

History Note: Deaf community has a home at Thompson Hall

by [Access Press Staff](#) // November 10th, 2016

November 5, 1916, was a great day for deaf Minnesotans. It was the day that St. Paul's Thompson Hall opened its doors. Deaf and hard-of-hearing Minnesotans have enjoyed the hall for 100 years, going there for classes, social events, and other gatherings. The centennial was celebrated this month with a banquet, trolley history tour, and other activities.

Deaf community members are fortunate that Doug Bahl did research on hall builder Charles Thompson, before Bahl's death in 2014.

Thompson was from a well-to-do family and never had to work. His father, Horace Thompson, founded the First National Bank of St. Paul. The Thompson family was also involved in the growth and development of the railroad system.

Charles Thompson was born in 1861. Histories don't indicate if he was deaf at birth or became deaf later. He attended what is now the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf in Faribault. His graduation present was a horse farm near Windom. But he sold the farm after a time and returned to the Twin Cities where there was a larger deaf community.

After meeting Margaret Brooks in 1896 at a Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens convention, Thompson fell in love. She had also attended the Minnesota state academy, although she finished her schooling in Colorado.

Deaf architect Olof Hanson designed the Thompsons' home, as a wedding present for the new bride. Hanson and Thompson were friends since childhood. The Thompson home soon became a gathering place for the deaf community. It still stands in the Ramsey Hill neighborhood of St. Paul.

The Thompsons later moved to a home on Lincoln Avenue, with a ballroom on its second floor. The family also had cabins in the Alexandria area and homes in other parts of the United States. Thompson enjoyed entertaining and hosting his many friends from the state's deaf community. Bahl described Thompson as being a mayor of a deaf colony. People flocked to the Thompsons for friendship.

Charles Thompson died in 1915. His widow Margaret decided to honor his memory with the construction of Thompson Hall. It was planned with ample natural light so that people could easily see one another and communicate through American Sign Language. It has a main floor dining room, an auditorium on the second floor and a bowling alley in the basement, which has now been converted into a smaller place to socialize. The hall's trustees originally included hearing members of the Thompson and Brooks families and one deaf administrator. Deaf trustees now hold all of the seats. The building opened with a well-attended celebration.

Margaret passed away in 1929. The Thompsons are buried at St. Paul's Oakland Cemetery, near many other prominent St. Paul families. The Thompsons are buried next to close family friends the Merriams, including the final resting place of former Gov. William R. Merriam.

Through the generosity of Margaret Brooks Thompson, Thompson Hall was not only able to open its doors. It has always operated as a free club, unlike other similar social organizations. It has hosted many, many events and activities over the past century and is a cherished place for its members. Deaf community members are looking forward to the next 100 years there

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com.