

Picton man's research honors deaf educator

By Rick Fralick
Gazette Staff

The work of a local man has helped to ensure that a pioneer in the education of deaf children in Ontario will not be forgotten.

Bill Conley of Picton spent several years researching the contributions of Samuel Thomas Greene, the first deaf teacher of deaf children in the Ontario school system.

Greene taught at the Ontario School for the Deaf and Sir James Whitney School in Belleville in 1870.

The school hosted some 1,000 deaf alumni and staff over the Canada Day weekend in a celebration and reunion on the occasion of its 125th anniversary.

A highlight of the weekend was the unveiling of a plaque noting Greene's accomplishments, and it is this plaque that is the culmination of Conley's work.

"My motivation is that I wanted to make sure that deaf people and deaf children know all about the history of Samuel Greene, who was the first deaf teacher in Ontario," Conley writes.

"At the unveiling ceremony, I made a short speech about my volunteer work doing research regarding Greene's life," he added. "I presented my project to Keith Dorschner, president of the Alumni Association, two years ago."

An American by birth, Greene was educated at the National Deaf-Mute College, now Gallaudet University, in Washington, D.C.

Conley himself graduated from Gallaudet in 1969 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy and Sociology.

After graduating in 1870, Greene came north to teach at the new provincial school for the deaf, later renamed Sir James Whitney School.

Believing that the education of deaf children should be based on solid language skills, Greene devised a progressive and highly successful method of teaching that used sign language and written English.

Co-founder and first president of the Ontario Association of the Deaf, he was renowned for his eloquent public addresses and poetry recitations in sign language.

Greene is buried at the Belleville Cemetery, about 2 kilometres west of the Sir James Whitney School, and the historical plaque will now draw attention to his final resting place as well as his place in history.

Conley's involvement actually began with his attempt to have the name of the school changed to better reflect the history of deaf education in Ontario.

Initially, he wrote letters to the Ministry of Education suggesting that the name be changed to the McGann-

Greene School for the Deaf.

John McGann, who came originally from Ireland, was a founder and teacher at the school who hired Greene as a teacher in 1870.

"I wrote letters to the ministry, but they didn't want to change the name of the school," Conley writes. "Then former Quinte MPP Hugh O'Neil recommended that I contact the Ontario Heritage Foundation about my proposal for the plaque."

Conley, who has a thick

binder full of research and correspondence on the matter, is happy with his success regarding the Greene plaque and says he intends to continue pursuing the name change.

Originally from Belleville, Conley attended the Sir James Whitney School after losing his hearing at the age of three due to red measles. He has lived in Picton since 1977 and worked at Prince Edward Heights from 1977 to 1985.

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Photo courtesy Bill Conley

Bill Conley of Picton poses with the new historical plaque honoring Samuel Thomas Greene, a pioneer in deaf education.

GREENE, Samuel Thomas