

Who Was Pocahontas?

By Erin Sawyer



This statue of Pocahontas stands in Jamestown as a memorial.

In 1607, English settlers arrived in Jamestown to create a colony that they hoped would bring great riches to their home country. They knew there was a good chance they would meet Native Americans when they arrived, and they were right. Not long after settling their massive ships on the marshy shore of the Powhatan River, they came face-to-face with the Powhatan Indians.

Pocahontas Meets the Strangers

Pocahontas was one of the friendly Powhatan visitors to the English colony. The tribe often provided the English with gifts of food and supplies because the

English did not understand how to farm or use the land. Pocahontas, who was just ten years old at the time, was sent to deliver the packages as a symbol of peace between the groups. In exchange,

the English provided the Native Americans with beads, guns and other items.

While little is known about Pocahontas, it is generally agreed that she was a fun, curious and playful girl who liked to do cartwheels with some of the English children. In fact, sources say that Pocahontas' name actually means "playful" or "mischievous one" in the Powhatan language.

Pocahontas saves John Smith



This engraving of John Smith hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, England. Public domain image, courtesy of Wikimedia.

In December 1607, just a few months after their arrival in Virginia, the settlers were having great difficulties getting along with the Powhatans. An English captain named John Smith was caught by the Powhatans and taken to the Chief's main village. No one can be totally sure what happened next. The only first-hand account of John Smith's capture comes from John Smith's diary. According to Smith, the Powhatan who had captured him wanted to kill him. Pocahontas saved Smith's life by throwing herself between him and his captors. Pocahontas, as the Chief's daughter, was then able to persuade her father to set John Smith free. Because of her bravery in saving his life, Smith remained forever grateful to young Pocahontas. Many historians do

not believe this actually happened. They argue that John Smith may have made up the story and that Pocahontas, at just ten years old, was unlikely to have acted so boldly.

Pocahontas the Prisoner!

Unfortunately, goodwill between the Native Americans and English did not last long and Pocahontas stopped visiting. Within five years, the two groups were fighting over supplies and food. Both groups took prisoners.

Even though Pocahontas stopped her visits, many of the English settlers never forgot her. They knew she was Chief Powhatan's favorite daughter, as well as a respected member of her tribe. In 1613, the English kidnapped her. They demanded that the Powhatan tribe release their English prisoners, and a supply of weapons they had stolen, in exchange for Pocahontas.

Not much is known about Pocahontas' life in captivity. Some records claim that Pocahontas was not treated well, while others maintain that she was comfortable

Using Diaries to Learn about History

When something happened a long, long time ago it is often difficult for historians to know all the details of the event. Historians may study old newspapers, paintings, photographs, and books to learn more about a historical event. Another way historians learn about the past is by reading diaries written by the people who lived through it. Diaries are a special source of information because they tell us what one person was thinking, feeling, and experiencing.

However, there are some problems with using diaries to learn about the past. First, the diaries tell what happened according to *one* person only. Another person might have seen or understood the event in a different way. Second, the writer of the diary might not have been truthful, and without more information, it is difficult to trust just one diary's account. For example, John Smith claimed that Pocahontas saved his life at the last moment, but did this really happen? There are no other accounts to prove whether Smith was telling the truth or not. What do you think? Why might Smith have made up a story about Pocahontas saving his life?

and healthy. While it is difficult to know the truth about her time as an English prisoner, several facts are certain.

For example, it is known that the English wanted Pocahontas to become a Christian. From moment they landed in North America, the English believed that the Native Americans were wrong because they did not believe in the same God as they did. Therefore, the English made it their mission to teach Pocahontas to read and write so that she could read the King James Bible and take notes about her studies. Her religious teacher, Alexander Whitaker, hoped that making Pocahontas a Christian would encourage other Native Americans to do the same. The English believed that this would help Native Americans.

Almost a year passed. During that time, the English and Powhatan met several times to talk about Pocahontas' release, but the two groups could never agree. Her father – now an old man – was no longer in full control of his empire. By then, according to English accounts, Pocahontas' two brothers and her sister had spent time with her and found her to be in good health.

Pocahontas Marries a Settler

Like so much of Pocahontas' life, it is unclear what she thought of her new Christian schooling; however, it is known that she was baptized in 1614 and given a new Christian name: Rebecca. That year, Pocahontas married John Rolfe, an Englishman who is famous for providing Virginia's first tobacco crop.

Pocahontas became Lady Rebecca Rolfe. Her marriage to John Rolfe created a brief period of peace between the English and the Native Americans. In 1616, the Rolfes sailed to England with several members of the Powhatan tribe on a mission to spread peace and educate the English on the Virginia settlement.

In England, Pocahontas saw Captain John Smith again. Although there are many love stories about Smith and Pocahontas, they are false. In fact, Captain Smith wrote in his journals that Pocahontas was very upset when they met again in England. She was angry at how the English had treated her tribe, and she considered Captain Smith to be largely responsible. Still, Smith respected Pocahontas' love for and faith in her tribe. He once wrote a letter to Queen Anne of England describing all of the good things Pocahontas had done for the early colony.

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