

Samson Occom

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Samson Occom (1723-1792) was a Mohegan First Nations preacher, poet, judge, diplomat, philanthropist, and the uncredited founder of Dartmouth, an Ivy League college in the United States. He was the first published Native American poet. Occom spoke Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Mohegan (Mohican), and English, shattering many stereotypes about First Nations peoples during his time.

Most of what we know about Occom comes from his autobiography and a series of handwritten letters exchanged with Eleazar Wheelock, which historians later corroborated. Occom was born to Sarah and Joshua Tomockham. He considered himself a “Heathen,” “from birth till [he] received the Christian religion” (“Occom, Sarah”). He believed that he and all First Nation peoples were “born ... [and] brought up in Heathenism” and the only ways to save themselves from their “Heathenish ways, Customs, and Religion” was through literacy, a sedentary lifestyle, and their conversion to Christianity (Occom and Dartmouth Libraries, “Autobiography” 1v). As a young boy, Occom recalled that “not one [Indigenous person] ... made a profession of Christianity,” which he viewed as a deterrent to converting more Indigenous peoples (Occom and Dartmouth Libraries, “Autobiography” 2r-2v). This motivated him to learn to read and write so he could spread Christianity among his “poor brethren” (Occom and Dartmouth Libraries, “Autobiography” 3v). Between the ages of sixteen and seventeen, Occom taught himself to read by attending church functions and by frequently asking his literate neighbors for help. In 1743, Occom decided to pursue further education with Eleazar Wheelock, a congregational minister in Lebanon, Connecticut. He initially anticipated staying with Wheelock for “a fortnight or 3 weeks” but ended up staying for four years; He stopped only because his eyes could no longer handle the strain of studying (Occom and Dartmouth Libraries, “Autobiography” 4v-5r).

Upon leaving his studies, Occom took on multiple roles within the Montauk, Shinnecock, Haudenosaunee, Iroquoian, and Mohegan communities. He served as a dedicated English teacher, an ordained minister, a funeral officiant, and later became a community-appointed judge for the Mohegan tribe. Through these deep connections, Occom played a key role in fostering diplomacy among Indigenous communities.

After almost two decades of serving Indigenous communities, Occom went with Wheelock to Britain to help raise money for a new school to educate young First Nations students. Beginning in 1765, Occom dedicated two years to preaching around three hundred sermons across England and Scotland. Occom was “a sensation, and large throngs came to hear him” (Childs). As a result of his success, Occom and Wheelock were able to raise £12,000 (equivalent to approximately \$2.4 million today).

Shortly after arriving home, Occom was informed that Wheelock was no longer using their funds as intended. Instead, Wheelock built a school for white students---Dartmouth. From 1769 to 1970, only twenty First Nations students attended Dartmouth.

On 27 April 2024, Samson Occom’s documents were finally returned to the Mohegan Tribe. In Mohegan tradition, when someone “creates an object or writes something, part of their being is in that work” (Silverstein). Thus, the return of his documents symbolized his return to the tribe.

During his travels, Occom met several popular hymnodists and compiled multiple English hymnals that were made specifically for “Christian Indian congregations” (Brooks). In 1774, Occom published *A Choice Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs; Intended for the Edification of Sincere Christians, of All Denominations*, which made him the first published Native American poet. The compilation of hymns was designed for all sects of Christianity, aiming to help Christians endure life's hardships until they reach heaven, where earthly struggles cease to exist. The following hymn, titled Hymn XI, is appropriately the eleventh hymn in this collection. It follows iambic tetrameter and an AA, BB rhyme scheme, breaking the pattern in lines 14–15, and 20–21. The hymn was compiled with the intent of being sung in congregation, with God in mind and a deep understanding of the lyrics being emphasized. Hymn XI underscores the futility of struggling with sin, emphasizing the need to devote oneself to God, who redeems all earthly hardships in heaven.

Further Reading

Brooks, Joanna. “Six Hymns by Samson Occom.” *Early American Literature*, vol.38, no. 1, 2003, pp. 67–87.

