

ON THE PERSEVERANCE OF NATIVE AMERICAN 'IDENTITY' IN THE 18TH CENTURY
NORTHEAST: THE BROTHERTOWN EXPERIENCE

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I am first and foremost an Orthodox Christian. The core of my personal identity and that of my family is grounded in the Orthodox Christian faith. It outweighs the contributions of our various ethnic backgrounds, our American citizenship, and our loyalty to any particular political party—though it contributes to them all. I mention this because I believe that it gives me a peculiar affinity to the Brothertown Community. My family and I are not typical Orthodox ‘ethnics’. We are not of Greek, Albanian, Russian, or any other ethnic group normally identified with Eastern Orthodoxy. We are converts and have joined a community in which people of Albanian extraction are the original majority. We have been grafted into their community; it has become our own. My experience as a member by inclusion in the Orthodox Christian community is “ocular”, to use the terminology that was introduced to us by Alice Nash, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst at our October 2, 2008 workshop.¹

Just as my family and I converted from one set of religious and cultural values the Brothertown Indians converted to a new identity—one which certainly had roots in their past yet was also essentially different. They had been Pequots, Niantics, Mohegans, Montauks, and Tunxis, but with their conversion to Christianity during the course of the 18th century Great Awakening they became “Brothertowns”—a new Indian nation that was

¹ At the Abby Kelley Foster Charter Public School Teaching American History Grant workshop held on October 2, 2008, Alice Nash, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, spoke about two types of historical observation—the specular and the ocular¹. Stated simply the specular experience of history is from the outside looking in, while the ocular is from the perspective of those who are actually living it. While this is, perhaps, an oversimplification of complicated and multifaceted human experiences, it provides us with a context and sets the parameters for our investigation. When it comes to questions of a people’s identity and the history that goes with it, *who* gets to tell the story is every bit as important as the story itself.

consciously Indian and consciously Christian.² This conversion of identity would become problematic for the Brothertowns because, as with every conversion, it would introduce a radical discontinuity from the past. They would preserve certain customs and ways of governance from their earlier tribal experience in New England but they would also adopt (and adapt) customs and ways associated with the dominant society. In fact, they would become expert at it, so much so that they would become something of an enigma to other Native Americans, the dominant Euro-Americans, and even to themselves.

Briefly stated, The Brothertown community emerged out of a multi-tribal Christian community that originated in the Long Island and moved to upstate New York (Oneida Iroquois territory) after the American Revolution, then on to Wisconsin in the 1820's. According to David Silverman (Daly, Thursday July 17 notes), a certain "common cause" among native groups emerged during the 18th century that was grounded in the specifically Christian tenets of the "Great Awakening". There were widespread Indian conversions to evangelical Christianity in response to the intensely emotional and individualized religious message of the likes of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. Salvation, for these men, was the result of an individual choice and not because of an irresistible divine dispensation. This was a message quite different from what often seemed to be the arid, cerebral, and arbitrary belief system of the earlier New England Puritans and it was directed at sections of colonial society often neglected by the Puritans—the poor, the marginalized, and racial minorities. It had immense appeal to women, perhaps in part, because they were welcomed to express themselves emotionally and devotionally in revival meetings. Samson Occom's mother seems to have been converted in this way and influenced her son to convert, in

² (Walter 2006, 3)

turn.³ Ultimately his conversion would lead to the creation of a distinctive tribe composed of elements of several Southern New England tribes and united by a common Protestant Christian religious identity. It would become a community which both identified itself with the dominant society (in terms of religion) and against it (in terms of race)⁴.

