



# POCAHONTAS

Spy, Diplomat, Entrepreneur, Medicine Woman

Pocahontas / Unidentified artist, copy after: Simon van de Passe,  
1595 – 1647. publisher: William Richardson / Engraving on paper,  
1793 / National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

# DISCUSS BEFORE WE BEGIN

TURN AND TALK

**WHAT IS HISTORY?**

**AND**

**HOW IS “HISTORY” DIFFERENT  
FROM “THE PAST?”**

# DISCUSS BEFORE WE BEGIN

History might be explained as “an account of the past, based on evidence.”

**But consider this:**

**The Greek root “historia” means “inquiry”**

Remember that history includes multiple accounts and multiple perspectives. Some of these voices may or may not be included in historical records. Sometimes the “evidence” of a situation is clouded by myth and of legend as accounts are retold over generations. Consider that some accounts might be original propaganda and the idea of “truth” can always be contested. The audience for history is important – who is this history being written for? How will it be read it? Why will it be retold?

# CHALLENGES OF SHARING POCAHONTAS' STORY



# HOW DO WE VALIDATE SOURCES?



This portrait is an example of persisting misinformation about Pocahontas.

An online search for an image of Pocahontas might result in this “Sedgeford Hall Portrait,” which was once believed to be a portrait of Pocahontas and her son Thomas.

It was even hung in the Rolfe family estate building at Sedgeford Hall! This is still where the portrait gets its name from!

Art experts disputed the painting's origin, saying it could not have been painted during the lifetime of Pocahontas. Eventually historians proved it was painted around the 1830s. Additionally, the child in the portrait appears to be several years older than Thomas Rolfe would have been when his mother was still alive. Thomas Rolfe was born in January 1615, making him two years, two months old at the time of Pocahontas's death.

In 2010, researcher Bill Ryan found a black-and-white drawn version of the painting in the 1848 edition of *Illustrated London News* identifying the portrait as "the wife and child of Osceola, the last of the Seminole Indian chiefs."

Many printed and Internet sources, however, still refer to this painting as a portrait of Pocahontas and Thomas Rolfe! Try to do a search for it today and see for yourself.

You will see other images in this presentation that may also be historically inaccurate, but they are included because they are still a part of our understanding of Pocahontas' narrative.

“Like a tapestry woven from both fact and legend, the story of Pocahontas leaves us wondering what is true about the Native American woman. We know nothing of her own thoughts, and those few words attributed to her come from the pens of Englishmen. She lived at a turning point, a moment when life changed forever for the native peoples of North America.”

– Brandon Marie Miller

John Smith did not publish the incident of Pocahontas saving him from execution until 17 years later. His account also changed a few times. The Pamunkey histories were passed down through oral tradition and weren't published in writing until 2007. Most historians believe the incident DID happen, but that Smith misunderstood an adoption ceremony meant to build an alliance instead of an actual execution.



SO WHAT  
REALLY HAPPENED?

Right: Pocahontas imagined as a Powatan "princess" with facial features based on her from life 1616 English portrait. Image source <http://patrickmurfin.blogspot.com/2017/03/pocahontasdeath-of-princess-with-murfin.html>

Left: Portrait of John Smith, image source [https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4524514.Steven\\_Wood\\_Collins/blog/tag/pocahontas](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4524514.Steven_Wood_Collins/blog/tag/pocahontas)



# DISCUSS BEFORE WE BEGIN

“Pocahontas might be a household name, but **the true story of her short but powerful life has been buried in myths that have persisted since the 17th century.**” – Jackie Mansky

“Her achievement as human being and as maker of history is extraordinary, and has **for too long been obscured in the mists of legend.** It is an achievement that warrants a modern telling and a new evaluation.” – Alexander Whitaker

“We need to remember that because of both the historical documents and fluid nature of a life so integrally connected to the *manito aki*, **we will never entirely know Pocahontas.**” - Charlotte Gullick

WHAT ARE SOME CHALLENGES THAT HISTORIANS MAY FACE IN FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT POCAHONTAS?