Occom, Samson. Samson Occom, autobiography, undated. *Dartmouth Libraries*, DOI:10.1349/ddlp.1465.

Wigginton, Caroline. “Extending Root and Branch: Community Regeneration in the petitions of Samson Occom.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2008, pp. 24–55.

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- Brooks, Joanna. "Six hymns by Samson Occom." *Early American Literature*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2003, pp. 67–87, DOI:10.1353/eal.2003.0003.
- Childs, Francis Lane. "A Dartmouth History Lesson for Freshmen." *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, Dec. 1957.
- Occom, Samson. *A Choice Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs: Intended for the Edification of Sincere Christians, of All Denominations*. Timothy Green, 1774, pp. 3-15. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*.
- Occom, Samson. "Samson Occom, autobiography, undated," *Dartmouth Libraries*, DOI:10.1349/ddlp.1465.
- "Occom, Sarah." *Dartmouth Libraries*, DOI:
- Silverstein, Hannah. "A Solemn and Celebratory Occasion." *Dartmouth*, 27 Apr. 2022.

Hymn XI²⁴³

Weary of struggling with my Pain,
 Hopeless to burst my nature's Chain:²⁴⁴
 Hardly I give the Contest²⁴⁵ o'er,²⁴⁶
 I seek to free myself no more.

From my own Works²⁴⁷ at last I cease,
 God that creates must seal my Peace;
 Fruitless my Toil²⁴⁸ and vain²⁴⁹ my Care,
 And all my Fitness is Despair.

Lord I despair myself to heal,
 I see my Sin but cannot feel;
 I cannot till thy Spirt²⁵⁰ blow,²⁵¹
 And bid th'²⁵² obedient Waters²⁵³ flow.

'Tis thine²⁵⁴ a Heart of flesh to give,
 Thy Gifts I only can receive:
 Here then to thee²⁵⁵ I all resign,

5

10

15

²⁴³ Occom, Samson. "A Choice Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs: Intended for the Edification of Sincere Christians, of All Denominations." Timothy Green, 1774.

²⁴⁴ *Nature's Chain* Referring to a hierarchical structure with God at the top, followed by angels, humans, animals, other living beings, and inanimate objects.

²⁴⁵ *Contest* "oppose as mistaken or wrong" OEL

²⁴⁶ *O'er* "from one point to another across an intervening space" (OED)

²⁴⁷ *Works* "physical or mental labour" (OED)

²⁴⁸ *Toil* to struggle to achieve objective or "for a living" for a prolonged period of time, either physically or mentally (OED)

²⁴⁹ *Vain* producing no result

²⁵⁰ *Spirit* referring to the holy spirit; part of the holy trinity

²⁵¹ *Blow* actively blossoming or the act moving air

²⁵² *Th'* a "contraction of 'the'" often "used to preserve 'the meter or rhythm of a verse'" (OED)

²⁵³ *Waters* a Christian symbol used to represent creation and purification

²⁵⁴ *Thine* an archaic form of "yours"

²⁵⁵ *Thee* an informal pronoun used to address someone

To draw, redeem, and seal is thine.

With simple Truth to thee I call,
 My Light,²⁵⁶ my Life, my Lord, my all:
 I wait the moving of the Pool,²⁵⁷
 I wait the Word that speaks me whole.

20

Speak, gracious Lord, my Sickness cure,
 Make my infected Nature²⁵⁸ pure:
 Peace, Righteousness,²⁵⁹ and Joy impart,
 And pour thyself into my Heart.



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²⁵⁶ *Light* a Christian symbol for God, his presence and his creations

²⁵⁷ *Pool* reference to John 5:2, the story of a paralyzed man healed from a pool in Jerusalem

²⁵⁸ *Nature* “The inherent character or nature of human beings” (*OED*)

²⁵⁹ *Righteousness* “conformity to the precepts of divine law or accepted standards of morality” (*OED*)