The crisis of religious conversion, the creation of a new “Pan Indian” identity that transcended former tribal identities, and the conscious use of both “Indian” and “White” forms of negotiation in the setting up of their communities allowed for the creation of a unique society that in many ways anticipated the nuanced racial and ethnic identities of millions of modern Americans. The fundamental difference between the Brothertowns and other ‘nuanced’ American identities is one of relationship with the State. As Indians, the Brothertowns have had a unique relationship with the federal government that impinges on their sense of identity to the present day. While white ethnic identity and religious affiliation are, to a large degree, a matter of indifference to the federal government, the declared ethnic or racial identity of non-whites is a matter of considerable concern for government insofar as certain types of funding and entitlements are directed at these groups (though anti-affirmative action lawsuits have challenged and weakened this since the 1980’s). When it comes to American Indians the federal government’s interest is greatly enhanced because the United States has bound itself to acknowledge certain Native American rights and federal obligations through treaties made with various tribes. So long

³ (Ottery 1989, 2)

⁴ (Peyer 1997, 106-107) In a somewhat extensive quote from Joseph Johnson Peyer illustrates the tension between racial identity and religious identity from the earliest days of the Brothertown’s existence. The English, who brought Christianity and thereby might be considered the impetus for the Brothertowns existence are also the same “brethren” who “stripped them, yea they as it were cut off their Right hands...”. Johnson concludes, “I say we leave them all in the hands of that God who knoweth all things, and will reward every one according to their deeds whether good or Evil”.

as a tribe exists it has unique claims to sovereignty. Thus, Indian ethnicity and who defines it is an area of considerable tension in modern American society with very real economic and political consequences for both tribes and government—state, local, and federal.

While the crisis of identity that led to citizenship and detribalization is the topic of another paper, being mostly of 19th and 20th century provenance, its roots can be clearly traced to the missionary efforts of the Rev. Samson Occom and his son in law, Joseph Johnson in the later part of the 18th century.

Samson Occom was born in Connecticut in 1723 of Mohegan and Pequot parents. His mother, Sarah, had been adopted into the Mohegan tribe when she married Joseph Occom.⁵ The Occoms were not Christians at the time of Samson's birth; conversion came later, after the death of Joseph, when Samson was about 16 years old. Under the influence of the Great Awakening both Sarah and Samson became Christians. This is noteworthy, as David Silverman pointed out in his presentation on the Brothertowns⁶, because for more than a century the majority of Southern New England's native peoples had been resistant to conversion to Christianity. The New England revivalists of the 1740's consciously reached out to society's marginalized. They preached a message that strove to reach the hearts of the listeners—a departure from the traditional Puritan appeal to intellectual assent. Not only were Indians freely admitted into Church fellowship (providing they showed signs of conversion), they were permitted—even encouraged—to preach to other Indians about their encounter with the saving power of Jesus Christ. Again, this was a rather radical departure from the past, at least since the traumas of King Philip's War.

⁵ (Ottery 1989)

⁶ Thursday July 17, 2008 Summer Institute workshop (Daly 2008)

Samson Occom's mother apparently knew the Rev. Eleazer Wheelock, who ran a small private school in Lebanon, Connecticut. Occom had already taught himself to read and greatly impressed Wheelock with his diligence as a student. After four years of studying Greek, Latin, and Hebrew he was ready to enter Yale.⁷ An illness involving his eyesight interrupted those plans and led him to do direct missionary work among the Montauks on Long Island, New York.

Among the Montauks Occom was a teacher, preacher and, by popular consent, judge.⁸ In short, he fulfilled the traditional roles of a sachem. His skill drew the attention of the various Christian missionary bodies in New England, who saw him as a potential missionary to native peoples as distant as the Carolinas and upstate New York. Indeed, it is interesting that these missionary groups seem to have preferred for him to move away from "their" territory, where the English were numerous and Indian populations in decline, to regions where there were few English and proportionally many more Indians—the frontier regions where life was difficult and often dangerous.⁹ Occom was ordained to the Presbyterian ministry in 1759 as "minister at large to the Indians"¹⁰ and went to New York to preach to the Oneidas. This was a dangerous time as the French and Indian War was at its height and there can be little doubt that there was a political motive on the part of the missionary societies to bring the Iroquois into an alliance with the English or, at least to

⁷ (Peyer 1997, p. 65)

⁸ (Peyer, 1997, p. 66)

⁹ (Peyer 1997, 69) The Long Island Presbytery (Presbyterian Church) intended that the newly ordained Occom take up a ministry among the Cherokees in the Carolinas thereby removing his somewhat troubling presence among the local Montauks. Wheelock frequently urged him to go to frontier regions of upstate New York to minister among the Iroquois—who spoke an entirely unrelated language and had very different customs from the New England Algonkians.