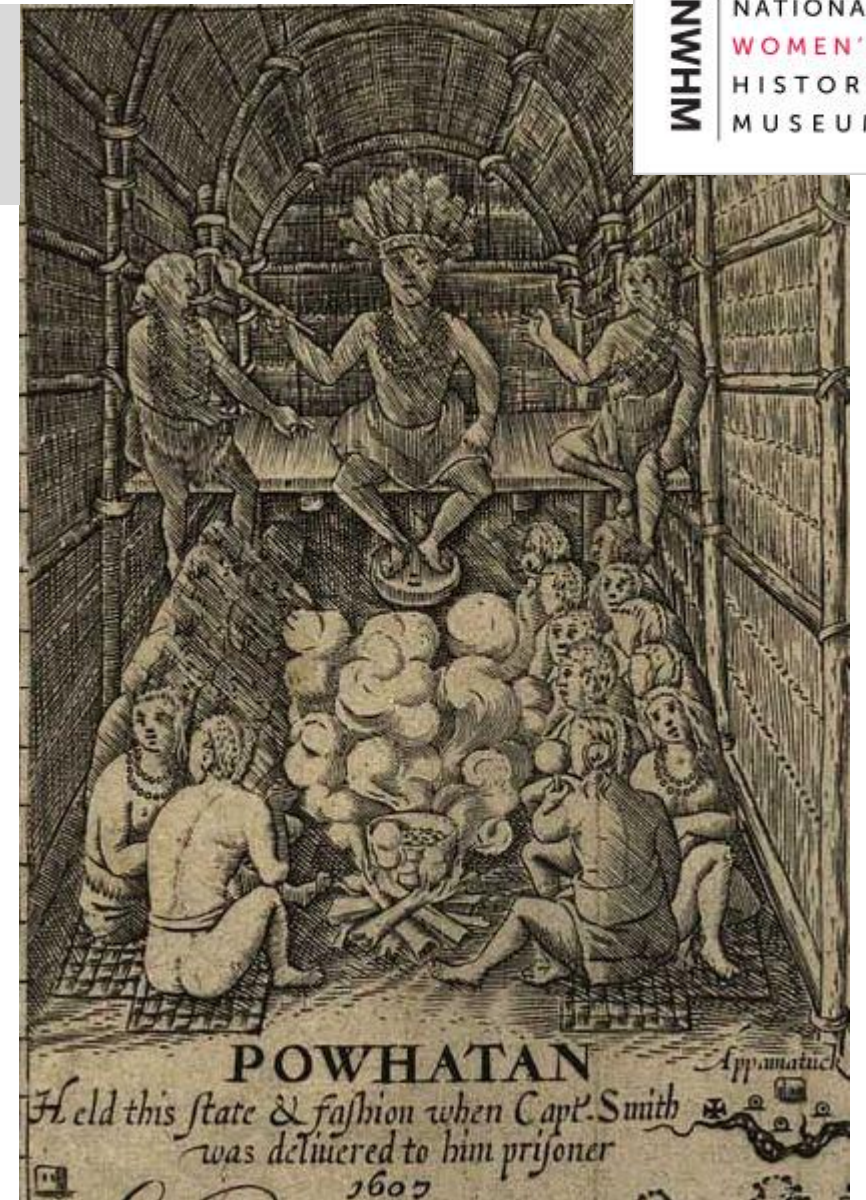
Source: Keam Collection, Getty Images. Engraved portrait of Native American Pocahontas of the Powhatan tribe circa 1610, she wears a shawl, feathered headdress, and European-styled necklace.  
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1615189,00.html>

# ABOUT POCAHONTAS



# POCAHONTAS WAS BORN INTO THE POWHATAN CONFEDERACY

- A powerful alliance of about 30 Algonquian-speaking groups and petty chiefdoms in Tidewater Virginia
- Their economy was based on agriculture and foraging (land was very important!)
- Powhatan tribes lived in villages on creeks and rivers that fed into the Chesapeake Bay
- Men hunted and foraged for food while women were responsible for planting and harvesting corn and vegetables



