

*He kindled and funded Eleazar Wheelock's "grand design." He never expected what he got in return .*

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## The Betrayal of Samson Occom

*by Bernd Peyer*

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Samson Occom's life unfolded in the midst of a hundred-year imperial war, when suspicion and hatred dictated relationships between Euro-Americans and Indians. At the time of his birth in 1723, his Connecticut tribe, the once-powerful Mohegans, had dwindled to 350 people. Ravaged by disease and warfare, plagued by the usual side effects of colonialism — alcohol, factionalism, defection, and dilution — the fragmented community was forced into a marginal existence on a fraction of its former land. The remaining Mohegans supplemented their meager harvests by peddling baskets and brooms or selling their labor as servants.

By his own account, Occom was brought up as a "heathen." At the age of 17 he converted to Christianity, then taught himself to read and write in order to learn Protestant philosophy. Finding his own people "perishing for lack of Vision," he undoubtedly saw in Christianity an alternative to the spiritual void he witnessed around him. Very likely, he also saw conversion as a means of escaping destitution. Two years later he took his place in the Mohegan community as an elected member of its 12-person governing council.

At about this time Occom heard of Eleazar Wheelock's college preparatory school in Lebanon, Connecticut. Hoping to improve his education, he asked his mother, Sarah, who was probably employed there as a house servant, to arrange a meeting with the minister. It was Occom who found Wheelock, and not the other way around.

Occom entered Wheelock's school in 1743, aided by a generous stipend from the Boston commissioners for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG). Despite failing eyesight and his advanced age — he was now 20 — Occom took just four years to advance from rudimentary literacy to fluency in English and relative proficiency in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, obvious testimony — by modern standards as well — to his superior intellect. One of Wheelock's fellow missionaries, the Rev. Samuel Buell, maintained that had Occom been in better health, he undoubtedly would have entered Yale.

Occom's success as a scholar was the spark that kindled Wheelock's "grand design" — a coeducational boarding school to train Indian missionaries for "errands into the wilderness." (His Moor's Indian Charity School would open, finally, in 1753.) Wheelock believed that his school would be the most effective way to keep Indians from roaming the land and causing disturbances along the frontier. Moreover, Indian missionaries, he thought, would be four times as serviceable as whites because they would be cheaper to maintain and would be willing to live under conditions unacceptable to Englishmen. Clarifying the place he had in mind for his charges in the missionary hierarchy, Wheelock wrote that they would be perfectly willing to accept their white colleagues as "elder brothers" and consequently would not "scorn to be advised or reprov'd, counseled, or conducted by them; especially so long as they shall be so much dependent upon the English for their

support." Allaying concerns that Indians would compete professionally with whites, Wheelock added, "There is no likelihood at all that they will, though ever so well qualified, get into Business, either as School-Masters or Ministers, among the English; at least till the Credit of their Nations be raised many Degrees above what it is now, and consequently they can't be employed as will be honorable for them, or in any Business they will be fit for, but among their own Nation."

Abilities and ill-health aside, Occom clearly never stood a chance of advancing to Yale. Bitterly realizing this, Occom suddenly found himself looking for a job without any assistance from the SPG or Wheelock, as he may well have expected. It would not be Samson Occom's last disappointment.

Relief came from the Indian community. During a seasonal fishing trip Occom made to Montauk territory in Long Island, the Montauks invited him to remain among them as their schoolmaster. After conferring with Wheelock about the offer, Occom moved to Montauk in 1749 and remained there for the next dozen years. As destitute as the Mohegans, the Montauks welcomed Occom's wide knowledge. Tightening the bond with them by marrying a daughter of a leading Montauk family, Occom served the community as schoolmaster, minister, scribe, advisor, healer, and judge. He founded a school where he taught children the alphabet with painted cedar chips (in a way predating Friedrich Froebel's famous kindergarten experiment by many years) and had older children assist the younger ones (foreshadowing the Lancastrian system of instruction, which wouldn't be introduced to American schools until 1806). In addition he initiated a Christian revivalist movement among Montauks and the neighboring Shinnecocks.