¹⁰ (Peyer 1997, 69-72) His ministry to the Iroquoian Oneidas was due, in part, because a Cherokee rebellion had cut off the prospect of beginning a ministry among them.

keep them neutral. It does not seem to have occurred to the English mission authorities that Occom's Algonkian ethnic background was very different from that of the Iroquoian Oneidas. The two groups came from entirely different language stocks and had a history of enmity. This is analogous to taking a Spaniard and sending him to preach in Denmark, ignoring the religious, linguistic, and cultural differences between the two groups simply because they are Europeans and have white skin! Occom made two other trips to New York before Pontiac's rebellion made continued efforts at least temporarily untenable.

Around this time he became embroiled in Mohegan politics, taking the side of the faction that was most resistant to interference from the Connecticut colonial legislature. This made him unpopular with the local whites who wanted Mohegan lands and with the missionary societies in Boston and New Haven who considered his behavior out of line for an Indian. Meanwhile, Eleazer Wheelock saw his potential as a fund-raiser for his Charity School. Perhaps to the relief of everyone, Occom departed for England on a wildly successful fundraising campaign at the end of 1765, remaining there for two and half years. In that time he raised over £ 11,000 and his sermons were heard by thousands, including King George III. He was dismayed to receive letters from his wife, Mary, describing the destitute condition of his family, whom he had placed in Wheelock's care while he was gone.¹¹

Upon his return in 1768 he expected to settle down to a reasonably comfortable life as a minister to the native people of Connecticut. The local authorities and the missionary societies remained suspicious of him and refused to supply funds for his work. Moreover,

¹¹ (Peyer 1997, 76-77)

Wheelock used the funds that had been raised in England to move his Charity School to Hanover, New Hampshire—far from the native population centers in Southern New England (Silverman 2008). By sleight of hand the “Indian Charity School” was transformed into a college for “English” boys. Oocom legitimately felt betrayed by his old mentor and in a letter he declared, “I am very jealous that instead of your Semanary (sic) Becoming alma mater, she will be too alba mater to Suckle the Tawnees” (Peyer, 78). It seems that around this time he came to a final conclusion that there was no hope for Indian-white coexistence, even among Christians. It was the last step in a long process that had included discriminatory pay (he had earned in twelve years what a white missionary straight out of seminary earned in one), a long period away from home in which his wife and family endured destitution in spite of promises that they would be taken care of, and constant reminders and warnings that he shouldn’t think too much of himself because, after all, he was an Indian. The Rev. Samson Oocom began to look for a place where his people could be both Indians and Christians without having to endure the humiliations and deceptions that he had come to regard as the norm in the “English” community.

Joseph Johnson’s speech to the Oneida’s during the initial period of negotiation for land in upstate New York demonstrates this alienation from the “English” most clearly.

Brethren we in New England or at least many of us are very poor, by reason of the Ignorance of our forefathers who are now dead. Brethren ye know that the English are very wise people, and can see great ways. But some says, that the Indians can see but little ways, and we believe that our fore fathers could not see but very little ways. Brethren, ye also know that some of the English loves to take advantage of the poor, Ignorant, and blind Indians. Well so it was in the days of our forefathers in New England. But not to expose the unjust acts of our English Brethren I shall not say much more about them, lest I cast a prejudice in your Hearts against the English Brethren.¹²

¹² (Murray 1998, 207)

Occom's contacts with the Oneida led him to look for a place of refuge in upstate New York, in Iroquois territory, which was then the 'wild frontier'. Though progress was slowed by the American Revolution (in which Occom supported republican ideals while counseling neutrality for his friends among the Oneidas) he, with his son in law, Joseph Johnson, actively pursued a plan of action in which Christian Indians from southern New England would join together to create not only a new, specifically Christian and specifically Indian, community in New York, but a new tribal identity as well. It is this process that impinges most on the questions of identity and representation that are central to the overarching theme of our workshops and institutes.