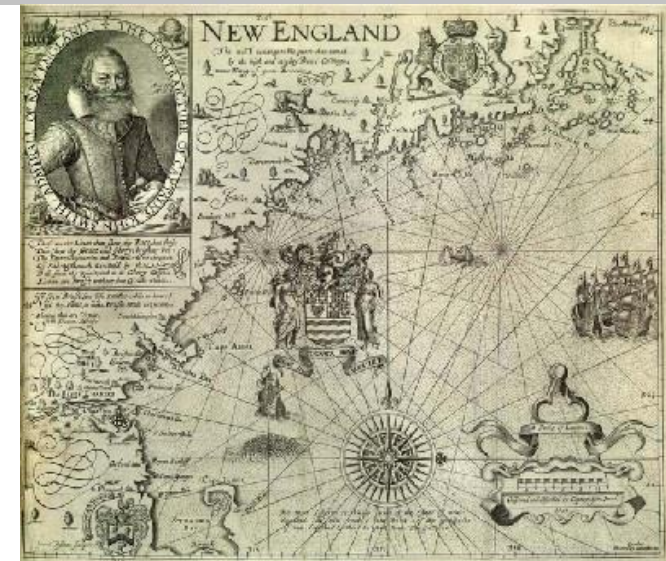
Source: Virginia map john smith large.jpg John Smith's Map of Virginia used in various publications, first in 1612. Very large version of the map. Other versions available at source URL. Source URL: [http://www.virtualjamestown.org/jsmap\\_large](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/jsmap_large)



Detail of the map showing the various towns in the Powhatan Chiefdom.  
Jamestown and Werowocomoco (Powhatan's capital) are underlined in red.  
John Smith's Map of 1612



John Smith, *A Map of Virginia: With a Description of the Countrey, the Commodities, People, Government and Religion* (1612)



Map of New England (1616) by Capt John Smith



# POCAHONTAS' ORIGIN



Image source: <http://www.angelfire.com/va/mobjackrelics/JohnSmith.html>

- Pocahontas' actual birthdate is unknown, but most historians agree she was born between 1595-1597
- Pocahontas is described as a favorite daughter of Wahunsenaca (powerful chief of the Powhatans who united over 30 tribes under himself)– his "delight and darling," according to the colonist Captain Ralph Hamor
- Not much is known about Pocahontas' mother, but she was one of about 100 wives that Wahunsenaca had. It is believed that she died while giving birth to Pocahontas

# NAMES

- At birth, she was formally named Amonute, not Pocahontas.
- “Pocahontas” is actually a childhood nick name that means “playful” or “mischievous.”
- Her informal, personal name was Matoaka, which means “white (or snow) feather.”
- John Smith called her Nonpareil, which means “to have no equal” in French, because of her “wit and spirit.”
- Pocahontas was born into the Powhattan Alliance (Mattaponi/Pamunkey tribes). The English called it the Powhattan Alliance, but to its members it was called Tsenacommacah.



Image source: <https://henrico.us/history/ourhistory/four-faces-of-pocahontas/>



# EARLY LIFE

Image source: <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/population/>



As a young girl, Pocahontas would have worn little to no clothing and had her hair shaven except for a small section in the back that was grown out long and usually braided.

The shaven parts were probably bristly most of the time as the Powhatan Indians used mussel shells for shaving. In winter, she could have worn a deerskin mantle (not everyone could afford one).

As she grew, she would have been taught women's work; which was separate from men's work, but both were equally taxing and equally important as both benefited all Powhatan society.

Besides bearing and rearing children, women were responsible for building the houses (called *yehakins* by the Powhatan), which they may have owned. Women did all the farming, (planting and harvesting), the cooking (preparing and serving), collected water needed to cook and drink, gathered firewood for the fires (which women kept going all the time), made mats for houses (inside and out), made baskets, pots, cordage, wooden spoons, platters and mortars. Women were also barbers for the men and would process any meat the men brought home as well as tanning hides to make clothing.