Wheelock regarded Occom's achievements as solid proof of the success of his "grand design." As Wheelock had envisioned, however, the success gained little for Occom financially. For two years the SPG paid him nothing, then finally granted him £15 to £20, one-sixth what it normally paid its missionaries. With a family to support, Occom was forced to supplement his income by hunting and fishing—the same activities missionary efforts were supposed to abolish—and by binding books and producing brooms, wooden spoons, and pails. Even these efforts were insufficient to meet his family and missionary responsibilities, and he incurred £100 in debts. Insisting that Occom was leading an extravagant lifestyle, the SPG refused to raise his pay. Wheelock could have protested loudly on Occom's behalf, but he never did. Occom concluded, in an autobiographical sketch he wrote a few years later, that his treatment may just have had something to do with the fact that he was an Indian.

Recognition of Occom's success at Montauk was slow in coming. In 1756 the SPG finally recommended that Occom be ordained. The ordination stalled for three years while Occom was tossed back and forth between the Congregationalists of the SPG, who offered him £30 annually to remain among the Montauks, and the Presbyterians, who wanted to send him on a mission to the Cherokees. At last Occom was ordained by the Presbyterians, but a Cherokee rebellion thwarted plans for their mission. In 1760 the Scotch Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge stepped in, offering Occom a mission with the Oneidas in New York. There was no mistaking the importance of the offer. It came at the height of the French and Indian War, when alliance with the Iroquoian nations was vital to British colonial interests. Occom accepted the position and managed his second mission with great success.

Occom's prospects seemed to be improving. Early in 1764 the SPG repeated its earlier offer of £30 annually if Occom would return to work with the Montauks and Niantics, as well as serving the Mohegans and other neighboring communities. Occom readily agreed and moved back to Mohegan in the spring, where he began to construct a permanent home for his growing family.

But Wheelock had other plans for Occom. As Occom was re-establishing himself at Mohegan, Wheelock founded a commission under the Scotch Society in Connecticut to gain more freedom for his own plans. Wheelock suggested that Occom be incorporated in the new society if the SPG would agree to give him up. The SPG eventually agreed on condition that Occom be sent on mission to the "Western Indians" or somewhere far beyond its own New England turf. The newly constituted Connecticut board sent Occom off to New York with no means of funding other than the board's vague hope that Wheelock's friend George Whitefield, who was visiting there at the time, would provide the means for his support. Whitefield, outraged at the presumption, sent Occom packing. While the strained relations between Whitefield and Wheelock soon mended, Occom again found himself jobless. Wheelock's irrational decision had nearly cost Occom the paid ministry among his own people that he had been hoping for for so long.

Returning to the Mohegans, Occom became enmeshed in the Mason Controversy, a recently revived land dispute with the colony that dated back to 1640. The status of all land transactions between colonists and Indians was hanging on a final decision pending in England. Occom sided with the Mason faction, which argued that certain land being used by the colonists had been taken from the Indians illegally. Occom apparently helped formulate a petition to George III offering to cede Mohegan land claims to the king and pay him an annual rent in exchange for the use of the land. Enraged Connecticut officials and colonists denounced the petition as a "Notable Bribe" and impugned Occom's reputation as the "Pious Mohegan." On top of this, the Rev. David Jewett, frustrated that Occom was drawing in more and more of Jewett's congregants—and who also had a vested interest in the contested lands the colony stood to lose—publicly charged Occom with ill conduct toward the overseers of the Connecticut board and with threatening to turn Episcopalian.

The Connecticut board met at Wheelock's house to settle the "dispute." Although Occom was acquitted of all charges except participation in the Mason Controversy, he was forced to sign a degrading confession: "...it was very imprudent in me, and offensive to the Public that I should so far engage as of late I have done, in the Mason Controversy: which has injured my Ministerial Character, hurt my Usefulness, and brought Dishonor upon Mr. Wheelock's School and Correspondents. For this imprudent, rash and offensive Conduct of mine, I am heartily sorry, and beg Forgiveness of God—of this honorable Board of Correspondents, of whom I ought to have asked further Advice—and the Public..."

This sobering experience undoubtedly marked a turning point in Occom's personal views of Indian-white relations. When London finally handed down a negative decision on the Mohegan Land Case in 1771, he wrote: "I am afraid the poor Indians will never stand a good chance with the English in their land controversies, because they are very poor, they have no money. Money is almighty now-a-days, and the Indians have no learning, no wit, no cunning: the English have all."

