

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Princess Pocahontas, Rebecca Rolfe (1595-1617)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/06r3c152>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 19(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Sharpes, Donald K.

Publication Date

1995-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

COMMENTARY

Princess Pocahontas, Rebecca Rolfe (1595–1617)

DONALD K. SHARPES

Pocahontas, whose name means “Playful Little Girl,” is perhaps one of the most romantic and gallant figures of early American history. However, the 1995 Disney movie has fancifully contributed another American Indian myth to U.S. history by omitting major elements of her young life and artificially contriving others.

Pocahontas did save the life of John Smith, the leader of the first American settlement at Jamestown, when she was only a girl, but she did not fall in love with him and did not marry him, as the movie depicts. She was widowed while still a teenager and then married John Rolfe, later secretary of the colony of Jamestown, whose own wife and child had just died. She became a Christian, learned English, sailed to England and was received at the court of James I. She died at the age of twenty-two, just as she was beginning a return journey to America. She is buried at Gravesend, a few miles from London, on the Thames River.

Pocahontas was the first Christian Native American, the first who spoke English, and the first Native American who had a child

Donald K. Sharpes is a professor of education at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

by an Englishman. Her place is extremely significant in North American history and in the relationship between early Europeans and native peoples.¹ Over the western rotunda of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., she is memorialized on a marble frieze that depicts her rescue of John Smith.

Pocahontas was the daughter of Powatan, the name given to all chiefs of the Powatan Confederacy, one of the largest coastal political organizations among Native Americans in the pre-Revolutionary era. (The *Powhatan* was one of the sister ships accompanying Commodore Matthew Perry when the fleet of four U.S. ships entered Tokyo Bay, 8 March 1854 and established commercial relations with Japan.) John Smith described Powatan as follows: "A tall, well proportioned man he is, with a sower look, his head somewhat grey, his beard so thinne, that it seemeth none at all, his age near sixtie, of a very able and hardy body to endure any labour. . . ." ²The Powatan Confederacy included about forty Algonquin villages clustered around the James and York rivers in what is now tidewater Virginia. The Algonquin people were related politically to the Five Nations of the north, the Iroquois. Women held a high place among these native peoples, and heritage was traced through the female branch of the family.³

The English sought to develop colonies in this newly "discovered" world in the early part of the seventeenth century, because they were interested in two things: gold and a passage to Asia. The Spanish had shown, in their conquests in Mexico and Peru, that Indians used gold artifacts and jewelry, so it was expected that all the natives had gold. What was not understood was that East Coast natives had a completely different culture from their cousins to the south and were unwilling to be subservient to the Europeans. And they did not have any gold.

Powatan permitted three London-based ships to land on the James River in 1607 but discouraged the 105 male settlers from permanent residence. When the men built a fort, the natives attacked but were repulsed by ships' cannon. As the story goes, John Smith kept the men from starvation throughout that winter of 1607 by obtaining corn from nearby Indians, but it is likely that he and his crew stayed alive by shooting the abundant ducks along the James River. Actually, when the chiefs sized up the squadron leaders who had come to negotiate for the corn, the natives raised the prices at least fourfold. By 1609, the natives attempted to cut off the settlement's grain supply in order to force the settlers to abandon the colony. But duck and geese migrating

in the autumn also helped stock the provisions of the fledgling colony and kept the group from famine.

As a relatively young man of twenty-eight in 1607, John Smith had already been a soldier in Holland, had served with the Austrians fighting against the Turks, and had been captured and sold as a slave in Constantinople. Eventually, he had won his freedom and had returned to England in time to become a part of the age of colonization, after the failure of Sir Francis Drake's "lost colony" on Roanoke Island.

It was during one of the first trade explorations in Virginia which sought Indian help and food that Smith was captured, and two of his companions were killed. In late December 1607, Smith was brought before Powatan, and tribal elders were ready to have him killed. He was placed over a large rock, and braves were about to club him to death, when Pocahontas ran towards Smith and placed her head over his. At least, this is according to Smith's account. Because of this unusual display of friendship by his daughter, Powatan spared Smith's life and received him into the tribe. Pocahontas was then only eleven or twelve years old. It is said that, at the time, Smith made a promise to Powatan that what was Smith's would be Powatan's; it is also said that Smith called Powatan "father," because Smith was a stranger in the land.