# POCAHONTAS' SPECIAL DUTIES

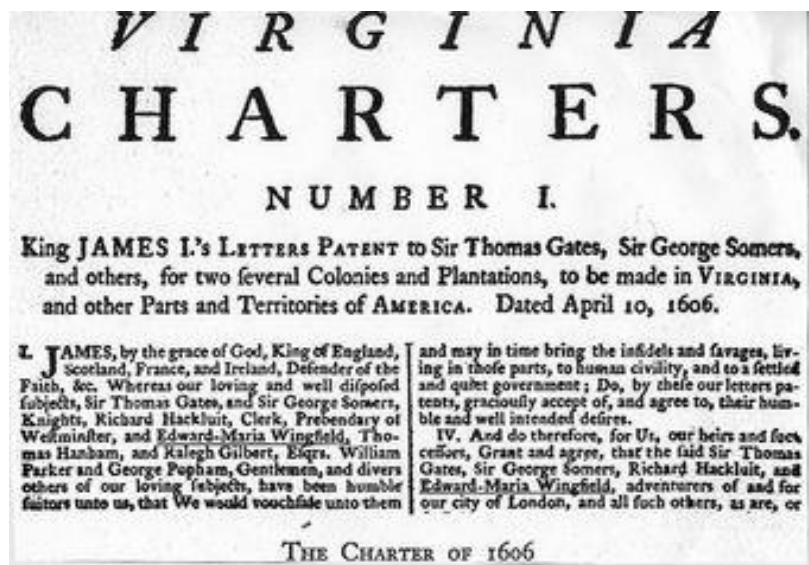


Pocahontas. Image Source:  
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiQ682767zcAhUt8KHfk2BjIQR6BAgBEAU&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.biography.com%2Fnews%2Ffamous-native-american-women-native-american-heritage-month&psig=AOvVaw3kHEOQLmOTFA-JJK0FzTnG&ust=1532696935347022>

- In 1603 Pocahontas was given her Dream-Vision: she was by the water and ships came like white birds out of the water and strange people poured out of them. Her own people started to disappear. When she saw a big pile of heaped shells on the shore, she walked closer to them but then saw they were bones not shells.
- She left to go to Werocomoco (it was common to return to their mother's village for Wahunsenaca's children) to train to become a Beloved Woman (a medicine woman). She was trained in "reading the land" and in the ways of the medewewin (medicine dance). She was involved in the manito aki (ceremonial / spirit world)
- Some Historians think since she was named Matoaka (which means "white/snow feather") and white feathers always signify a Beloved Woman (medicine woman) that she might have had that "calling" since birth.



# CHANGE ARRIVES



The Charters of the Virginia Company of London were written in 1607. Image source: <https://importantdocumentsproject.weebly.com/charters-of-the-virginia-company-of-london.html>



- In 1607 a crew of 100 men of the Virginia Company of London came to the Tsenacommacah. They called it James Towne in honor of King James I.
- The crew fought over social class. John Smith actually arrived to James Towne in shackles because he did not get along with another gentleman on the journey. Many of the men felt that “rooting in the ground” was beneath their dignity and they did not want to do the necessary labor to survive in the swamp. They suffered greatly from disease, dirty drinking water, famine, and depended on help from the Native Americans.
- Pocahontas frequently delivered messages and goods on behalf of her father. John Smith would spend time with her to learn Algonquian.
- In 1608 Matoaka/Pocahontas becomes a spiritual guide to Nantaquod (John Smith)—this is after the infamous incident and ceremony that they are both known best for now.



