

Migration from England to Illinois

Name	Date	From	To
Sampson Mason (1625-1676)	1649	Bolton, Lancashire (now part of Greater Manchester), England	Rehoboth, Bristol, Massachusetts
Pelatiah Mason (1669-1763)	Before 1692	Rehoboth, Bristol, Massachusetts	Swansea, Bristol, Massachusetts
Capt. Edward Mason (1784-1824)	1807 or 1808	Swansea, Bristol, Massachusetts	Savoy, Berkshire, Massachusetts
John Thomas Mason (1816-1876)	@1840	Savoy, Berkshire, Massachusetts	Dundee, Kane, Illinois

Sampson Mason (1625–1676)

Sampson Mason was born in Bolton, a community deeply shaped by religious conviction and civil conflict. Bolton was known in the seventeenth century as a stronghold of Puritanism—so much so that it was sometimes called the “Geneva of Lancashire.” Faith, politics, and daily life were inseparable, and allegiance carried real consequences.

Those consequences struck the Mason family directly during the English Civil War. In May 1644, Bolton was attacked by Royalist forces in an event later remembered as the Bolton Massacre. The assault was exceptionally brutal, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians. Family tradition holds that Sampson’s father, Robert Mason, was among those killed. If so, Sampson would have been about eighteen years old at the time, abruptly deprived of his father and exposed at close range to the violence that could result when religious and political authority were enforced by force of arms.

The trauma of the massacre was compounded by the instability that followed. Lancashire (now part of Greater Manchester) had suffered heavily during the war, and its economy was strained by taxation, troop movements, and disrupted trade. For young men, especially those without inherited security, prospects were uncertain. Shoemaking—Sampson’s later trade—was a crowded occupation in England, tightly regulated and offering limited opportunity for advancement or land ownership.

Religious Dissent and the Formation of Conscience

At the same time, the religious landscape was shifting. The Civil War years saw the spread of dissenting Protestant movements, including Baptists, who rejected infant baptism, opposed state control of the church, and emphasized liberty of conscience. Even in a Puritan town like Bolton, such views could provoke suspicion and exclusion. Uniformity was prized, and deviation—especially religious—was rarely tolerated.

Family tradition that Sampson served as a dragoon in the army of Oliver Cromwell fits this context well. Cromwell's forces included many men drawn to nonconformist beliefs, and military service exposed soldiers to ideas about individual conscience, resistance to imposed authority, and the possibility of a society ordered differently from the one they had known. When the war ended in 1649 with the execution of King Charles I, thousands of veterans returned to a country that was politically unsettled and economically constrained.

That same year, Sampson Mason chose to leave England.

Emigration, Settlement, and a Life Shaped by Principle

Sampson's decision came after the peak of the Puritan Great Migration to New England. By 1649, Massachusetts towns were established and survival more certain. For a skilled tradesman with dissenting religious views, New England offered work, land, and the chance to rebuild a life—even if full political equality was not guaranteed.

Sampson settled first in Rehoboth, Massachusetts Bay Colony, where he worked as a shoemaker and established himself as a permanent resident. Because he was a Baptist, he could not join the established Puritan church and therefore was not considered a freeman. Instead, he was legally classified as a “sojourner”—a resident who could live, work, and pay taxes, but who lacked voting rights and political authority.

In 1669, Sampson applied for admission as a freeman but did not take the required oath. The oath bound the applicant to uphold the colony's religious and civil order, and for a Baptist it posed a serious conflict of conscience. Sampson's refusal was almost certainly intentional. It reflects a consistent pattern in his life: a willingness to accept reduced civic status rather than submit to enforced religious conformity.

Eyeing a New Settlement

Despite these limitations, Sampson was far from marginal. He became one of the original proprietors of Swansea, founded in 1667, although he never moved there. Proprietorship indicated trust, economic stability, and social standing. Swansea was known for greater religious tolerance than many Massachusetts towns and attracted settlers who sought a community where dissenters could live with fewer pressures to conform.

Sampson's Baptist faith endured beyond his own lifetime. Family records show that several generations of his descendants continued to identify as Baptist, even during periods when dissent carried social and legal disadvantages. This continuity suggests that Baptist belief was a defining element of family identity—one consciously preserved and passed down.

