

Pocahontas (c. 1596-c. 21 Mar. 1617), Virginia Algonquian "princess" and a key mediating figure in Anglo-Indian relations in the Jamestown colony, also known as Matoaka or Amonute, was the daughter of [Powhatan](#), paramount chief of coastal Virginia. Her mother's name is unknown. Matoaka or "Pocahontas" (a nickname allegedly meaning "playful" or "mischievous one") was a frolicsome, carefree girl of about ten when the English arrived at Jamestown in 1607, and she displayed an immediate and intense curiosity about the strange white men. Captain [John Smith](#) (1580-1631) first described Pocahontas in 1608 as "the only Nonpareil" of Indian Virginia, whose appearance, intelligence, and friendly personality "much exceedeth any of the rest of his [Powhatan's] people." Two years later, colonist [William Strachey](#) observed that Pocahontas was a "well featured but wanton young girle," who turned cartwheels around James Fort while completely naked.

Pocahontas's high status, age, gender, and personal inclination made her an ideal emissary in the often tense relations between her powerful father and the English intruders. She displayed a lifelong affection for Smith and befriended English boys of her own age, such as Henry Spelman and Thomas Savage. When Smith was being held at Powhatan's York River capital at Werowocomoco in late December 1607, Smith reported that Pocahontas "hazarded the beating out of her owne braines to save" his life and "prevailed upon her father" to free him. Smith's famous account of Pocahontas's intervention to prevent his "execution" was not published until 1624 and is now disputed by growing numbers of historians. If that event ever happened, and if Pocahontas played any role in it, she probably acted out a symbolic role in a public ceremony that, in fact, resulted in Smith's adoption as Powhatan's "son" and his investiture as a subordinate chief (*werowance*).

What is more verifiable is Pocahontas's active and successful role as a go-between following Smith's return to Jamestown. She frequently conveyed food and gifts to the English fort and in May 1608 helped negotiate the release of Powhatan prisoners held by the colonists. During the next two years she protected Smith, Spelman, and other Englishmen from the wrath of her father's warriors, causing Smith to write later that even at the risk of her own life Pocahontas "was the meanes . . . to know . . . [Indian] trecheries [and thus] to preserve" the Virginia colony.

About 1610 Pocahontas reputedly married Kocoum, a little-known war captain, and paid no further visits to Jamestown, both because of her adult responsibilities and the onset of the First Anglo-Powhatan War. In a trading expedition in the spring of 1613, Captain [Samuel Argall](#) discovered Pocahontas along the Potomac River as she was visiting the Patawomeke tribe. He betrayed her curiosity about English friends who might be on board his ship, and with the assistance of the Patawomekes, he took her hostage. Dismayed that Powhatan refused to ransom his favorite daughter and sue for peace, the colonists kept Pocahontas as a well-treated prisoner at Jamestown for a full year, and during this time she converted to Anglicanism under the guidance of the Reverend Alexander Whitaker. Baptized as the "Lady Rebecca," Pocahontas also became engaged to colonist [John Rolfe](#).

The timing of this betrothal was probably not a coincidence, for both Indians and colonists were weary from five years of brutal combat and were seeking a mutually face-saving means to end the conflict without a humiliating capitulation by either side. Rolfe wrote the Jamestown governor, [Sir Thomas Dale](#), that he wanted to marry Pocahontas "for the good of this plantation, for the honour of our countrie, for the glory of God, for my owne salvation, and for the converting [of] . . . an unbelieving creature." The Christian wedding of the Lady Rebecca and John Rolfe at the Jamestown chapel in early April 1614 was therefore more a diplomatic marriage of convenience than a love match and symbolized the suspension of intercultural hostilities as long as Pocahontas lived.