By 1609, Smith was president of the Jamestown Council. During that year, he was badly injured in a gunpowder explosion (perhaps as a result of a leadership quarrel for command of the enterprise) and was immediately placed on a ship back to London to recover from his wounds. The settlement had grown to nearly six hundred people, but, after Smith departed, all but sixty died of starvation. The following year, another 150 settlers arrived. Pocahontas often helped the settlers by informing them of the schemes intended to starve them out of the area.

In 1610, Pocahontas was engaged to Kocoum, a warrior about whom little is known. He died within three years. At about the same time, while Pocahontas was visiting neighboring tribes, perhaps as a widow, she was kidnapped. Kidnapping was a method of trade negotiation used by the English (a method still used in parts of the world today) to obtain the corn the natives were unwilling to supply the colony. Captain Samuel Argall had offered a copper kettle to anyone who could capture Pocahontas, because he knew that she was a favorite of her father's. She was brought to Jamestown in March 1613. She was then only eighteen.

While in custody in Jamestown, she met John Rolfe, the new president of the colony. Powatan had refused to pay the ransom of several hundred bushels of corn, so Pocahontas became a permanent resident of the colony and learned the customs of the English. Rolfe, who was about twenty-eight years old, had arrived in Jamestown in 1610. On the voyage from England, his own young daughter had died and was buried in the English settlement on the island that still bears her name—Bermuda. His wife had died shortly after the couple arrived in Jamestown. Rolfe brought tobacco leaf to Jamestown from Trinidad in 1611, and this commodity saved Jamestown. By 1616, the colony was exporting fifty thousand pounds of tobacco annually.

John Rolfe fell in love with Pocahontas and asked the governor, Sir Thomas Dale, for permission to marry her. He believed it was “another knot to bind the peace stronger.” The governor consented, and so did Powatan, sending two of his sons as witnesses to the marriage, which occurred on 5 April 1614.

Pocahontas was baptized as a Christian and was given the name Rebecca. In 1616, Rolfe and his new bride sailed with the governor to England, carrying with them Thomas, the Rolfe’s infant son and about a dozen other Native Americans, including Powatan’s advisor.

The Rolfes stayed at an inn near Fleet Street in London, and Pocahontas and her infant son were given a stipend by the Virginia Colony for maintenance. She and the other natives were the objects of much curiosity in late Elizabethan England (although Elizabeth had died in 1603, and James I was now on the throne), and Pocahontas was invited to dinner by the bishop of London and other dignitaries. Soon, however, she became ill, and she never really recovered from this sickness.

After months of delay, John Smith, whose life she had saved years earlier, came calling in London. Pocahontas was said to be piqued because Smith had not called on her earlier, but it is likely that he was just observing the customary courtesies of his day by not presumptuously considering himself friendly with a princess received at the king’s court. Social customs and titles were not to be ignored by Englishmen, especially at court, as they might be in the Virginia wilderness.

Pocahontas reputedly said to John Smith on the occasion of that reunion, “You did promise Powatan what was yours should be his, and he the like to you. You called him father, being in his land a stranger, and by the same reason so must I do you. . . .” She

continued, "Were you not afraid to come into my father's country and cause fear in him and all his people except me, and fear you here I should call you father? I tell you then I will, and you shall call me child, and so I will be forever and ever your countryman." Pocahontas understood, if Smith did not, that the situation was now reversed, and she was in a strange land, England, needing a father protector and wishing to adopt her new land, the country of her husband and part of her son's heritage.

Smith was then writing a book about his Virginia adventures (*The Generall Historie*) and was soon himself to depart for New England. He was to pen nine books altogether, written in his days in England, mostly about his soldiering adventures and his explorations along the eastern coast of America in 1614 and again in 1616, and about his Jamestown settlement days.

In the winter of 1616, a portrait artist, Simon van der Passe, engraved the portraits of both John Smith and Pocahontas, who appeared very severe in her court costume. In March 1617, the wind seemed favorable, and the captain and new deputy governor, Samuel Argall, were ready to sail to Virginia with the Rolfes. The last place along the Thames where a ship could take on water and fresh food was Gravesend, and it was here that Pocahontas was brought ashore either dead or dying.

She was buried 21 March 1617 in the chancel of the parish church of St. George, in a place reserved for clergy and distinguished parishioners. An error, never corrected in the parish registry, noted that she was the wife of "Thomas Wrolfe," although that was her son's name. Captain Argall persuaded John Rolfe to leave his very young son at Plymouth in England, so that Rolfe's cousin could raise him in London. One of the descendants of Thomas Rolfe, in the eighth generation, was Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), who became president of the United States in 1912, almost three hundred years after his Native American ancestor's wedding.

