

POCAHONTAS

Pocahontas, daughter of the powerful Virginia Indian leader and paramount chief, Powhatan, was born about 1596. Pocahontas was a nickname meaning “playful one,” given to her by her father. Her formal names were Amonute and Matoaka. Powhatan had numerous wives, and Pocahontas had a large number of half-brothers and half-sisters. Nothing is known about her mother.



As a young girl, she spent her early years in her mother’s village, playing and learning women’s daily work. This would have included farming, making clothing, gathering firewood and preparing meals. Even the daughter of a chief would be required to work when she reached maturity. The Powhatans lived in a matrilineal society, in which inheritance of status came through the female line, so Pocahontas would not inherit any of her father’s status. Her people did not consider her a “princess” as did the English. When she was about ten years old, she moved back to her father’s household where she worked with her half-sisters and step-mothers.

The first time Pocahontas met John Smith was in December 1607, when she was about eleven years old. Smith had been captured and brought before her father in his village at Werowocomoco on the northern side of the York River. Years later (1624), Smith wrote that Pocahontas rescued him from death, but most historians speculate that he was put through a ritual that Powhatan used to assert his authority over the English in Virginia. In early 1608 she accompanied Indian emissaries to Jamestown with food. Here she would, “get the boyes forth with her into the market place and make them wheele [cartwheel].”

Once she came to Jamestown with one of Powhatan’s messengers to ask Smith to release a few Indian prisoners being held in James Fort. He delivered them to Pocahontas, “for whose sake only he fained to save their lives and graunt them liberty.” Another time she warned Smith of a possible ambush by some of Powhatan’s warriors. His writings indicate that when he knew her, she was a very young girl, but he seems to have admired and respected her. After Smith left Virginia in the fall of 1609, Pocahontas was not seen among the English. Her father had moved his capital town far up the Chickahominy River, so it would have been difficult for her to get to Jamestown. One source says she

married a warrior named Kocoum, but nothing is known about him or their life together.

In 1613, while searching for corn to feed hungry colonists, Samuel Argall discovered Pocahontas visiting the Patawomac Indians on the Potomac River. She was kidnapped in order to ransom English prisoners held by Powhatan and to retrieve tools and weapons stolen by the Powhatan Indians. Powhatan waited three months after learning of his daughter’s capture to return seven English prisoners and some stolen guns. He refused other demands, however, and relinquished his daughter to the English, agreeing to a tenuous peace.

Thereafter, Pocahontas lived among the English. She was taken up the James River to Henricus to be taught English customs and religion by the Reverend Alexander Whitaker. There she met John Rolfe, a widower who had arrived in Virginia in 1610 and who introduced tobacco as a cash crop in the colony. Rolfe fell in love with her and wrote a letter to Sir Thomas Dale justifying his feelings for her. In 1614 she was baptized with the Christian name Rebecca and married John Rolfe. Powhatan sent one of her uncles and two of her brothers to the wedding. The following year the Rolfes had a son, Thomas.

In 1616 the Rolfe family traveled to England with Sir Thomas Dale, who hoped to encourage financial support for the colony. They were accompanied by representatives of the Powhatan Indians, including the priest Uttamatamakim who had been instructed by Powhatan to count all the people in England. In England the Rolfes met the Bishop of London. Pocahontas was presented at court where she met King James and Queen Anne at the annual Twelfth Night masque at Whitehall Palace. The Virginia Company provided Pocahontas with a stipend for her expenses. While in London Pocahontas became ill. Rolfe moved her to the countryside, and her old friend, John Smith, came to see her. In the spring of 1617 the Rolfes prepared to return to Virginia. However, on the trip down the Thames River, Pocahontas died. She was buried at St. George’s Church, Gravesend, England. John Rolfe sailed for Virginia, where he had been appointed secretary of the colony, but he left Thomas in England with relatives. Thomas Rolfe returned to Virginia in the 1630s, by which time Powhatan and John Rolfe were dead. Peace with the Indians had been broken in 1622 by a bloody retaliation led by Pocahontas’s uncle, Opechancanough, in response to growing numbers of English settlers in Virginia.



In Pocahontas’s short life, she played a number of roles, while caught between two cultures. Although she was one of Powhatan’s favorite children, she probably had little influence over his actions toward the English colonists. At times the English used Pocahontas as a pawn to get revenge on her father, but her conversion and marriage coincided with a time of strained friendship between the English and Powhatans. Traveling to England, she had an opportunity to represent the Powhatan people to high level English officials, and her visit served to bring the Virginia colony to the attention of prominent men and women in England.

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