

Samoset (c. 1590 – c. 1653)

The First Native American to Contact the Pilgrims

Compiled by Jerry Reif

All Scouts learn the story of the Pilgrims' arrival on the Mayflower in Plymouth Harbor in November 1620 in American History classes. A major part of that story is the role played by Tisquantum or Squanto, the Patuxet Indian. Squanto was captured and enslaved by an English sea captain named Thomas Hunt in 1614 and sent first to Spain and then England before returning to his tribal land in 1619. During his captivity, Squanto learned English. By teaching the colonists how to catch herring to fertilize maize, squash and beans, how to catch eels and other seafood, and how to trap and hunt wildlife, he helped the Pilgrims recover from that extremely hard first winter. What is not so well known in the Pilgrim story is the key role played by Samoset, our Council's namesake. So let's take a brief look at the role he played.

After fleeing religious persecution in England, and first settling in Leiden, The Netherlands, where they discovered that they did not care for the Dutch culture, the Pilgrims set sail for America in the hope that they could freely practice their Puritan beliefs. As you all know, they landed at Plymouth in the Patuxet region on the eastern shore of present-day Massachusetts. Patuxet was the homeland of the Wampanoag Confederacy. Wampanoag means "*People of the First Light.*" which makes sense since they would be the first to see the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean. The Confederacy was led by Chief Massasoit, head of the Pokanoket tribe.



The Wampanoag Confederacy

That first winter of 1620/21 following their arrival was a near disaster for the Pilgrims. Roughly half fell victim to disease, starvation, and harsh conditions. Many died. Those who survived were too weak and few in number to adequately defend themselves, so they lived in constant fear of attack by the Wampanoag. They knew that the Wampanoag had been watching them, although no actual contact had been made. The Wampanoag were just as uncertain of and wary about the intent of the colonists as the Pilgrims were of them. Several colonists had even complained that some of their tools that they had left in the fields had been stolen by the Wampanoag. So the Pilgrims decided that they needed to establish a militia to defend their settlement, and they set up patrols to try to keep an eye on the Wampanoag. One day while on patrol, several men noticed two Wampanoags on a nearby hill and sounded the alarm. Captain Myles Standish, the colony's elected military commander, and Stephen Hopkins went out looking for the Wampanoags. They armed themselves and went to the area where the Wampanoag had been sighted, but they had fled before Standish and Hopkins could make contact. So they returned to the settlement.

William Bradford, one of the Pilgrim's leaders, kept a journal which was published in 1984 in the book *Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647.* In this journal he recorded these early sightings of the Wampanoag as follows:

"... the Indians came skulking about them, and would sometimes show themselves aloof off, but when any approached near them, they would run away; and once they stole away (the Pilgrim's) tools where they had been at work and were gone to dinner."

So it was a surprise to the Pilgrims when, on 16 Mar 1621, Samoset walked into their settlement and in broken English, said "Welcome, Englishmen, Welcome!" Samoset, whose name means "*He Who Walks Over Much,*" was born about 1590 on Monhegan Island, a small, rocky island off the coast of present-day Maine. He was a sagamore, or lesser chief, of the Eastern Abenaki people who ranged from east of the White Mountains in present-day New Hampshire to the southeast coastline of Maine. Abenaki means "*People of the Eastern Dawn.*" Samoset told the Pilgrims he had arrived in Patuxet in Jul 1620, that he had been visiting Chief Massasoit, and had come to the settlement as an emissary.