When I visited Pocahontas's grave at the parish church of St. George in Gravesend, I noted that, in 1984, the Cherokee Nation had brought soil from Virginia and placed it over the grave of Pocahontas so that she would forever lie beneath the soil of her ancient and beloved people. The somewhat idealized bronze statue of her in native attire in the churchyard at Gravesend in England is a replica of a similar bronze statue at Jamestown.

Powatan died the year following his daughter's death. ("Chief Powatan's Mantle," decorated with figures embroidered in



This bronze statue of Pocahontas in the churchyard of St. George's parish in Gravesend, England, along the Thames River, is a replica of the statue of her in Jamestown, Virginia.

roanoak, is on display in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. Powatan gave it to Captain Christopher Newport to be presented to King James I.) John Rolfe returned to Virginia and married a third wife, Jane Pierce; their daughter Elizabeth was born in 1620. John Rolfe died in early March 1622, at thirty-six years of age, presumably of natural causes. On 22 March, the Indians attacked the settlement at Jamestown, killing 340. But the settlement continued.

Thomas Rolfe, Pocahontas's son, returned to Virginia, the land of his birth, in 1635, as a young man of about twenty. As captain of Fort James, he courageously defended the settlement against further attacks. His uncle was now Powatan's successor and chief of the confederacy.

The early English settlements in America were disappointing and offered a cruel life for those who came. Recruiters in England shamelessly lied to prospects about the country, saying that large nuggets of gold could simply be gathered on the beaches. Moreover, few of the early settlers had the necessary skills to survive. They were not the most knowledgeable or able representatives of their country. Later colonists were convicts and malcontents. Malnutrition and disease, as well as poor relations with the native peoples, took the inevitable toll.

Whenever two cultures make contact, both will be changed.⁵ Native American cultures had been developing for thousands of years, but they would be profoundly affected by contact with Europeans. Unlike the English, who generally did not intermarry with the local natives (John Rolfe and Pocahontas were an exception), the Spanish often married native women in their southeastern coast settlements. Archaeological evidence from St. Augustine, Florida, reveals that Spanish culture was modified through intermarriage and that many new foods and domestic artifacts were introduced by the native culture. In the early part of the sixteenth century, La Florida, as Florida was then called, was a multiethnic mix of English, African, Spanish, and Native American people. It is a mistake, then, to consider the English settlements in North America to be the only European presence of the day.

At the time of European contact, Native American communities were based on obligations, a sense of community, and kinship ties. All of those are evident in the relationship of John Smith and Pocahontas, who considered Smith her "father" because of the kinship bonding. All native communities had complex religious



The wooden plaque outside St. George's parish in Gravesend describes, in brief, the life of one of its most famous buried occupants.

views, which were not explored by the European scholars. However, Europeans were bewildered by the origins of native peoples and how they related to Biblical peoples. Were they the remnants of the lost tribes of Israel?

European bewilderment soon gave way to disillusionment about native peoples, and Indians presently fell into the category of infidels, heretics, and idolaters, who only needed to become Christians to become civilized. For the English in America, young Pocahontas symbolized the grace and beauty of that process; the English largely ignored the wider elements of her culture—kinship, community, and the sense of obligation—which permitted her to enter the nonnative world. She remains as a personal example of courage and resourcefulness in the face of contact with other cultures.

NOTES

1. There are scores of references to stories about Pocahontas and the early Jamestown settlers. One useful reference is Funk and Wagnalls; *Builders of*

America (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1959), especially the chapter on John Smith, 76–145. Perhaps the two most noteworthy books are *Pocahontas*, by Grace Steele Woodward (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), and Philip L. Barbour's *Pocahontas and Her World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970).

2. Among Smith's several books is the *Generall Histories of Virginia, New-England and the Summer Isles* (Bermuda), first published in London in 1624, where this quote can be found. Smith's detailed navigational accounts were also used by the Pilgrims in their voyage of 1620. The Pilgrims were actually headed for Virginia and instead landed in Plymouth, which shows they needed much more than Smith's guides.

3. See J.C. Furnas, *The Americans* (New York: G.P. Putnams, 1969).

4. The parish registry and accompanying publications, St. George's Parish, Gravesend, England. Much of this work has been based on the Barbour (1970) book and on R.R. Hiscock's *History of Gravesend's Parish Churches*, compiled in 1975 by Colin Pilgrim-Rector.

5. See Brian Fagan, "A Clash of Cultures," *Archaeology* (Jan.–Feb. 1990), 32–37.