# SO WHERE DID THE STORY COME FROM?

It has inspired  
books, plays, and  
movies

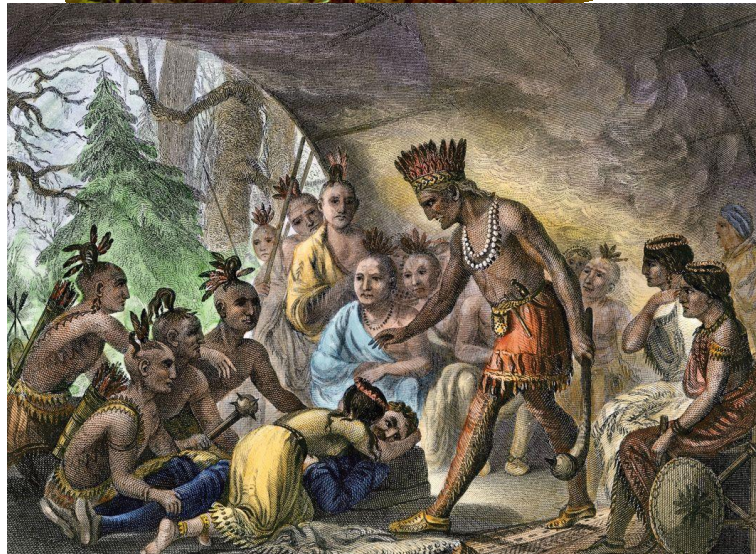
Image source: <https://www.thoughtco.com/pocahontas-saves-captain-john-smith-3529836>



[http://heroism.wikia.com/wiki/File:Pocahontas\\_saves\\_John\\_Smith.jpg](http://heroism.wikia.com/wiki/File:Pocahontas_saves_John_Smith.jpg)



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John\\_Smith\\_Saved\\_by\\_Pocahontas.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_Smith_Saved_by_Pocahontas.jpg)



<https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/74450200073775704/>



[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/pocahontas/pocahontas\\_gallery.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/pocahontas/pocahontas_gallery.cfm)

