

Pocahontas at Syon
from the James to the Thames
The Life of Pocahontas



Pocahontas

The Powhatan

Pocahontas was born in 1595 in Virginia. She was a native American, the daughter of the chief of the Powhatan Indians who lived along the tidal James River, downstream of modern-day Richmond. The name "Pocahontas" was a nickname, meaning "the naughty one". Her real name was Amonute or Matoaka. Her father, known as Powhatan, ruled over 30 nearby villages of the Algonquin tribe. He married a woman from each of the villages in turn, and when she bore him a child, he sent her back and married another woman. As a result he had plenty of children and peace in the region was assured. However, his favorite daughter was Pocahontas.

As Pocahontas grew up, the peace and prosperity enjoyed by the Powhatan people was turned upside down. Colonists arriving from England in search of fame and fortune were making their way up the James River. At the time that Pocahontas first came into contact with the English, she was about twelve years old.

The Founding of Jamestown

In 1607, the Virginia Company of London led an expedition to the 'New World' in search of fame, fortune and a desire to spread the word of Protestantism. 104, poorly equipped settlers landed on a marshy piece of land that jutted into a bend in the James River some 40 miles from the sea. They called it Jamestown, the first permanent settlement in English speaking America. Many of the settlers were English Nobility, who had little experience of building or farming. During the first year, 50 of the English settlers died from hardships, starvation, and illnesses.

The land that the colonists settled was home to the Powhattan Indians. Every now and then the local Powhatans would pay the colonists a visit. These early meetings were friendly. The Indians would bring fruit and corn for trade. If it was not for the help of local people, even more of the settlers would have died.

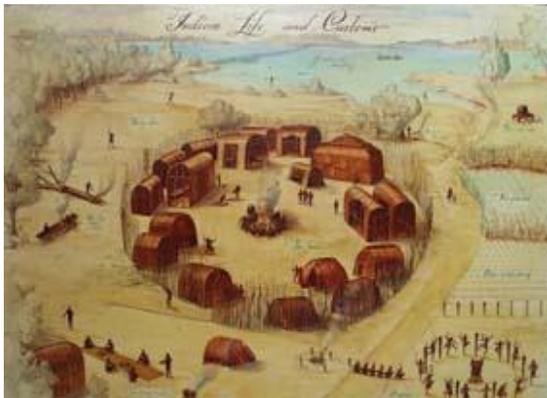
When the winter came, and the conditions grew even harsher, one of the settlers, Captain Smith led an expedition of seven ragged men up the river to trade with the native people. On meeting the Powhatans an argument flared up and several Indians were killed. Following negotiations, peace was made and the English were given food. In December, Smith led a second expedition up the river, during which conflict arose again with the Powhatans. Smith was taken prisoner and led to village of the Powhatan King. The village consisted of 12 large houses made of wood and thatch and was situated by the river, at the point where it turned into rocky rapids near to the present day city of Richmond.

The Pocahontas Incident

Many years later, Captain Smith wrote that he was led into the biggest house in the village to meet King Powhatan. Along either side of the house sat two rows of men, and behind them their women, with their heads and shoulders painted red, and wearing headdresses of white feathers. The King sat on a heap of mats. His shoulders bore a great robe made of raccoon skins, with the tails still hanging down. Around his neck were strung many chains of pearls. On each side of him sat a young woman. When Smith came in a great shout went up. The Queen of the Powhatans brought him a bowl of water to wash his hands, and another woman gave him a bunch of feathers as a towel to dry them.

After dinner, two large stones were brought into the house and laid before the King. The men rose up, crowded around Captain Smith, grabbed hold of him, and dragged him to the stones. They pushed his head down and according to Smith, were about to smash him with their clubs. It was at this point that Captain Smith recalls that Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas started to plead and beg her father to spare his life. When he brushed her off, the young girl threw her arms around Smith's head, so that it would be impossible to hit him without hurting her. And in this way that Captain Smith recalls she saved Smith's life.

Whether this account is true can never be proved, for by all accounts Captain Smith was a rogue who would do or say anything for his own self promotion. He was described by his fellow colonists as an abrasive, ambitious, self-promoting mercenary soldier. The story was only written down by Smith many years after it is supposed to have taken place, at a time when Pocahontas had become famous; at a time when he had much to gain. Accounts written immediately after the event suggested that the starving adventurer had been kept comfortable and treated in a friendly fashion as an honoured guest of Powhatan. Most scholars also agree that the "Pocahontas incident" would have been highly unlikely, especially since it was part of a longer account used as justification to wage war on Powhatan's Nation. Whatever the truth, the story of Pocahontas, the Native American Princess, saving the Englishman from execution, has gone down in legend. Powhatan released Captain Smith at the end of the winter to return to Jamestown, where being by far the most capable settler he became leader of the colony. Conditions at Jamestown continued to be bleak, hunger and disease commonplace. Relations between the Powhatans and the English were not easy and there were frequent skirmishes although peace was usually made in return for food. For a while, Pocahontas made regular visits to the English settlement at Jamestown helping to forge better relations between the two groups. Following an accident, Captain Smith moved back to England.



