

Pocahontas

Teenage Peacemaker

The Powhatan tribe and the English settlers at Jamestown never fully trusted each other. Pocahontas (1595?–1617) helped both groups reach a temporary peace.



When Captain John Smith published his history of Virginia in 1624, he claimed a young Native American girl named Pocahontas had saved his life. Since that time, hundreds of books, stories, and movies have been based upon her story.

The actual Pocahontas was known to her fellow Powhatans as Matoaka, a name that means “she is playful.” Her father was a fierce warrior who conquered more than 30 nearby villages.

However, accounts of Pocahontas indicate that she was very kind to everyone. Her father, known as Chief Powhatan, had numerous children with a variety of wives, but it seems clear that Pocahontas was his favorite. Her personality endeared her to nearly everyone she encountered.

Meeting the English Since 1524, French and Spanish explorers had made stops near Powhatan villages. These meetings were often violent. Some Native Americans had been kidnapped and others were killed by the Europeans. The Native Americans had murdered a party of Spanish priests who attempted to convert them to Christianity.

When three English ships docked at the mouth of the James River in 1607, the first thing Chief Powhatan wondered was when they were leaving. His son entertained representatives from the ships. The chief hoped that if he was friendly, the English would respect their hosts and not trespass on their land. Chief Powhatan spoke to the English a few days later.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

We are unarmed and willing to give you what you ask, if you come in a friendly manner. Take away your guns and swords, or you may die in the same manner.

CHIEF POWHATAN, quoted in
Eyewitnesses and Others

The 105 men on board took this as an offer to make themselves at home. They landed and began building a fort. They also kept a careful eye out for danger, because they didn't believe they could trust the Native Americans.

Clash of Cultures Pocahontas's people wanted to avoid war, but they also wanted the whites to leave. Chief Powhatan decided the best course of action would be to carefully watch the English and see what they were up to. It was about this time that Pocahontas first laid eyes on the explorers.

One of the first people she saw was a short white man with a beard leading a party of other whites carrying guns through the woods. His name was John Smith. He had been trading at several Indian villages when he noticed warriors with bows and arrows following at a distance.

Taken Prisoner It is uncertain who fired first, but a skirmish followed in which both sides fired at each other. As Smith tried to make his escape, he slipped in a mud bog and was captured.

Chief Powhatan seemed impressed with what his warriors told him about Smith. Scholars differ, but he seems to have decided to make Smith an honorary member of the tribe. The Powhatans apparently planned a ceremony in which they staged his “death,” so that he might be saved by one of them. This ceremony was to make him part of the Powhatan family forever.

As the ceremony got under way, Smith apparently thought he was really about to have his head smashed with stone clubs. Princess Pocahontas fell over him, either to save his life or to welcome him into the tribe. Smith, however, thought she had saved him from death.

Now that Smith was a Powhatan, he was expected to bring gifts to his new father, the chief. The chief said he wanted a cannon from the English fort. Smith was led back to the fort where he told the Powhatans they could take it. He knew the cannon weighed hundreds of pounds. When the Powhatans couldn't budge it, he sent them back to the chief. Meanwhile, believing that Pocahontas was responsible for his still being alive, Smith began to tell the other Jamestown colonists how useful she might be to them.

Pocahontas Kidnapped In 1613, a Jamestown leader named Samuel Argall insisted the only way to make peace with the Powhatans was to frighten them. He helped kidnap Pocahontas, knowing she was Chief Powhatan's favorite daughter. For over a year, the princess was kept in captivity.

However, her friendliness won over her captors. One of them, a tobacco farmer named John Rolfe, told Pocahontas about the Christian religion. As he did, he found himself falling in love with her. He believed she was falling in love with him, as well. This presented a problem for Rolfe, who had been taught it was wrong to marry someone from another race.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Likewise adding hereunto her great apparance of love to me, her desire to be taught and instructed in the knowledge of God: her Capableness of understanding, her aptness and willingness to receive any good impression, and also the spiritual besides her own incitements stirring me up hereunto. What should I do?

JOHN ROLFE, letter to Sir Thomas Dale,
quoted in *Pocahontas and Her World*

A New Life Pocahontas was no longer treated quite like a prisoner. However, she wasn't exactly free, either. Both the Powhatans and English saw her as the one link that could keep the peace between them. Because her role as a peacemaker was so important, she never tried to escape.

Then, on April 5, 1614, Rolfe and Pocahontas were married. The English insisted that she take a name that sounded more English. She was called

Rebecca. A year later, she gave birth to a son, whom she and Rolfe named Thomas.

The year after that, officials at Jamestown encouraged Rolfe and his new family to make a trip back to England to seek financial aid for the colony. In London, people were eager to meet Pocahontas. One of the most famous poets and playwrights of the time, Ben Jonson, asked to be introduced. In March of 1617, John Rolfe, Pocahontas, and their son were on board a ship to sail back to Jamestown. However, the ship had barely reached the mouth of the Thames River when she became quite ill. She was rushed to the nearest town, which was called Gravesend. A few days later, suffering and eventually dying from an unknown disease, Pocahontas said to John Rolfe, "All must die. 'Tis enough that the child [Thomas] liveth."

In 1622, John Rolfe died of an illness. Rolfe had decided to leave the child Thomas in England. As an adult, Thomas Rolfe returned to Virginia representing the English government in the colony. Today, several families in America can trace their genealogy back to Rolfe and Pocahontas through their son, Thomas.

Review Questions

1. Why were the Powhatans nervous about the arrival of English settlers?
2. How did John Rolfe and Pocahontas meet?
3. Why did the Rolfe family travel to England?

Critical Thinking

4. **Comparing and Contrasting** Compare the biography of Pocahontas presented here with a movie or book about her that you know. How are they alike and different?
5. **Drawing Conclusions** Many people wonder if the story of Pocahontas saving John Smith is true. What do you think?
6. **Making Inferences** Why didn't Pocahontas escape back to her people when she had the chance?