Samson Occom understood the importance of deeds and treaties as guarantors of legal ownership, though he could not have been naïve about the ease with which such agreements could be broken by determined opponents—especially if the agreements involved Indian ownership and white hunger for land. That understanding was manifest in his insistence that Oneidas record their gift of land in a formal deed (October 4, 1774)¹³ and it paid off when, in 1786, the Oneida attempted to go back on the deal in the face of white land speculation.¹⁴ After the Oneida ceded most of their territory to the rapidly expanding United States, Occom appealed to the New York General Assembly for redress and ultimately got it, based on the written deed he was able to produce as record of the original land grant from the Oneidas (Peyer, 86).

¹³ (Peyer, 84)

¹⁴ (Peyer, 86)

Occom was also critically aware of how whites made use of personal and political divisions amongst the Indians in order to further their own ends. In the case of the Brothertown community, they found their ally in Elijah Wampy, whom Occom referred to as the leader of a group of “mullatoes and strangers”¹⁵ (indicating, incidentally, that racial distinctions between “pure” and “mixed” bloods were being made within the community). Wampy was willing to divide and lease (sell) the community’s lands at Brothertown to encroaching white farmers and it took all that Occom could do to at least partially resist him and obtain limited redress from the New York legislature. For our purposes it is important to note how the legal and racial categories of the dominant society were being adopted and adapted by the Brothertowns to defend their own claims. As time unfolded and the community moved yet again in the 1830’s these same tactics would be used to defend the tribal property and identity—again with only partial success.

According to Will and Rudy Ottery the Brothertown passed laws similar to those of the “English” towns and states of their native New England, “There were also stringent laws against immorality, profanity, drunkenness, theft, extortion, idleness, neglect of children and racially mixed marriages.”¹⁶ What is noteworthy in this quote is the prohibition of “racially mixed marriages”. While the old Puritan blue laws of the region were well known, race relations laws were not universally applied. Massachusetts had one until 1843, but Connecticut, Occom’s home-state apparently never did nor, for that matter, did New York.^{17, 18} Needless to say, concepts of racial purity and inhibitions against racial mixing

¹⁵ (Peyer, 86)

¹⁶ (Ottery 1989, 14)

¹⁷ (Wikipedia 2008) This site contains an excellent set of tables illustrating the evolution of race mixing laws in the period from 1700-1967. Though Wikipedia sites have a spotty record with regard to the interpretation of historical data, the tables correlate with data found at other sites, most notably

had a powerful base in the English colonial experience and in the new Republic. The Brothertowns concern with maintaining racial purity was a reflection of the times. Occom understood races in terms of families of color¹⁹ though he appears to have rejected race based slavery (Wyss, 140). The requirement for the maintenance of racial purity as the primary means of maintaining an Indian identity is poignantly and rather painfully made clear in the following passage excerpted from a letter written by Occom in 1785:

“In overhalling the list of our Tribe we have found one name that we cannot find out where it came from. We find the Families of Mohegan and the Number of families and their Christian or given Names and sir Names but there is one of Moses Mazzeens Family is calld Ben but what Ben no Body can tell it is Moses Mazeens Daughter Hannah’s son and he is Blacker than our Indians and he thinks he is from Guinney peartly....The whole Tribe objects against him and we cannot tell how his name was put down amongst the Names of the Mohegan Tribe it may be thus the inattention of the Tribe and now we object against his having Right among us—more over if he takes rite among us—not only guinney Children but European Children and some other Children will take rite also—and it will also give Liberty to our Daughters to borrow Children from all Quarters”²⁰

The racist overtones are graphic, but a fuller understanding of Occoms anxiety can only be had if we consider the context. Indians were being made to disappear—literally through loss of land and figuratively through expulsion or exclusion from the dominant community’s consciousness (and conscience). The “one drop” racial theory that was taking hold in the United States contributed to this. One drop of African blood made one black—no matter what other ‘blood’ ran through his or her veins. Indian-ness and white-ness were erased if there was any African mixture, according to this theory. In part the understanding existed to solve the legal problem of the mixed offspring of liaisons between white men and slave women of African ancestry. If whiteness were conveyed to the offspring of such “relationships” (if they can be called that, since many were forced) then the children born

¹⁸ (Loving Day: Celebrate the Legalization of Inter-racial Couples n.d.)

