

## OCCOM, SAMSON

**First Name (variants):** Sampson

**Last Name (variants):** Occum; Accom; Ocham; Long Island Indian

**Honorific(S):** Rev.; Mr.

**Birth:** 1723 in Mohegan, CT

**Death:** July 14, 1792 in New Stockbridge, New York

### **Affiliation**

Mohegan; Montauk; Brothertown; Connecticut Board of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge; New York Board of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge; Suffolk Presbytery; Society in London for propagating the Gospel in N.E. & parts adjacent

### **Education**

Self-taught in English literacy, studies in languages and theology with Eleazar Wheelock and Benjamin Pomeroy (1743-1748)

### **Faith**

Moderate Calvinist

### **Nationality**

Mohegan

### **Occupation**

Minister, community leader

### **Residence(S)**

- Mohegan, CT (from 1723 to 1743)
- Lebanon, CT (from 1743 to 1747)
- Montauk, Long Island (from 1749 to 1761)
- Mohegan, CT (from 1764-03 to 1785-10)
- Brothertown, NY (from 1785-10 to 1791-12)
- New Stockbridge, NY (from 1791-12 to 1792-07-14)

### **Events**

*Building of Occom's house*

In December 1763, Occom returns to Mohegan to choose a site for his house, close to the Mohegan Chapel. The project engages several Indian laborers, cost about £100, and is a notable structure, clapboarded with cedar.

*Fundraising Tour of Great Britain*

After many months of planning and shifting personnel, Occom, accompanied by the minister Nathaniel Whitaker, sets sail in December 1765 for a two-and-a-half year tour of England and Scotland in order to solicit contributions to Wheelock's Indian Charity School and missionary efforts. Introduced to aristocrats and prominent clergy by the minister George Whitefield, Occom preaches many sermons, travels widely, and collects a large sum of money.

#### *Jewett Controversy*

This crisis comes to a head in 1764 when Occom returns to Mohegan from Montauket and gains a following among the Indians and English. Robert Clelland, schoolmaster at Mohegan, fears he is being supplanted, and his patron, the minister David Jewett, thinks Occom is interfering and not sufficiently respectful. More importantly, Occom supports the Mohegan tribe's claims in the Mason Land Case, in which Jewett, who opposes them, stands to lose considerable property. Finally, Jewett brings an official complaint to the Connecticut Board of Correspondents, which acquits Occom on all charges except that of involvement in the Mason Case. Despite their reconciliation, bitter feelings linger between Occom and Jewett.

#### *Mason Land Case*

This enduring and complex controversy begins with an ambiguous agreement of September 28, 1640 in which Uncas, sachem of the Mohegans, either gives or entrusts a large tract of the Tribe's territory to the Colony of Connecticut, to be overseen by Major John Mason, a long-time advisor to the Mohegans. Over the years, Mason's heirs, on behalf of the Mohegan Tribe, resist the Colony's claims that it owns the lands through a series of suits and appeals. In 1743, Occom attends hearings of the case, which has split the Tribe into opposing factions. The case is finally decided in the Royal Courts in London in 1773 against the Mohegans.

#### *Occom's First Mission to the Oneidas*

Recruited in November by the New York Commissioners of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, Occom leaves in May 1761 with his brother-in-law David Fowler, for a mission among the Oneida in western New York. He preaches, establishes a school, and recruits three young Mohawk men to attend Wheelock's Indian Charity School. He returns home at the end of September.

#### *Occom's inoculation*

On March 11, 1766, during their tour of London, Nathaniel Whitaker inoculates Occom against smallpox, a controversial practice that involves inserting scabs into an incision, causing a mild case of the disease, which produces immunity to it.

#### *Occom leaves his studies*

In 1747, after four years of schooling with Wheelock, Occom begins to prepare for entrance to Yale by studying Latin, Greek and Hebrew with Benjamin Pomeroy at Hebron, Connecticut. In the summer of 1749, he is officially released from his studies because of severe eyestrain.

#### *Occom's Marriage*

In the fall of 1751, Occom marries Mary Fowler, daughter of a prominent Montaukett family on Long Island, where Occom has established a school and mission.

#### *Occom's Mission to the Montauks*

After being released from his studies in the summer of 1749 because of acute eyestrain, Occom goes on a fishing expedition to Montauk, Long Island and decides to establish a school there and become a missionary to the Montaukett Indians. He serves in that role for 12 years.

#### *Occom's Ordination*

In November 1756, the Boston Board of Commissioners of the London Society for Propagating the Gospel recommends Occom for ordination as a Congregational minister. Nearly three years of discussion ensue as all parties involved (the Boston Board of Commissioners, the New Jersey Commissioners of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge) try to find a suitable mission and salary for Occom. Ultimately he is ordained in August 1759 by the Suffolk County Presbytery, the ecclesiastical body with which he has had the most professional contact and the one closest to his current mission among the Montauks.

#### *Occom returns to Mohegan*

In March 1764, after three missions to the Oneida and heavily in debt, Occom and Mary move their family from Montauk to Mohegan across the Long Island Sound, and because of bad weather lose many of their household possessions in the process.