Occom's troubles at Mohegan, meanwhile, were temporarily alleviated when Wheelock, desperate for funds for Moor's Charity School, sent Occom on a fundraising mission to England with the Rev. Nathaniel Whitaker. Feeling threatened by Wheelock's independent action, the Boston board of SPG opposed the idea. The Connecticut administration also objected because it suspected Occom would agitate in London in favor of the Mason faction. Rumors spread locally and in England that Occom was not Mohegan and had only recently been converted for the purposes of the trip.

Occom departed from Boston on December 23, 1765, with mixed feelings about the prospects of his mission and worries about leaving his family again. He delivered more than 300 sermons in England and Scotland—in one case before an overflow crowd of 3,000 people. He was lionized by numerous dignitaries, such as Lord Dartmouth and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, who were impressed by his

modesty and sincerity, and who would continue to support him long after his return to America. In perhaps the greatest tribute accorded a foreigner, Occom was parodied on the London stage, and had his portrait painted by the noted artist Mason Chamberlain.

Occom and Whitaker collected a total of about £12,000, an astronomical sum in private donations. John Thornton, level-headed businessman, philanthropist, and treasurer for the board of trustees for the English fund, had no doubts to whom credit was due. In a letter to Wheelock he wrote: "Mr. Occom was the instrument under God that was the means of collecting the money."

When Occom sailed home to Mohegan in the spring of 1768, he was a noted personality at the height of his career, a multilingual, widely-traveled, and well-connected minister with nearly 20 years of experience behind him. In the wake of his smashing success in England, he hoped he would finally obtain a ministry close to his native village and be paid modestly for his services out of the funds he had been so instrumental in collecting. He came home to find, however, that the Boston board of the SPG, which still controlled Mohegan territory, had neither forgotten nor forgiven his previous involvement in the Mason Controversy. And he found that his family, whom he had entrusted to Wheelock's care during his trip to England, was living in destitute conditions.

Still Wheelock had plans for Occom. He wanted to send him off again into what Occom called "the hideous Wilderness" on a mission to the Onondagas in New York. Now 45 years old, with permanent health problems, worried about the welfare of his family, Occom balked at the suggestion. But Wheelock was unable to comprehend the human needs behind the hesitancy. Wheelock concluded that the attention Occom had gotten in England had made him susceptible to "that Indian distemper, Pride," and accused him of aspiring after "Grandeur and ease." Refusing to go to New York, unemployed once again, Wheelock's star pupil and fundraiser reverted to a hand-to-mouth existence as an itinerant preacher, often depending upon the benevolence of friends for his very survival.

Relations between Occom and Wheelock further deteriorated when Occom had a drink early in 1769. Given to abstinence at a time when a good vintage was universally appreciated in Connecticut, Occom immediately castigated himself by writing a full confession to the Suffolk Presbytery, who eventually concluded that Occom's intoxication came not from intemperate drinking, "but from having Drank a small quantity of Spirituous Liquor after having been all day without food." Wheelock and his associates, however, chose to magnify the issue beyond all proportion, penning numerous letters to Occom's friends and informing them of his "fall" into that greatest of all Indian sins—intemperance. The charge stigmatized Occom forever.

Wheelock was perhaps really looking for an excuse to legitimize his increasing disenchantment with the outcome of the "grand design." In 1770, one year after Dartmouth received its charter, he moved his charity school to Hanover. The school had already begun to decline; Oneida parents had withdrawn their children in 1769 and New England Indians were apparently no longer welcome there. By 1771 Wheelock had changed his mind altogether about training Indians as missionaries, lamenting "the bad conduct and behavior of such as have been educated here, after they have left the school, and been put into business abroad: and it is that from which, I think, I had the fullest evidence that a greater portion of English youths must be fitted for missionaries."

Occom himself had become increasingly suspicious of Wheelock's plans, a suspicion shared by both the English and Scotch trustees for the funds Occom had gathered. In July 1771, Occom penned the most vituperative letter he'd ever written, unleashing his feelings to Wheelock: "I am very jealous that instead of your Seminary Becoming alma Mater, she will be too alba mater to Suckle the Tawnees, for She is already aDorned up too much like the Popish Virgin Mary. She'll be Naturally ashamed to

Suckle the Tawnees for she is already equal in Power, Honor and Authority to any College in Europe, I think your College has too much Worked by Grandeur for the Poor Indians, they'll never have much benefit of it,ÑIn so saying I speak the general Sentiment of Indians and English too in these parts."