Pelotiah Mason (1669-1763)

Pelotiah Mason was born on 1 April 1669 near Providence Ferry in Rehoboth, Bristol County, Massachusetts, the eighth son and eleventh child of Sampson Mason and Mary Butterworth. He grew up in a large household of thirteen children during a formative period in southern New England's settlement, when Rehoboth was still emerging from its frontier beginnings. Before 1692,

Peletiah moved from Rehoboth to Swansea, following a broader family and community migration that reflected both opportunity and the strengthening presence of Baptist settlers in the area.

Marriage and Children

On 22 May 1694, Peletiah married Hephzibah Brooks in Swansea. Hephzibah was born in 1673 in Billerica, Massachusetts Bay Colony, the daughter of Timothy Brooks and Mary Russell. Together, Peletiah and Hephzibah raised eleven children. Religion played a central role in family life, and this commitment is evident in the fact that three of their sons later served, at different times, as pastors of the same church—an unusual distinction that underscores the family’s standing within the Baptist community.

Occupation, Homestead, and Public Life

Peletiah Mason earned his livelihood as both a tanner and a shoemaker, trades that were essential to everyday life in colonial Swansea. His homestead stood along the highway leading from the Great Bridge—now called Myles Bridge—to Mattapoissett, today’s Gardner’s Neck, situating him on a well-traveled local route. In addition to his work, Peletiah held several minor town offices, indicating his active participation in civic affairs. He was also a committed member of the Second Baptist Church of Swansea, continuing the Baptist tradition established by his father’s generation.

Land Distribution, Death, and Burial

Peletiah Mason made no will, having chosen instead to distribute his property among his sons during his lifetime. On 28 April 1724, he conveyed a forty-acre lot, probably adjoining his own homestead, to his eldest son, Job. Later, on 31 August 1747, he transferred additional parcels of land to Job, Russell, and John for love and small sums of money, likely completing the disposition of his real estate. Peletiah lived more than thirty-five years after the death of his wife and died on 29 March 1763 at the age of ninety-three. He was buried in a small family burial lot in an orchard near his former homestead, about a mile north of the Second Baptist Church, his grave marked by a simple fieldstone monument reflecting a life of quiet industry, faith, and community service.

Capt. Edward Mason (1784-1824)

Captain Edward Mason was born into a family that had lived in Swansea, Bristol County, Massachusetts, for four generations. As the oldest of ten children, Edward grew up with an ingrained sense of responsibility shaped by family, church, and town life in a long-settled coastal community. By the opening years of the nineteenth century, however, Swansea no longer offered the same opportunities it once had. Land had been subdivided repeatedly, and younger—and even eldest—sons often faced limited prospects for establishing independent farms. For Edward, moving west was not a rejection of family tradition but an extension of it: securing land, stability, and independence for the next generation. Around 1808–1809, shortly after his marriage, he and his family relocated to Savoy, Berkshire, a newly settled hill town that promised opportunity at the cost of hardship.

Marriage and a Growing Family

Edward married Mary Pierce on 12 March 1807 in Swansea, beginning their married life just as plans for relocation took shape. Within a year or two, the young couple left behind familiar surroundings and extended family ties to face the uncertainties of frontier life. Between 1808 and 1824, Edward and Mary had six children, most of them born after the move to Savoy. Raising a family in a remote hill town required resilience and cooperation, particularly for Mary, who managed household and childrearing responsibilities far from the support networks she would have known in Swansea. Their family expanded alongside the town, shaped by farming and seasonal challenges.

Life and Leadership in Savoy

Life in Savoy was demanding in ways Edward had not experienced in coastal Bristol County. The land was heavily forested, the soil rocky, and winters long and severe. Clearing fields, building shelter, and maintaining roads required unrelenting labor and cooperation among neighbors. Edward's title of "Captain" suggests service in the local militia, a position of trust and leadership that carried significant weight in early New England communities. In a frontier environment, militia officers were not only defenders but organizers and stabilizing figures, helping maintain order and community cohesion. Edward's upbringing in Swansea prepared him well for this role, translating long-held values of civic duty into a new and challenging setting.

John Thomas Mason (1816-1876)

John Thomas grew up in Savoy in a family of six children, five of them boys. Although the Mason family had only lived in Savoy for one generation, John, his brother, David, and some of his cousins heard about inexpensive land in Kane County, Illinois. Their move westward was the beginning of the Mason story in Illinois.

[John's migration story is told in the Biographical Sketch.]