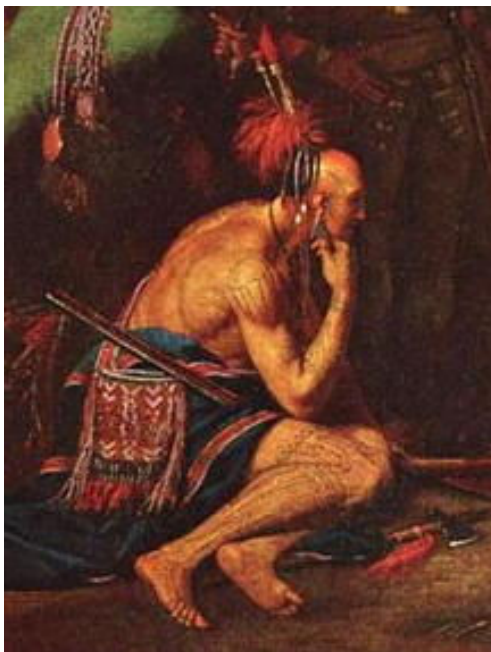


Samoset Contacts the Pilgrims - 1621

Like most of the tribes in New England, Samoset's Abenaki people spoke Algonquian, so he could easily converse with the Wampanoag because they spoke the same language. How Samoset made his way to Patuxet is unknown, but historians assume he probably sailed with Captain Thomas Dermer from his home on Monhegan Island to Cape Cod. Dermer, who made extensive explorations along the coast from present-day Newfoundland to the Virginia Colony from 1618 to 1621, made frequent stops in the Patuxet region prior to the Pilgrims' arrival.

In an article reprinted in Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth, Alexander Young, who collected the historical documents recording the lives of the Pilgrims and events at Plymouth Plantation, described Samoset's arrival as follows:

"He very boldly came all alone, and along the houses, straight to the rendezvous; where we intercepted him, not suffering him to go in, as undoubtedly he would out of his boldness."



Artist's Conception of Samoset

The startled colonists described Samoset as a tall and straight man with long black hair down his back and short hair in the front, and without a beard. In a gesture of peace, Samoset carried with him his bow and an empty quiver. In his hand he held two arrows, one tipped and ready for battle, the other untipped. To the Puritan Pilgrims, Samoset must have been considered virtually naked, since he wore only a fringed loincloth around his waist and moccasins on his feet. The day was mild but windy, so they offered him a horsehair coat to cover his body. Samoset told the Pilgrims that he was originally from Monhegan Island, which he said was five days' journey by land, but only one day by ship. He also told them that he had been in the Patuxet region for the past eight months visiting the Wampanoag, and that was planning to return to his people shortly. He stated that he had learned English from contact with the English fishermen and traders who visited Monhegan Island.

As described in Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers, upon his arrival:

"He (Samoset) asked (for) some beer, but we gave him strong water and biscuit, and butter and cheese, and pudding, and a piece of mallard; all which he liked well."

Samoset was described by William Bradford in Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth, 1622 as:

"...a man free in speech, so far as he could express his mind, and of a seemly carriage."

Although Samoset only spoke broken English, the Pilgrims actually admired his ability to communicate. They questioned him at length to learn everything they could about himself and the Patuxet region. According to records in the Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers,

"He discoursed of the whole country, and of every province, and of their sagamores, and their number of men and strength."

Samoset told the Pilgrims that the region in which they had settled originally belonged to the Patuxet, who, along with some neighboring tribes, fell victim to a terrible plague that had ravaged the region four years earlier, leaving only a few alive. To a certain degree, the Pilgrims accepted the fate of the Patuxet as divine providence that they should take over the territory. The fate of the Patuxet is also described in the Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers as follows:

"There is neither man, woman, nor child remaining, as indeed we have found none; so as there is none to hinder our possession, or to lay claim unto it."

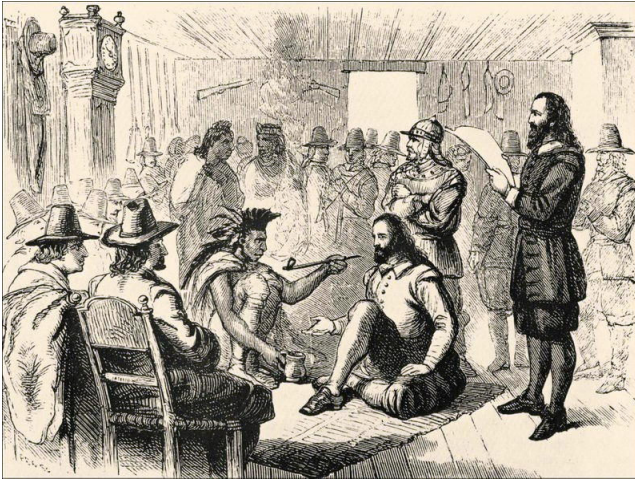
Samoset also told the Pilgrims that a warrior named Squanto, who had not been present during the plague, was one of the few Patuxet left. He said Squanto could speak better English, so he would arrange a meeting between them. Samoset talked about Massasoit, the great chief of the Wampanoag, who was nearby with 300 Nemasket. He also told them about their other neighbors, the Nauset, who were angry with the white men for killing some of their people and taking others as slaves. According to The Pilgrims & Plymouth Colony: 1620, Edward Winslow wrote that:

"the Nausets were ill-affected towards English, by reason of one (man named) Hunt, a master of a ship, who deceived the people, and got them under colour of trucking (trading) with them, twenty out of this place where we inhabit (Plymouth) and seven men from Nausites, and carried them away, and sold them for slaves, like a wretched man (for 20 pound a man) that cares not what he does for his profit."

Since Samoset spent the whole day talking with the Pilgrims, by evening they concluded that he had no intention of leaving. When they realized that they probably needed to put him up for the night, they decided to have him sleep on the Mayflower, where it would be easier to watch him. However, the tide was out and the wind too strong for their shallop to reach the ship. So Stephen Hopkins allowed Samoset to stay at his house, and a guard was posted to watch him. When preparing to leave the following morning, Samoset promised to return with more men and goods to trade. The Pilgrims gave him a knife, a bracelet, and a ring, and he left.

The next day, 17 Mar, Samoset returned with five men. They wore fur leggings and carried their bows and arrows, as well as a few deer and wildcat skins to trade. They also returned some of the Pilgrims' tools. However, since it was Sunday, the Pilgrims refused to trade with them and asked them to return the following day. Nevertheless, the Pilgrims entertained them and offered them food. In turn, the Wampanoag sang and danced for the Pilgrims. They also introduced the Pilgrims to a cornmeal biscuit they carried with them on long journeys they took. A few hours later when the Wampanoag left, Samoset was either actually sick or pretended to be sick so he could stay with them for a few more days. When he

finally left the following Wednesday, 21 Mar, the colonists gave him a hat, a pair shoes and stockings, a shirt, and some cloth to tie around his waist.



Chief Massasoit Meeting with the Pilgrims

On Thursday, 22 Mar, Samoset returned with Squanto. They conducted some business with the Pilgrims, offering them dried herring. But the real reason for their visit was to tell them that Massasoit, the great sachem, was waiting nearby with the Nemasket and wanted to meet with them. An hour later, Massasoit appeared with his brother Quadequina and 60 of his men on the hill overlooking the settlement. Although there was some initial reluctance on the part of both parties to meet, they eventually did so. The meeting resulted in a treaty of sorts, and was the beginning of Massasoit's friendship with the Pilgrims.

Following is an excerpt from William Bradford's journal describing this meeting and its participants:

"...Captain Standish and Master Williamson met the king (Massasoit) at the brook, with half a dozen musketeers. They saluted him and he them, so one going over, the one on the one side, and the other on the other, conducted him to a house...where we placed a green rug and three or four cushions. Then instantly came our governor with drum and trumpet after him, and some few musketeers. After salutations, our governor kissing his hand, the king kissed him, and so they sat down. The governor called for some strong water, and drunk to him, and he drunk a great draught that made him sweat all the while after; he called for a little fresh meat, which the king did eat willingly, and did give his followers. Then they treated of peace, which was:

- 1. That neither he nor any of his should injure or do hurt to any of our people.*
- 2. And if any of his did hurt to any of ours, he should send the offender, that we might punish him.*
- 3. That if any of our tools were taken away when our people are at work, he should cause them to be restored, and if ours did any harm to any of his, we would do the likewise to them.*
- 4. If any did unjustly war against him, we would aid him; if any did war against us, he should aid us.*
- 5. He should send to his neighbor confederates, to certify them of this, that they might not wrong us, but might be likewise comprised in the conditions of peace.*
- 6. That when their men came to us, they should leave their bows and arrows behind them, as we should do our pieces when we came to them.*

Lastly, that doing thus, (British) King James would esteem of him as his friend and ally.