#### *Occom's Second Mission to the Oneidas*

In 1762, Occom returns to Oneida from May to September to find the people in dire straits due to war and an early killing frost.

#### *Occom's Third Mission to the Oneidas*

In May 1763, Occom, accompanied by Samuel Ashpo, another Mohegan minister, sets out on his third mission to the Oneidas but cannot get to New York because of the outbreak of Pontiac's War.

### **Marital Status**

Occom married Mary Fowler, a Montauk woman and one of his students, in 1751. They had 10 children. Mary Fowler has been noted for her adherence to Montauk lifeways and many scholars have seen her as an opposite pole of influence in Occom's life from Eleazar Wheelock.

### **Biography**

Samson Occom was a Mohegan leader and ordained Presbyterian minister. Occom began his public career in 1742, when he was chosen as a tribal counselor to Ben Uncas II. The following year, he sought out Eleazar Wheelock, a young Anglo-American minister in Lebanon, CT, in hopes of obtaining some education and becoming a teacher at Mohegan. Wheelock agreed to take on Occom as a student, and though Occom had anticipated staying for a few weeks or months, he remained with Wheelock for four years. Occom's academic success inspired Wheelock to

open Moor's Indian Charity School in 1754, a project which gave him the financial and political capital to establish Dartmouth College in 1769. After his time with Wheelock, Occom embarked on a 12-year mission to the Montauk of Long Island (1749-1761). He married a Montauk woman, Mary Fowler, and served as both teacher and missionary to the Montauk and nearby Shinnecock, although he was grievously underpaid for his services. Occom conducted two brief missions to the Oneida in 1761 and 1762 before embarking on one of the defining journeys of his career: a fundraising tour of Great Britain that lasted from 1765 to 1768. During this journey, undertaken on behalf of Moor's Indian Charity School, Occom raised £12,000 (an enormous and unanticipated amount that translates roughly to more than two-million dollars), and won wide acclaim for his preaching and comportment. Upon his return to Mohegan in 1768, Occom discovered that Wheelock had failed to adequately care for his family while he was gone. Additionally, despite the vast sums of money that he had raised, Occom found himself unemployed. Wheelock tried to find Occom a missionary position, but Occom was in poor health and disinclined to leave his family again after seeing the treatment with which they had met while he was in Britain. Occom and Wheelock's relationship continued to sour as it became apparent to Occom that the money he had labored to raise would be going towards infrastructure at Dartmouth College, Wheelock's new project, rather than the education of Native Americans. After the dissolution of his relationship with Wheelock, Occom became increasingly focused on the needs of the Mohegan community and increasingly vocal in criticizing Anglo-Americans' un-Christian treatment of Native Americans. In September of 1772, he delivered his famous "Sermon on the Execution of Moses Paul," which took Anglo-American spiritual hypocrisy as one of its major themes, and which went into four printings before the end of the year. In 1773, Occom became further disillusioned when the Mason Land Case was decided in favor of the Colony of Connecticut. The details of the Mason Case are complicated, but to summarize: the Colony of Connecticut had gained control of Mohegan land early in the 18th century under very suspect circumstances, and successfully fended off the Mohegan's 70-year-long legal challenge. The conclusion of the case came as a blow to the Mohegans, and further convinced Occom of Anglo-American corruption. Along with David Fowler (Montauk Tribe), Occom's brother-in-law, and Joseph Johnson (Mohegan), Occom's son-in-law, Occom helped found Brothertown, an Indian tribe formed from the Christian Mohegans, Pequots, Narragansetts, Montauks, Tunxis, and Niantics. They eventually settled in Oneida country in upstate New York. Occom moved there with his family in 1789, spending the remaining years of his life serving as a minister to the Brothertown, Stockbridge, and Mohegan Indians. Harried by corrupt land agents, the Brothertown and Stockbridge groups relocated to the eastern shore of Lake Winnebago, though Occom died in 1792 before he could remove himself and his family there. Occom's writings and legacy have made him one of the best known and most eminent Native Americans of the 18th century and beyond.

[Documents written](#)

[Documents received](#)

[All related documents](#)

### **Sources**

Axtell, James. *The European and the Indian: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America*. New York: Oxford University Press 1981. Brooks, Joanna. *The Collected Writings of Samson Occom, Mohegan: Leadership and Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Native America*. Oxford 2006. Calloway, Colin. *The Indian History of an American Institution*. Dartmouth College Press 2010. Elliott, Michael. "‘This Indian Bait’: Samson Occom and the Voice of Liminality." *Early American Literature* Vol. 29 No. 3 (1994) pp. 233-253. Fisher, Linford. *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America*. New York: Oxford University Press 2012. Love, Deloss. *Samson Occom and the Christian Indians of New England*. Pilgrim Press 1899. Silverman, David J. *Red Brethren: The Brothertown and Stockbridge Indians and the Problem of Race in Early America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2010. Richardson, Leon. *An Indian Preacher in England*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press 1933. Wyss, Hilary. *Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 2000.