Wheelock, offended by Occom's accusation, was, as late as February 1772, still writing of his intentions to stick to his original intent: "The Plan is such that all the Benefit done or proposed to be done to the English is Subservient in the Best Manner to the Indian Cause; and greatly adds to and increases my ability to help the Indians and that many ways in so much that I hope in God to be able to support a Hundred Indians and Youths designed for Indian Service on Charity in a little Time." Occom and Wheelock maintained a correspondence until 1774, when their 31-year relationship ended in mutual silence.

The rest is history: by 1775 Wheelock had used up the entire English fund, most likely for the construction of buildings for Dartmouth College. The Scotch Society kept a somewhat tighter hold on its money, releasing it only on occasion, until they finally rechanneled it in 1922, claiming that there were no appropriate candidates for the funding. Moor's Indian Charity School continued sporadically and separately from Dartmouth until 1850.

Even before parting permanently from Wheelock, Occom had been setting new sights on improving the lives of Indians. Tired of tribal squabbles and disillusioned with the English Protestants, Occom developed a plan for an independent New England Christian Indian community far away from the detrimental influence of whites. Tapping into several communities of Christian Indians, he recruited volunteers to form a new settlement on Oneida lands in New York. The Connecticut administration supported this venture, probably seeing the "removal" of Christian Indians as a ready solution to the colony's persistent land problems. In 1774 the Oneidas told the New England Christian Indians "we receive you into our Body as it were, now we may say we have one head, one heart and one Blood" and deeded them a tract of land near the present-day town of Kirkland, New York. Their move interrupted by the Revolutionary War, the vanguard of New England Christian Indians took refuge among the Stockbridge Indians in Massachusetts. (Occom counseled all Christian Indians to maintain neutrality, or if necessary, take up the republican cause.)

Finally on November 7, 1785, Occom's dream for the Indian community became a reality. "We Named our Town...Brothertown, in Indian Eeyamquittoowauconnuck," he wrote, and "Concluded to live in Peace, and in Friendship and to go in all their Public Concerns in Harmony both in their Religious and temporal concerns, and every one to bear his part of Public Charges in the Town.— They desired me to be a Teacher amongst them. I consented to spend some of my remaining days with them, and make this Town my Home and center."

Two years later the Brothertown and New Stockbridge community, calling on him as "God's Ambassador into this wilderness," requested that he serve also as their minister, with pay from their own funds as they accrued. This was the first Presbyterian church organized by Indians themselves, Occom noted with obvious satisfaction, "for we had no white man to assist us."

Occom traveled between Brothertown and Mohegan, serving as minister, doctor, councilor, spokesman, and lobbyist until his death in 1792. His harmonious, faction-free vision for Brothertown was never fully realized. Yet, despite numerous incursions into their lands and subsequent removals to Indiana in 1812 and Wisconsin in 1831, Occom's coalition of Christian Indians still constitutes a viable community that now considers itself to be a homogeneous tribe, the Brothertown Indian Nation, and is currently fighting for federal recognition.

Occom is remembered and revered today as a respected elder not only among the Brothertowns, but also among the Mohegan Nation, the Montauks, and the Shinnecocks, who celebrated "Samson Occom Day" in June of 1970. The "Father of American Indian Literature," he left behind an impressive body of writing, including *A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Moses Paul*, a bestseller which went through at least 19 editions and was translated into Welsh; *A Choice Collection of Spiritual Hymns*; an autobiography; a tribal history of the Montauk; a booklet of Indian remedies; and volumes of original letters and manuscripts.

And the legacy of Occom's vision of Indian education remains. The founding of Dartmouth College — like Samson Occom's life — was braided with strands of promise and betrayal. The College took 200 years to rededicate itself to Indian education. Introduced in 1972, Dartmouth's Native American Studies program has grown into a full-scale department and now offers a major. Some hundred Native Americans currently study at the College, among them Occom descendant Sarah Harris '00.

Occom's name still appears to be good for credit in the Dartmouth community, too. The Samson Occom Pooled Income Fund has netted five million dollars in donations from Dartmouth alumni. The College, though, owes more than a financial debt of gratitude to Samson Occom. For had Samson Occom not found Eleazar Wheelock, there would have been no Dartmouth.

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