English officials on both sides of the Atlantic were optimistic that the conversion of Pocahontas was the first step in bringing all Powhatans into the fold of Anglicanism, and they arranged a tour of England so that she could generate moral and financial support for this enterprise. In June 1616 Pocahontas arrived in England with her husband and their infant son, Thomas Rolfe. The court of King James I and the leading citizens of London received her well, and she became the much-admired "belle sauvage" as she attended lavish receptions in her honor. The Reverend Samuel Purchas wrote that she "did not only accustom herself to civility, but still carried herself as the daughter of a King, and was accordingly respected . . . by divers . . . persons of honor." John Smith visited with Pocahontas for the first time in seven years, and he allegedly wrote to Queen Anne of her "extraordinarie affection to our Nation," which had been "the instrument to preserve this Colonie from death, famine and utter confusion."

The harsh weather and polluted air of London took their toll on the young Indian princess, however, and she became ill as she was preparing to leave for the return voyage to Virginia. Carried from Captain Argall's ship after it had sailed several

miles down the Thames from the London docks, Pocahontas died and was immediately buried in the Church of St. George at Gravesend, Kent.

Pocahontas's legacy, according to John Smith, was as "the first Christian ever of that [Powhatan] Nation, the first Virginian [who] ever spake English, or had a childe in marriage by an Englishman." Her deeds, whether the product of childish immaturity or keen insight, were consistently directed toward the lessening of conflict between Indian and English cultures. She was such a powerful, singular symbol of peace and union between the races, however, that her tragic, premature death hindered chances for continued amity in Virginia. Powhatan followed his daughter to the grave only a year later, and those Englishmen, such as Smith and Argall, who had known Pocahontas's genuine affection, were replaced by more ruthless Englishmen intent on the blatant conquest, not gentle conversion, of the Virginia Algonquians.

By bestowing the biblical name of Rebecca on Pocahontas, the English in effect predicted the future course of Anglo-Powhatan relations: "And the Lord said to her [Rebecca], two nations are in thy wombe, and two maner of people shalbe devided out of thy bowels, and the one people shalbe mightier then the other, and the elder shal serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Pocahontas's son, Thomas, remained in Great Britain and was reared as an English gentleman; when he moved to Virginia in 1640, he followed his father's example in cultivating tobacco on conquered Indian lands. Through him, ironically, the blood of the princess Pocahontas was bequeathed to many thousands of white descendants--colonists who eventually grew mightier than the Powhatans and, as Smith had predicted, ultimately achieved "a Kingdome by her meanes."

Bibliography

The essential English primary sources on the life of Pocahontas are Philip L. Barbour, ed., *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith* (3 vols., 1986); William Strachey, *Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (1612), ed. Louis B. Wright and Virginia Freund (1953); Ralph Hamor, *A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia*, ed. A. L. Rowse (facsimile repr. 1957); and Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625), esp. vol. 19 (1906). Three centuries of embellishment began with Robert Beverley, *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705), ed. Wright (1947).

The best biographies are Barbour, *Pocahontas and Her World* (1970), and Frances Mossiker, *Pocahontas: The Life and the Legend* (1976). The larger context of Anglo-Powhatan relations are provided by Barbour, *Three Worlds of Captain John Smith* (1964), and Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (1990). On Pocahontas's descendants, see *Adventurers of Purse and Person: Virginia, 1607-1624/25*, ed. Virginia M. Meyer and John Frederick Dorman, 3d ed. (1987), pp. 508-12; and Wyndham Robertson, *Pocahontas, Alias Matoaka, and Her Descendants* (1887). The only contemporary portrait of Pocahontas is a 1617 engraving by Simon van de Passe, from which was derived the painting in the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

The story of a young Indian maiden with competing loyalties for different worlds has proven to be an irresistible subject for generations of Anglo-American poets, playwrights, and novelists. See Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative* (1994), and William M. S. Rasmussen and Tilton, *Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend* (1994).

J. Frederick Fausz

Citation:

J. Frederick Fausz. "Pocahontas";
<http://www.anb.org/articles/20/20-00799.html>;
American National Biography Online Feb. 2000.

Copyright © 2000 [American Council of Learned Societies](#). Published by [Oxford University Press](#). All rights reserved.
[Privacy Policy](#).