

Ask the Archivist: Who Were My Deaf Predecessors?

*A question for Melissa Mead,
the John M. and Barbara
Keil University Archivist
and Rochester Collections
Librarian.*

A fellow historian sent me an old newspaper clipping entitled “Six Deaf Students Taking Courses at University.” What can you tell me about my deaf predecessors at Rochester?—Corinna Hill, a doctoral student in history at Rochester

The caption for the grainy image in the September 17, 1921, *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* reads as follows: “Six graduates of the Rochester School for the Deaf . . . are taking regular courses at the University of Rochester. It is said that no other school for the deaf in the United States has had as many as six graduates, at one time, taking university work with students who can hear.”

Left to right in the front row of the newspaper photograph are Jessie Ramsay, Floyd DeWitt, and Doris Myers. In the back row are Thomas Dunn, Frederick Rossner, and Carl Whitlock.

Through a combination of lip-reading and shared note-taking, the deaf students participated in the academic and social life of the University. New York state supported funding for tutors. DeWitt, Rossner, and Whitlock, Classes of 1922, '23, and '24, respectively, withdrew before earning degrees; according to the *Campus* newspaper, both Whitlock and Rossner were active on the football team. Dunn graduated in 1922, but did not keep in close contact with the University.

In 1925, Doris Myers became the first deaf woman to graduate from the University. Her studies included courses in history, rhetoric, biology, French, Spanish, Greek, and education, and she was a recipient of the Edmund Lyon Memorial Scholarship. After graduation she taught for two years at the Rochester School for Deaf (RSD).

The October/November 1930 issue of *Rochester Review* reported the marriage of Jessie Ramsay and Floyd DeWitt. According to his 1945 obituary, DeWitt had worked for the Smith Printing Company, was vice president of the Rochester Civic Association of the Deaf, led the RSD Alumni Association, and served on its board. In 1973, *Democrat and Chronicle* columnist Cliff Carpenter devoted an article to Jessie Ramsay's story, recounting her lifelong association with RSD. Two years after entering the school at the age of five, Ramsey became an orphan; she would list the superintendent, Zenas Westervelt (1895, Honorary), as her guardian. After her husband's death, she would return to teach and mentor at RSD until 1965.

The Rochester School for the Deaf was founded in 1876 as the Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes, and its association with the University through shared students, alumni, faculty, and staff is a notable one. According to an essay on RSD written by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck, President Martin Anderson, in his capacity as a trustee of the New York Board of Charities, recommended the establishment



NOTABLE NEWS STORY: A 1921 story in the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* highlighted a group of six students who enrolled at the University from the Rochester School for the Deaf.

of the school, which would serve all students, regardless of financial standing; he also published a pamphlet entitled “The Education of Deaf-Mutes” in 1879.

Edmund Lyon, Class of 1877, would play an active role at RSD as a trustee and as president, and would develop the Lyon Phonetic Method, “a method of symbolizing speech sounds by hand movements,” to aid in the teaching of speech. Other RSD presidents with University connections include professor Samuel Lattimore; Esther Henckel Ratcliffe, Class of 1919; Allan Kappelman, Class of 1933; and William Fullagar, founding dean of what is now the Warner School of Education. James Galloway, Class of 1929, served as superintendent from 1943 to 1966.

By 1927, the University's alumni directory counted over a dozen graduates who had taught at the RSD, beginning in 1877 with Sylvanus Ellis, Class of 1858.

“Right along, deaf people have been proving what they can accomplish . . . and I should like to become one of this group.”

—Helen Fay, Class of 1927

Two additional RSD contemporaries were Laurence Samuelson, who attended only for the 1922–23 academic year, and Helen Fay, who would graduate in 1927. In her application letter to Annette Gardner Munro, dean of the College for Women, Fay wrote: “Perhaps it is due to that unsatisfied feeling so many experience at graduation [from high school]. We think that when we have reached a certain goal we shall be satisfied with ourselves, but on attaining it, find we desire to climb higher. . . . Right along, deaf people have been proving what they can accomplish . . . and I should like to become one of this group.” 

To learn more about these students and others, visit <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/blog/ATA-Winter2020>.