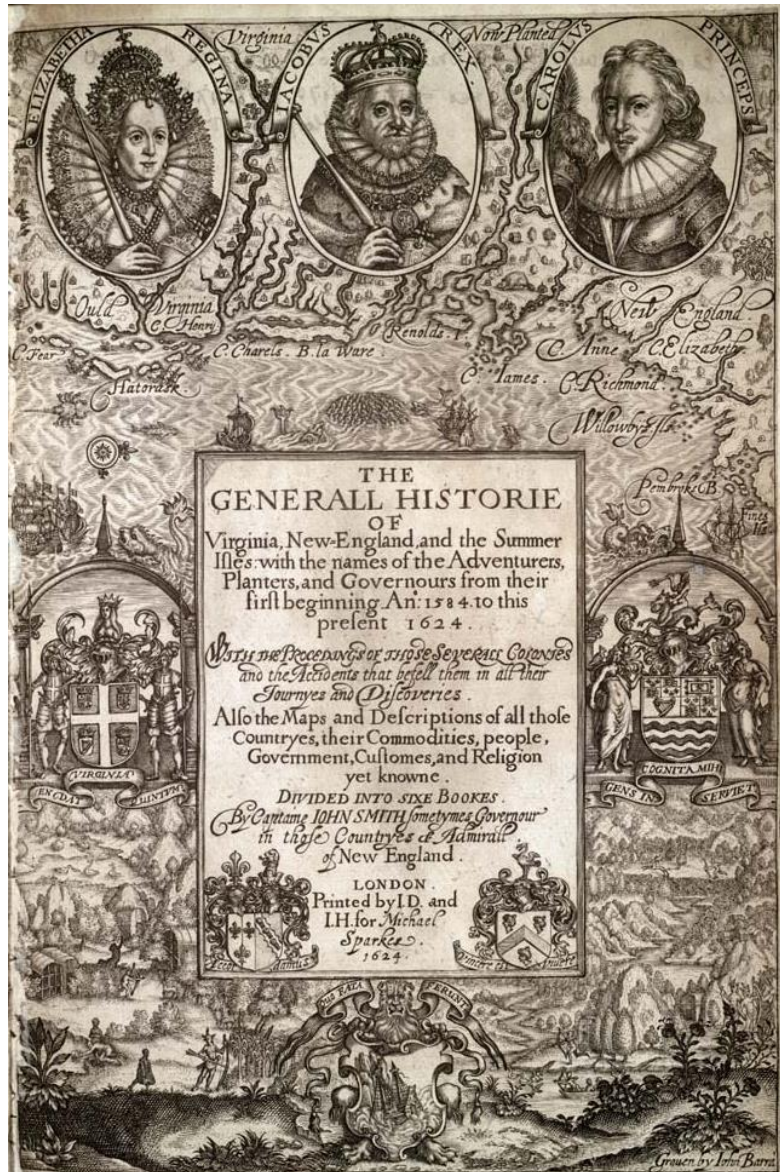


<https://adayinthefootloosey.wordpress.com/2013/01/18/why-did-pocahontas-save-john-smith-and-what-became-of-her/>

It has been retold  
over and over and  
over again...



**John Smith always kept very detailed journals of his adventures. He was able to promote himself and frequently wrote about himself in the third person. How could self-chronicling like this help someone?**



Source: 1624 edition of John Smith's History of Bermuda, in concert with Virginia and New England.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Generall\\_Historie\\_of\\_Virginia,\\_New-England,\\_and\\_the\\_Summer\\_Isles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Generall_Historie_of_Virginia,_New-England,_and_the_Summer_Isles)





Here he is showing himself bound,  
as Powhatan decides his fate...

A description of part of the ad-  
ventures of Cap. Smith in Virginia.

The Country wee now call Virginia beginneth at Cape Henry distant  
from Roanoack 60 miles, where was S. Walter Raleigh's plantation.  
and because the people differ very little from them of Powhatan in any  
thing, I have inserted those figures in this place because of the conveniency.



## Sometimes John Smith's accounts were inconsistent...

- In his 1608 account, Smith described a large feast followed by a talk with Powhatan. In this account, he does not meet Pocahontas for the first time until a few months later.
- In 1616, however, Smith revised his story in a letter to Queen Anne, who was anticipating the arrival of Pocahontas with her husband, John Rolfe. In that account he describes the dramatic act of selflessness which would become legendary: "... at the minute of my execution", he wrote, "she [Pocahontas] hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save mine; and not only that, but so prevailed with her father, that I was safely conducted to Jamestown."
- Smith further embellished this story in his *Generall Historie*, written years later.
- It is important to consider that Smith may have exaggerated or invented the account in order to enhance Pocahontas's standing while she was in England. Another theory suggests that Smith may have misunderstood what had happened to him in Powhatan's longhouse. It might have been a tribal ritual intended to symbolize his death and rebirth as a member of the tribe.

## John Smith's "The Generall Historie of Virginia" Published in 1624 (17 years after incident)

He said that he and two companions were spontaneously ambushed; they were killed but he was taken to Powhatan.

After two months in captivity, Powhatan decided to have John Smith clubbed to death in a ritual ceremony

Pocahontas (11 or 12 years old) threw herself between him and his attackers causing her father to relent.

Afterwards, Powhatan told Smith he was part of the tribe. In return for "two great guns and a grindstone," Powhatan would give Smith the York River and "forever esteem him as his son Nantaquoud." Smith was then allowed to leave Werowocomoco.

John Smith did retell this story a few different ways, including when he shared the incident with Queen Anne.

## The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History by Dr. Linwood "Little Bear" Custalow and Angela L. Daniel "Silver Star," based on the sacred oral history of the Mattaponi tribe published in 2007

Smith was exploring when he encountered a Powhatan hunting party. There was a fight and Opechancanough (Pocahontas' uncle) caught him.

Smith was taken from village to village to demonstrate the English were as human as they were. The "rescue" was a ceremony, initiating Smith as another chief. It was a way to welcome Smith, and, by extension, all the English, into the Powhatan nation by having him be "reborn" into the tribe.

Pocahontas would not have been present, as children were not allowed at religious rituals. Afterwards, Pocahontas would have considered Smith a leader and defender of the Powhatan people, as an allied chief of the English tribe.