Pocahontas' Capture by the English

At the age of 14, Pocahontas is believed to have married her father's favourite: Kocumom and had had a child with him. Believing Captain Smith to be dead, she stopped visiting Jamestown and settled down to family life in a small village called Patowomeck. Five years passed before she came into contact with the English again. On an expedition up the James River, a young English captain recognised Pocahontas and realized that if captured she would be a valuable prisoner.

He met the village chief, and hatched a plan to kidnap her. The next day, when the chief was due to visit the English ship, his wife said she wanted to go with him. The chief decreed that she could only come if another woman accompanied her, and she asked Pocahontas. Pocahontas sensed that something was wrong, but the chief's wife persuaded her to come. The native American's had dinner with the English and stayed the night aboard their ship. But in the morning, Captain Argall refused to let Pocahontas leave. The chief and his wife pretended to be shocked by her capture, but Pocahontas saw Argall pay them off with some trinkets. Kocumom is believed to have died in the fight that ensued, although their child survived.

Pocahontas was held captive at Jamestown and later at a settlement called Henrico where she learnt the English language and customs. During her captivity, a 28-year-old widower named John Rolfe fell in love with the attractive young prisoner. Rolfe was an important figure in Virginia because he had introduced Bermudan tobacco which became the chief cash crop of the colony. Both the English and the Powhatans understood that the marriage would be an important alliance between the two sides and form the basis of a peace treaty. As a condition of her release, Pocahontas agreed to marry Rolfe, On marriage, she became Rebecca Rolfe and was christened. Shortly after, they had a son, whom they named Thomas Rolfe.

A Visit to England

Two years later on the spring of 1616, Rolfe took Pocahontas to England where the Virginia Company of London hoped to use her in their propaganda campaign to support the colony. King Powhatan also saw the visit as an opportunity to learn about the English. He sent Pocahontas's sister and brother-in-law to accompany her on the trip. Known now as Lady Rebecca Rolfe, her visit to London caused a sensation and she became a kind of celebrity. The English treated Pocahontas, or Lady Rebecca, as full royalty. At Christmas she joined King James I and Queen Anne to watch a musical play at Whitehall Palace. To the average English person at the time, Virginia was a wild and far off land, and its native people were savages. Yet here was a princess who was a Christian, well-mannered, charming, dressed in English clothes, and spoke English.

Whilst in England, the Rolfe's stayed with the Duke of Northumberland at a villa in the grounds of Syon House on the banks of the River Thames. It has been suggested that they were invited to Brentford by the owner of Syon Park, the 9th Earl of Northumberland, whose brother George Percy had been governor of the settlements in Virginia in 1607. It was at Syon House that once again she met Captain John Smith. She was so overcome with anger that she was unable to speak to him. When she regained her composure, she gave him some strong words for how he had badly treated her people. She reminded him how her father had called him "son." She said the settlers had told her that he had died after his accident, but she had suspected that it was untrue, adding, "because your country people tell so many lies."

Pocahontas trip was successful, the perception of Virginia as a good investment being secured. Funds were received that allowed John Rolfe to establish a new cash crop in Virginia; tobacco, a move that would turn the colony into paying proposition and introduce the world to its pleasures. To save money, it was decided that the Rolfe's should return to Virginia. Boarding their ship at Brentford, Pocahontas, John Rolfe and their son Thomas made passage downstream in March of 1617 but "Rebecca" had to be taken off the ship at Gravesend after she fell ill. She died there on March 21, 1617, at the age of 21. She was buried at Gravesend. Chief Powhatan died the following spring of 1618.

Legacy

In the years after Pocahontas' death, the relations between the English settlers and the Powhatan people grew worse. As the colonists expanded, the Native Americans were pushed further and further back. There were clashes and treaties, broken promises, and more fighting. But Pocahontas' son Thomas survived and the Americans who are descended from her, are known as the Red Rolfe's. Their number include two first ladies, Edith Wilson, wife of President Woodrow Wilson, and Nancy Reagan, wife of President Ronald Reagan. Pocahontas' life was entangled with those of the English settlers who during her lifetime destroyed her native culture and took over her ancestral land. Throughout her life, she strove for peace and reconciliation between the English and her tribes, yet was betrayed by both. She was at first seen as a savage by the colonisers, although with time the English came to regard her as royalty, Following her tragic death at such a young age, legends have grown up about her, She is regarded as a hero by the Native American people, books have been written about her and she has been depicted in paintings and films.

The story of Pocahontas is a fascinating one in its own right but it is also a story that should make us re-examine our own history and how we tell the story of our past, as the story of Pocahontas has been twisted and re-invented many times, with truth and integrity lost.

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