¹⁹ (Wyss 2000, 141)

²⁰ (Wyss 2000, 151-152)

of them could not be slaves. Thus, blackness trumped all other racial characteristics. This had profound legal implications for Indians; if the children born of inter-racial mixings were by law black, then their (Indian) rights vis a vis the federal government would be erased. The problem of mixtures with whites was equally problematic since dilution of Indian blood would likewise cause one's Indian identity to melt away. In a number of contentious cases over property it was the 'mixed blood' who was identified as the agent of white land-grabbers. Oocom's claim that his opponent in New York, Elijah Wampy, was the leader of a group composed mostly of "Mulattoes & Strangers" (Peyer, 86) was an attempt to delegitimize the faction by casting doubt on their racial purity, and thus any right to claim membership or representative power within the tribe. While we find this extremely distasteful from a twenty-first century perspective, within the context of the Brothertowns of the late eighteenth century (and for all Indians until very recently) the price of losing one's racial identity meant losing one's lands and all sovereign rights granted through treaties. The singular identity for race at the time seems to have been color.

The Brothertown were not alone in their concerns about racial mixing; the Cherokee and other tribes were equally determined not to allow it—especially when mixing involved blacks. Indeed, the Cherokees of Georgia and, later, Oklahoma, were slave-holders who had assumed many of the cultural and racial attitudes towards blacks held by the dominant society. Hillary Wyss refers to Oocom's racial understanding as being one of "identity in opposition" (Wyss, 152) wherein one's race community was defined as much by what one was not as by what he or she was. Again, for Indians the stakes in this matter were very high—economically, socially, and legally.

Perhaps another matter to consider here—at least in the particular case of the Brothertowns—is the tension arising out of adopting a new religious and ethnic (Pan Indian) identity. Positively identifying themselves as a specifically Christian Indian tribe having roots in several tribal groups might have been enough if there hadn't been constant pressure for land and for cultural submission from a dominant society that had an insatiable appetite for the former and a natural expectation for the latter. “We are Christians but we are NOT white; we are Indians but we are not wild pagans” seems to have been the constant declaration of the community. As with any attempt to distinguish and differentiate between groups of people, there is always the danger of turning differences into values. For Occom and Johnson, the Brothertown were the “real” Christians—the “English” having distinguished themselves as duplicitous, greedy, and false Christians. Likewise, since color was the primary distinguisher of ethnicity, English and white became interchangeable and whiteness itself became an ensign of wickedness. Occom and Johnson both tried to mitigate this bald form of racial demonization on more than one occasion, though not always convincing themselves, never mind their hearers. The exclusion of blacks because of massively perceived inferiority flowed from the same fountain.²¹ Like many of the more “successful” tribes—those who adopted and adapted to dominant society norms of dress, behavior, religion, and economy—the Brothertown also borrowed from the general racial lexicon of the times, sometimes perversely inverting the very models that the dominant society used against them.

The adaptation of the dominant society's understanding of ownership, government, and race was clearly a protective mechanism against the depredations of that very society.

²¹ Both Peyer and Wyss address this quite clearly, using extensive primary source material.