# WHERE IS THE TRUTH?



# HOW DO WE VALIDATE SOURCES?



It is a true challenge to validate historical sources sometimes.

There is some truth to this legend of Pocahontas, but there are also many facts lost to time and the influence of legend.

By examining multiple sources focused on the same incident, historians are still continuing to gather information and get a clear picture of this moment in history.

**Isn't it interesting that even our understanding and knowledge of history can continue to change and evolve as time goes on?**

You will see other images in this presentation that may also be historically inaccurate, but they are included because they are still a part of our understanding of Pocahontas' narrative.

# CHANGE CONTINUES



[https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Starving Time The](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Starving_Time_The)



- In 1609 over 500 more colonists arrived in Jamestown, (this time including men, women, and children). The Powhatans could see that the colonists did not intend to only stay for a short while, as first promised.
- Many of the settlers died of disease, starvation, and in skirmishes. Pocahontas warned John Smith of one of the attacks before they took place.
- John Smith was injured in a gun powder accident and had to return to England in 1609. Pocahontas was told that he died. In his absence, Jamestown suffered a Starving Time.
- In 1610, there were less than 70 colonists who had survived the Starving Time.

# WOMANHOOD



Image source:  
<https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/pocahontas-her-life-and-legend.htm>

- The years 1609-1610 would be important ones for Pocahontas. She would be about fourteen, which was adulthood and marriageable age.
- She began to dress like a Powhatan woman, wearing a deerskin apron and a leather mantle in winter, since she was of high status. She might also wear one-shouldered fringed deerskin dresses and start decorating her skin with tattoos. When she traveled in the woods, she would have worn leggings and a breechclout to protect against scratches, as they could become easily infected. She would have also grown her hair out and worn it in a variety of ways: loose, braided into one plait with bangs, or, once married, cut short the same length all around.
- In 1610, Pocahontas married Kocoum, whom Englishman William Strachey described as a "private captain," which implies he had command over some men. The fact that he was not a chief, and not high in status, suggests that Pocahontas may have married for love. Although Pocahontas was the favorite daughter of the paramount chief, she still had the freedom to choose whom she married, as did other women in Powhatan society.

Source: <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/pocahontas-her-life-and-legend.htm>



# WOMANHOOD

- In 1613, Pocahontas was kidnapped by Captain Samuel Argall. He forced her relatives to trick her onto his ship *The Treasure* and had Kocoum killed. Captain Argall used Pocahontas as a noble hostage for ransom. He demanded corn, the return of some prisoners and stolen items, as well as a peace treaty.
- Pocahontas' father tried to negotiate, but Captain Argall moved Pocahontas to the Henrico settlement (near present day Richmond). This is where Pocahontas met Jon Rolfe.
- Pocahontas started a strict religious conversion to Christianity and was baptized with another new name: Rebecca.
- Rebecca, may have been a symbolic gesture to Rebecca of the Book of Genesis who, as the mother of Jacob and Esau, was the mother of two "nations", or distinct peoples, which suits Pocahontas' narrative.



An 1850s painting of John Rolfe and Pocahontas by JW Glass Image  
Source [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Rolfe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Rolfe)



# BECOMING LADY REBECCA

- After a year of captivity, Sir Thomas Dale took Pocahontas and 150 armed men to Powhatan, and demanded a ransom.
- A skirmish occurred, and Englishmen burned villages and killed Indian men.
- It is during this event that Pocahontas told her father that she wished to marry Rolfe.
- John Rolfe also asked for permission to marry Pocahontas from his governor. In his request he explained that he felt he would be saving her soul.
- Both the Powhatans and British governors gave them permission to marry. They married on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1614.

Image source: <https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/native-history-pocahontas-marries-john-rolfe-in-jamestown-wZwL22ISbEOOfDomrsr0VZg/>



John Rolfe was a widower when he met Pocahontas. In 1609, John Rolfe and his first wife were in a huge 44 hour storm in the Bahamas. **Some people believe this story is the basis for Shakespeare's play "The Tempest."** The crew had to salvage pieces of wood from the ships and try to re-build new ships to get to Jamestown. John Rolfe's wife had a baby girl who they named Bermuda, but she died before they could get the ships out of the tropics. Rolfe's wife died right after they reached Jamestown in 1610.