All which the king (Massasoit) seemed to like well, and it was applauded of his followers; all the while he sat by the governor he trembled for fear. In his person he is a very lusty man, in his best years, an able body, grave of countenance, and spare of speech. In his attire little or nothing differing from the rest of his followers, only in a great chain of white bone beads about his neck, and at it being his neck hangs a little bag of tobacco, which he drank and gave us to drink; his face was painted with a sad red like murry, and oiled both head and face, that he looked greasily. All his followers likewise, were in their faces, in part or in whole painted, some black, some red, some yellow, and some white, some with crosses, and other antic works; some had skins on them, and some naked, all strong, tall, all men in appearance."

Samoset and Squanto stayed with the Pilgrims for another day. That day Squanto went fishing for eels and gave them to the Pilgrims. Following is an account of his fishing expedition:

"Tisquantum went at noon to fish for eels; at night he came home with as many as he could well lift in one hand, which our people were glad of. They were fat and sweet; he trod them out with his feet, and so caught them with his hands without any other instrument."

Whether Samoset had any further contact with the Pilgrims after 23 Mar 1621 is unknown. Historians claim that Samoset appears again in accounts three years later in 1624 near present-day Portland, Maine, when he made deals with an English trader, Captain Christopher Levett. Calling Levett his "cousin," Samoset decreed that only he could buy the furs his tribe had to sell. This declaration so angered competing traders that men from one company actually attacked Samoset.

During the following years, trade relations between the Native tribes and the colonists quickly degraded. Beatings and corruption by the colonists led to retaliation by the tribes, and eventually progressed into full-scale wars in the latter part of the 17th Century. The most devastating was King Phillip's War (Jun 1675-Aug 1676), which, on a per capita basis, was the bloodiest war in America's history. However, despite the controversies and conflicts throughout the colonies, Samoset continued to live in peace with the colonists for more than 30 years. He recognized the importance of alliances and treaties with the colonists, which were key factors in helping his people survive the wars, plagues, and slave traders.

During the following years of his life, Samoset may have been involved in several land transactions with the colonists. Some historians claim that on 15 Jul 1625, he signed the first land sale transaction between the eastern coastal Indians and the colonists. He supposedly deeded 12,000 acres of land at present-day Pemaquid Point to John Brown; thus, establishing that the true owners of the land in the new world were the Native Americans, not the English Crown. Several historians have made allusion to the fact that a Capt John Somerset (Sommerset/Summerset), who was involved in land transactions in 1641 and 1652, may have in fact been Samoset. Samoset is believed to have died in 1652 at age 63 in what is present-day Bristol, Maine.

In summary, while not widely credited in history books for his role in helping the Pilgrims following the harsh winter of 1620/21, on 16 Mar 1621, our Council's namesake, Samoset, an Abenaki sagamore, was the first Native American to contact the Pilgrims. During the week he spent in the Plymouth settlement, he played a key role in establishing relations between the Wampanoag Confederacy and the Pilgrims. He was truly the first emissary of the Native Americans to the Pilgrims. As members of Samoset Council, we should all be proud of his role in our American history and proud that the Council, which was formed in 1920, is named after him.

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About the author. Jerry is a native of Antigo and a 1969 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is a retired Air Force Colonel and Program Manager for a major defense contractor. He is an Eagle Scout and served on the staff of Camps Tesomas and Chickagami, 1961-63. Following his retirement in 2010, he served on the Samoset Council Endowment Committee and currently serves on the Investment Committee. The *Gerald and Barbara Reif Family Foundation* provides funds for the Eagle Scout Kits which the Council provides to all new Eagle Scouts. Jerry is an historian and genealogist who has had several articles published in genealogy newsletters. He discovered the information about Samoset while researching and writing his family history about his ancestors who settled in the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colonies. He is descended from John Billington, one of the Mayflower passengers.