Yet, it could never prove to be entirely successful; the dominant group would always win on the grounds of race. For an Indian community to 'win' it would have to acquire citizenship (limited to whites in most places prior to the Civil War) which, for all practical purposes, meant the 'legal' abrogation of their tribal identity. The Brothertowns would eventually do just that in order to hold on to their lands in Wisconsin, but that is beyond the scope of the time period we are now covering. It is important to note, however, that a profound tension over identity existed from the beginning in the Brothertown community and that there were numerous conscious choices made to try and beat the dominant community at its own game. The problem was that this very strategy lent itself to the myth of the 'disappearing Indian', for if Indians started to "act like whites", how could they remain Indians? This question was asked over and over again within both communities and for a very long time the resounding answer from the dominant group was, "they can't". White society was clearly unwilling to accept them as equals and seems to have explained the tendency to adopt apparently non-Indian ways to a loss of racial distinctiveness. Rather than becoming white, they were becoming racial bastards—literally nobody's legitimate children and therefore completely outside the protection of the law. The Brothertowns own insistence on maintaining racial purity was, in part, an effort to avoid just such a fate.

It was said during the course of our October 2, 2008 workshop (and I cannot attribute the particular speaker) that whoever controls the narrative controls the 'story'. In the case of the Brothertowns, they were able to speak for themselves because they made a conscious choice to present a literary record and interpretation of their own experience. That this was not quite enough to keep them from at least partially "disappearing" into the mythology of the dominant community would become more apparent as the nineteenth

century progressed and a federal and state policy of assimilation emerged. Still, the literary record that Occom and Johnson left forms the foundational witness to the inception of a particular community—one that borrowed heavily from the beliefs of the dominant society while insistently maintaining its distinctiveness.

Non-Indian New Englanders, in both literary and oral history, made the Indians disappear from their consciousness (and their consciences!) by re-telling their story using a different set of symbols and interpretations. Paradoxically, Indians sometimes seemed to cooperate in this process. Occom and Johnson would express themselves very eloquently in the literary and oratorical forms of educated Euro-Americans and Euro-Americans would in turn come to hear and interpret them within that context. The “English” would hear Indians speaking to them in their own familiar language and they would fail to see, or, perhaps more truthfully, they would explain away what those Indians had to say about their experience of oppression and deception at the hands of their white mentors. They would, like Eleazar Wheelock, see Indians learning how to act like ‘civilized Christians’—even if imperfectly by their Anglo-European standards. They would write off the complaints those men raised as being the result of a racial propensity towards ingratitude. They would celebrate the foundation of an Indian Christian community as the result of their own efforts and not as a desperate reaction against those efforts (at least insofar as they were interpreted by the Indians as efforts to dominate and control them even in their relationship with God).

It might be fairly stated that in a literary society people disappear by the stroke of a pen. This may happen in the form of a novel, as in James Fennimore Cooper’s, “The Last of

the Mohicans”, or through the liberal-minded act to enfranchise native peoples of Massachusetts in 1869 at the cost of their ‘legal’ identity and loss of their tribal lands. Or, it may happen as the paradoxical result of a community adapting too well, at least superficially to the dominant culture’s norms of expression—even when they are used to distinguish between them. This would become very much the case for the Brothertown in the period immediately following the one being considered in this paper.

It the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Brothertown tribe would persist in resisting pressures to disappear by making use of the laws and customs of the dominant society to defend themselves . It was a process in which they would have to constantly define and redefine themselves to meet the crisis of identity and representation. The cost, however, would be high and their success, at least in the sense of re-gaining federal recognition remains uncertain. What is quite fascinating is their consistent use of the “power of the pen” to speak for themselves and to define their own voice on the scene. In doing so, they have remained, if only barely, visible. This ‘visibility’, of course, is to the larger society. In their own experience they have never ‘disappeared’. Nor have the Pequots, Mashpees, Nipmucks or Tunxis. It is a matter of hearing and reading their stories on their terms and, as much as possible, in the light of their own understanding. It is also a matter of understanding that *their* narratives, too, have changed over time to meet the contingencies of the moment. It is the quality of living people to change; re-telling their story is a sign that they are alive. It simply comes down to who does the telling and who wields the pen. Samson Occom and Joseph Johnson showed a remarkable capacity for doing just that in the earliest stages of the Brothertown experiment. New voices are rising now to

carry on the process—some from within and some from outside the Brothertown community. In that sense alone, things remain constant.

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