# THE PEACE OF POCAHONTAS



The wedding of Pocahontas with John Rolfe  
lithograph, Philadelphia : Published by Joseph Hoover, 719 Samson St., c1867.  
Library of Congress, LC-DIG-pga-03343

- The marriage was viewed by all as a peace-making event—the “Peace of Pocahontas.”
- Rolfe also helped save the Virginia colony by promoting tobacco cultivation, and was likely aided in some part by his wife.
- Pocahontas bore a son named Thomas and, in 1616, the Rolfes traveled to England.
- While in England, Pocahontas dressed in the Elizabethan style pictured in her famous portrait. She was considered an Indian princess by the English, she was granted an audience with King James I and the royal family.



# POCAHONTAS IN ENGLAND

- Pocahontas became of symbol of Indian religious conversion (one of the goals of the Virginia Company).
- The company decided to bring Pocahontas to England in 1616 as a symbol of the tamed New World "savage." She toured the country with about a dozen other indigenous Virginians.
- Although Pocahontas was not a princess in the context of Powhatan culture, the Virginia Company nevertheless presented her as a princess to the English public.
- While some considered her a curiosity rather than a princess, Pocahontas was treated well in London. She attended a masque where she sat near King James I and Queen Anne.
- Eventually, the Rolfe family moved to rural Brentford, where Pocahontas would again encounter Captain John Smith.
- She was so overcome with emotion that she could not speak and turned away from him. Upon gaining her composure, Pocahontas reprimanded Smith for the manner in which he had treated her father and her people. She reminded him how Powhatan had welcomed him. She became angry and reminded him how he had not been afraid to threaten every one of her people—except her. She said the settlers had reported Smith had died after his accident, but that Powhatan had suspected otherwise as "**your countrymen will lie much.**"



Image Source: <http://blog.godreports.com/2017/08/the-faith-of-pocahontas-and-her-untimely-death-after-being-called-as-a-missionary/>

# DISCUSS

TURN AND TALK

If Pocahontas did not rescue John Smith, as he claimed she did... were there other ways that she still helped the colonists and preserve peace in other ways?

**IF SO, HOW?**



# A LIFE ENDED TOO SOON



Image source: <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/pocahontas/essays.php?id=16>

- After 7 months in England, Jon Rolfe, Lady Rebecca, and Baby Thomas sailed for Virginia in March of 1617.
- Pocahontas fell ill. She was taken ashore at Gravesend, where she died, possibly of pneumonia or tuberculosis. There are some theories she may have had dysentery, known then as the bloody flux, because crew members had it when they arrived in Virginia.
- Her funeral took place on March 21, 1617, in the parish of St. George's. The site of her grave was probably beneath the chancel of St. George's, which was destroyed in a fire in 1727.
- Captain Samuel Argall was the English ship captain who kidnapped Pocahontas by tricking her into boarding his ship. He was the captain of the ship on which Pocahontas was taken to London where colonists hoped to use her to raise money for the colony. He was also the captain of the ship that the sick and dying Pocahontas boarded for the return trip to Virginia. Pocahontas died before they got out to sea.

# MODERN HONORS FOR POCAHONTAS



In July 2006, on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jamestown's founding, a delegation of Virginia Native Americans visited her grave and held a private ceremony to reclaim their native daughter back into her heritage.

Pocahontas' image is on the Henrico County flag of Virginia



Virginia Indians dance at Cobham Hall near Gravesend, England, during a welcome ceremony Friday, part of celebrations marking the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, Virginia. (Associated Press/The Spokesman-Review)

This statue of Pocahontas, by William Partridge, has stood at Historic Jamestowne since 1922. Her hands and arms are burnished gold from visitors touching them for almost 100 years.





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