

# Pocahontas



**P**ocahontas was an Indian princess, the daughter of Powhatan, the powerful chief of the Algonquian Indians in the Tidewater region of Virginia. She was born around 1595 to one of Powhatan's many wives. They named her Matoaka, though she is better known as Pocahontas, which means "Little Wanton," playful, frolicsome little girl.

Pocahontas probably saw white men for the first time in May 1607 when Englishmen landed at Jamestown. The one she found most likable was Captain John Smith. The first meeting of Pocahontas and John Smith is a legendary story, romanticized (if not entirely invented) by Smith. He was leading an expedition in December 1607 when he was taken captive by some Indians. Days later, he was brought to the official residence of Powhatan at Werowocomoco, which was 12 miles from Jamestown. According to Smith, he was first welcomed by the great chief and offered a feast. Then he was grabbed and forced to stretch out on two large, flat stones. Indians stood over him with clubs as though ready to beat him to death if ordered. Suddenly a little Indian girl rushed in and took Smith's "head in her arms and laid her owne upon his to save him from death." The girl, Pocahontas, then pulled him to his feet. Powhatan said that they were now friends, and he adopted Smith as his son, or a subordinate chief. Actually, this mock "execution and salvation" ceremony was traditional with the Indians, and if Smith's story is true, Pocahontas's actions were probably one part of a ritual. At any rate, Pocahontas and Smith soon became friends.

Relations with the Indians continued to be generally friendly for the next year, and Pocahontas was a frequent visitor to Jamestown. She delivered messages from her father and accompanied Indians bringing food and furs to trade for hatchets and trinkets. She was a lively young girl, and when the young boys of the colony turned cartwheels, "she would follow and wheele some herself, naked as she was all the fort over." She apparently admired John Smith very much and would also chat with him during her visits. Her lively character and poise made her appearance striking. Several years after their first meeting, Smith described her: "a child of tenne yeares old, which not only for feature, countenance, and proportion much exceedeth any of the rest of his (Powhatan's) people but for wit and spirit (is) the only non-pariel of his countrie.

Unfortunately, relations with the Powhatans worsened. Necessary trading still continued, but hostilities became more open. While before she had been allowed to come and go almost at will, Pocahontas's visits to the fort became much less frequent. In October 1609, John Smith was badly injured by a gunpowder explosion and was forced to return to England. When Pocahontas next came to visit the fort, she was told that her friend Smith was dead.

Pocahontas apparently married an Indian "private Captayne" named Kocoum in 1610. She lived in Potomac country among Indians, but her relationship with the Englishmen was not over. When an energetic and resourceful member of the Jamestown settlement, Captain Samuel Argall, learned where she was, he devised a plan to kidnap her and hold her for ransom. With the help of Japazaws, lesser chief of the Patowomeck Indians, Argall lured Pocahontas onto his ship. When told she would not be allowed to leave, she "began to be exceeding pensive and discontented," but she eventually became calmer and even accustomed to her captivity. Argall sent word to Powhatan that he would return his beloved daughter only when the chief had returned to him the English prisoners he held, the arms and tolls that the Indians had stolen, and also some corn. After some time Powhatan sent part of the ransom and asked that they treat his daughter well. Argall returned to Jamestown in April 1613 with Pocahontas. She eventually moved to a new settlement, Henrico, which was under the leadership of Sir Thomas Dale. It was here that she began her education in the Christian Faith, and that she met a successful tobacco planter named John Rolfe in July 1613. Pocahontas was allowed relative freedom within the settlement, and she began to enjoy her role in the relations between the colony and her people. After almost a year of

captivity, Dale brought 150 armed men and Pocahontas into Powhatan's territory to obtain her entire ransom. Attacked by the Indians, the Englishmen burned many houses, destroyed villages, and killed several Indian men. Pocahontas was finally sent ashore where she was reunited with two of her brothers, whom she told that she was treated well and that she was in love with the Englishman John Rolfe and wanted to marry him. Powhatan gave his consent to this, and the Englishmen departed, delighted at the prospect of the "peace-making" marriage, although they didn't receive the full ransom.

John Rolfe was a very religious man who agonized for many weeks over the decision to marry a "strange wife," a heathen Indian. He finally decided to marry Pocahontas after she had been converted to Christianity, "for the good of the plantation, the honor of our country, for the glory of God, for mine own salvation ..." Pocahontas was baptized, christened Rebecca, and later married John Rolfe on April 5, 1614. A general peace and a spirit of goodwill between the English and the Indians resulted from this marriage.

Sir Thomas Dale made an important voyage back to London in the spring of 1616. His purpose was to seek further financial support for the Virginia Company and, to insure spectacular publicity, he brought with him about a dozen Algonquian Indians, including Pocahontas. Her husband and their young son, Thomas, accompanied her. The arrival of Pocahontas in London was well publicized. She was presented to King James I, the royal family, and the rest of the best of London society. Also in London at this time was Captain John Smith, the old friend she had not seen for eight years and whom she believed was dead. According to Smith at their meeting, she was at first to overcome with emotion to speak. After composing herself, Pocahontas talked of old times. At one point she addressed him as "father," and when he objected, she defiantly replied: "Were you not afraid to come into my father's Countrie, and caused feare in him and all of his people and feare you here I should call you father: I tell you I will, and you shall call mee childe, and so I will be forever and ever your Councieman." This was their last meeting.

After seven months Rolfe decided to return his family to Virginia, In March 1617 they set sail. It was soon apparent, however, that Pocahontas would not survive the voyage home. She was deathly ill from pneumonia or possibly tuberculosis. She was taken ashore, and, as she lay dying, she comforted her husband, saying, "all must die. 'Tis enough that the child liveth." She was buried in a churchyard in Gravesend, England. She was 22 years old.

Pocahontas played a significant role in American history. As a compassionate little girl she saw to it that the colonists received food from the Indians, so that Jamestown would not suffer the fate of the "Lost Colony." She is said to have intervened to save the lives of individual colonists. In 1616 John Smith wrote that Pocahontas was "the instrument to pursurve this colonie from death, famine, and utter confusion." And Pocahontas not only served as a representative of the Virginia Indians, but also as a vital link between the native Americans and the Englishmen. Whatever her contributions, the romantic aspects of her life will no doubt stand out in Virginia history forever.

(Taken from Jamestown Rediscovery, <http://www.preservationvirginia.org/rediscovery>.)

### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What position does this article take on Pocahontas saving Smith from execution?
2. How is Pocahontas portrayed in this article?
3. What new information did you learn from this article?