carpenter and farmer, who moved there with his wife—who was not Deaf—in 1694. By 1710, the migration had virtually ceased, and the in-marriage community that was created contained a high incidence of hereditary deafness that persisted for over 200 years.

The language was able to thrive because of the unusually high percentage of Deaf islanders and because deafness was a recessive trait, which meant that almost anyone might have both Deaf and hearing siblings. In 1854, when the island's Deaf population peaked, an average of one person in 155 was Deaf, while the United States national average was one in about 5,730. In the town of Chilmark, which had the highest concentration of Deaf people on the island, the average was 1 in 25; at one point, in a section of Chilmark called Squibnocket, as much as 1 in 4 of the population of 60 was Deaf.

By the 18th century there was a distinct Chilmark Sign Language. In the 19th century, this was influenced by French Sign Language, and evolved into MVSL in the 19th and 20th centuries. From the late 18th to the early 20th century, virtually everybody on Martha's Vineyard possessed some degree of fluency in the language.

Sign language on the island declined when the population migrated to the mainland. There are no fluent signers of MVSL today. Katie West, the last Deaf person born into the island's sign-language tradition, died in 1952, though there were a few elderly residents still able to recall MVSL when researchers started examining the language in the 1980s. Linguists are working to save the language, but their task is difficult because they cannot experience MVSL firsthand.