

Deaf Heritage on Martha's Vineyard – A Driving Tour

During the colonization of Martha's Vineyard, a group of families with a hereditary deafness immigrated to the Island from England, many settling in the township of Chilmark. Deaf residents of Chilmark were valued members of the community, fully integrated into its political, economic, social, and spiritual life. Hearing residents conversed with their deaf neighbors in Martha's Vineyard's distinctive form of sign language, and used it to sign at public gatherings such as town meetings and church services for their deaf friends and relatives. Visitors were startled by the prevalence of deafness and sign language, but residents saw their deaf neighbors simply as neighbors.

There are no monuments to the Chilmark deaf community and the contributions its members made to the evolution of American Sign Language. However, amid the Martha's Vineyard of today, it is still possible to see traces of the Chilmark of the 19th and early 20th centuries: an insular world of small farms and fishing shacks where "everyone . . . spoke by hand."

Points of Interest



▲ Vineyard Haven Harborfront. Circa 1900.

Stop #1

Martha's Vineyard

Chamber of Commerce

24 Beach Street, Vineyard Haven
mvy.com/deafheritage

Beach Street, which runs in front of the Chamber of Commerce building, was once the gateway to the village of Holmes Hole. Judge Samuel Sewall, whose account of a 1714 visit to Martha's Vineyard contains the first mention of a deaf resident of the Island, began his journey at Beach Street. So, perhaps, did Jonathan Lumbert (the deaf man he met), when he immigrated to the Island in 1694.

Thomas Hart Benton's portrait of Joseph "Josie" West. ►

Stop #2

Martha's Vineyard Museum

151 Lagoon Pond Rd.,
Vineyard Haven mvmuseum.org

Overlooking Vineyard Haven Harbor, the Museum preserves, exhibits, and interprets materials related to the history and culture of Martha's Vineyard, including the Chilmark deaf community.

Thomas Hart Benton's portrait of Joseph "Josie" West, a deaf farmer, is on permanent display as are other materials, including a notebook kept by Alexander Graham Bell during his investigations on the Island in the 1880s.



▲ Lambert's Cove

Stop #3

Lambert's Cove

281 Lambert's Cove Rd, West Tisbury
Jonathan Lambert (or Lumbert), who immigrated to Martha's Vineyard from Weald in the county of Kent, England around 1700, is believed to have been the ancestor of all the hereditary deaf residents of Martha's Vineyard. He settled near a shallow cove on the north shore of the Island, which now bears his name.



▲ Chilmark Town Hall

Stop #4

Old Chilmark Center

Middle Rd., junction of Tea Lane and Meetinghouse Rd., Chilmark

Until the early 1900s, the village center of Chilmark stood at these crossroads. Deaf residents of the town would have come here to worship at the Congregational and Methodist Churches, to do business or socialize at one of the two general stores, or attend meetings at the Town Hall. The roads that converge here all date to the 1700s. Most deaf citizens of Chilmark would have spent their lives on widely scattered farms like those that, even today, border Middle Road.



▲ Abel's Hill Cemetery

Stop #5

Abel's Hill Cemetery

322 South Road, Chilmark
Abel's Hill, named for 17th-century Wampanoag resident Abel Wauwompahque, was the site of the first two Congregational meetinghouses in Chilmark, around the town's principal cemetery. At least twenty-eight members of the Chilmark deaf community are buried on the hilltop, including Jared and Jerusha Mayhew (Stop #9), "One-Armed Ben" Mayhew, Josie West (Stop #2), George and Dedamia Tilton West (Stop #8) and Katie West (Stop #6).



▲ Katie West House

Stop #6

Chilmark Public Library

South Rd., junction of Middle Road & Menemsha Crossroad, Chilmark

Founded in 1882, the library was originally located in E. Elliot Mayhew's store, and then in the town hall. In 1953, the town purchased the home of the late Katie West, sister-in-law of George and Josie West (Stop #8) and the last native speaker of Martha's Vineyard sign language—who had died the year before. The library opened in its new home in 1956 and maintains the Chilmark Deaf Community Digital Archive.

Stop #7

Beetlebung Corner

South Road, junction of Middle Road and Menemsha Crossroad, Chilmark

E. Elliot Mayhew moved his general store, which doubled as the post office, to the site of the current Chilmark Store. A new town hall, still in use today, was built on the Middle Road side of the intersection in 1887, and the Methodist church (now the Chilmark Community Church) moved to the Menemsha Crossroad in 1910. These changes completed the shift of Chilmark's village center from its old location (Stop #4) to its current one.

▼ Chilmark School



Stop #8

Squibnocket Beach

Squibnocket Rd., off State Rd., Chilmark

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many Chilmark fishermen used Squibnocket as a base of operations. The tiny post office at Squibnocket was overseen by a local farmer, George West. His wife, Dedamia Tilton West, was deaf, as were five of the couple's eight children—among them Josie West (Stop #2) and George West, Jr. (the subject, along with his wife Sabrina, of Thomas Hart Benton's painting "The Lord Is My Shepherd").

▲ Squibnocket Post Office. ▲



▲ Mayhew House

Stop #9

Jared & Jerusha Mayhew House

251 State Road, Chilmark

Nearly hidden from the street by high hedges, this turreted Queen-Anne-style house is recognizable by its yellow-painted clapboards and red roof. Built in the late nineteenth century, it was the home of Jared and Jerusha Mayhew. A prosperous farmer, Jared—like his parents Benjamin and Hannah, his older brother Benjamin, his uncle Alfred, and his aunts Ruby and Love—was deaf. He is said to have been the last Chilmark resident born into a family where deaf children outnumbered hearing ones.



▲ Menemsha Harbor

Stop #10

Menemsha Harbor

Basin Road, Chilmark

Chilmark residents travelling to New Bedford often departed from Menemsha, riding with friends or family members going to "The City" to bring fish and other products to market, or buy supplies. Many of the deaf children who left the Island to be educated at the American School for the Deaf likely took their first steps away from home on these shores.