

PROJECT TITLE: Pocahontas Revisited	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** –How does the real Pocahontas compare to the legend of Pocahontas?

2. **Contextual Essay** –

Contemporary society has been inundated by the romanticized, animated image of the girl known as Pocahontas. While this undertaking by Disney may have helped to make her story a familiar one to elementary age children, it has failed to depict an accurate account of her short life. Many of the harsh realities of her life, such as her death at such a young age, have been excluded from children's biographies that tend to report the legend, rather than the truth. I suggest, however, that many discrepancies exist between the contemporary commercial exploitation of Pocahontas, and the exploitation of her image by her contemporaries. While we have little other than myth and legend on which to rely, one must look further than popular legend to discern the possible motivation behind the events that would shape Pocahontas' life.

While there are written accounts of Pocahontas' actions, one must take into account the possible biases of the writers. During her lifetime and in the years immediately following her death, only the English people wrote about her and her interactions with the English.

Pocahontas' people carried on an oral tradition of relaying facts. Quiakros, or priests, were highly regarded members of the Powhatan tribe who were entrusted with all religious and secular knowledge of the tribe they served. Their purpose was to maintain, preserve and impart knowledge, thus preserving the history of their particular tribe. In 2004, Custalow carries on the oral tradition by relaying the history of his tribe to his co-author, Daniel. They record it in writing for the first time in the book, The True Story of Pocahontas (2007).

There is no wonder these two means of preserving history have resulted in such powerfully different representations of the events that shaped Pocahontas' life and her legendary status.

Pocahontas, daughter of the powerful Algonquian chief, Powhatan, was born around 1595 somewhere near what is now known as the Tidewater region of Virginia. Originally named Matoaka and born to one of Powhatan's many wives, she likely spent the first twelve years of her life having never set eyes on a white man (her name was changed to little Pocahontas after the death of her birth mother Pocahontas). While most accounts of her relationship with Captain John Smith agree on the amicability of their interactions, the romanticized story of her begging her father to spare his life is, in all probability, just that; a story.

The legend reports that Smith was in danger of being clubbed to death by Powhatan's men, but had his life spared when Pocahontas threw herself on top of him and begged her father to allow Smith to live. According to the only account of Pocahontas' life written by Native Americans, Smith was never in any danger, but was undergoing a ceremony in which he would be considered a werowance (a leader of *his people*.) Smith's written account embellished the story, perhaps for effect. The Native American account assures us that although it took place at the location where Pocahontas resided at the time, no children or women would have been allowed to be present during this sacred ritual. (Custalow & Daniel; 19)

Popular legend suggests that Pocahontas and Smith became friends after this ritual and some accounts indicate they became romantically involved. According to Custalow and Daniel, she would have treated him with respect, as she would any tribal leader designated by her father. Being a child of only about ten years old, she would have been too young to have travelled to Jamestown whenever she wanted. She was allowed to go, however, under the protection of priests and warriors sent by her father to deliver food, without which the settlers surely would not have survived (24-25). With this in mind, it is understandable why the colonists may have associated the food with Pocahontas.

Because Pocahontas was only a child of ten or eleven and had not yet joined the women of her tribe in the menstrual hut just outside her village, she was allowed to play and cartwheel, and likely wore very little clothing. According to Townsend, Smith wrote about his sexual feelings for this prepubescent girl and "went so far as to claim that she and thirty other naked young women once virtually attacked him in a dance, demanding sexual favors" (p.75).

Varying accounts surrounding her treatment during her captivity and her marriage to John Rolfe also abound. Since the Native American history is an oral one, the only written documentation available, are those of English settlers. Since both parties have their reasons for bias, it is important to consider both views when attempting to separate fact from legend.

The oral history reports that Pocahontas was raped and became impregnated while in captivity, citing Thomas Dale as spending a great deal of time with her. This explains the reasoning behind naming her child Thomas rather than John. (Custalow & Daniel, p. 63)

Thomas Dale was knighted by King James to become "Sir Thomas Dale of Surry" on June 16, 1606. After much service to the king, he was sent to the Virginia Colony with three ships on May 19, 1611. He arrived at Jamestown with men, cattle, and provisions. He found the conditions unhealthy and greatly in need of improvement, and he immediately called for a meeting of the Jamestown Council, and established crews to rebuild Jamestown. With many high appointments, he was effectively, the highest ranking law enforcement officer in Virginia for five years.

Roundtree, however, indicates that the date of the birth of Thomas was never recorded, which leaves us to question on which side of the Atlantic Thomas was actually born.(p.167)

According to Rolfe's own letters, he fell in love with Pocahontas while teaching her during her captivity. Although he felt it was wrong of him to allow these feelings to develop, because she was not a baptized English woman, he became obsessed with her. He wrote that the only course he had was to "...endeavour to make her a Christian". This became his mission, which he felt was in her best interest. (Townsend, p.116)

Again, the oral history differs. It suggests that Pocahontas was depressed and saw no other way out of her situation other than to form a union with the Englishman Rolfe. Additionally, Pocahontas' father was reportedly depressed and felt unable to attend the wedding of his daughter for fear that he may have been held captive also. (Custalow & Daniel, p. 66-67)

Sir Thomas Dale voyaged back to England, and in an effort to obtain financial support for the Virginia Company included about a dozen Algonquian people, including Pocahontas and her husband.

"Pocahontas's visit to England was a propaganda venture subsidized by the Virginia Company of London" (Roundtree, p. 176)

She was also reunited with John Smith at this time, but according to Roundtree, she was angry with him for taking so long to visit her and allowing the lie about his death to continue. She felt her and her father's hospitality had been taken advantage of and she felt extremely unhappy with his aloofness. (p. 182)

After seven months, John Rolfe attempted to return his family to Virginia. Pocahontas was too ill to survive the voyage, however, and was taken ashore at Gravesend England, where she is buried in a churchyard. She was 20 or 21 years old.

The death of young women was not uncommon in the seventeenth century. While childbirth claimed the lives of many, contagious disease was often the cause. "One of the most contagious killers...other than smallpox was the "bloody flux," a hemorrhagic form

of dysentery...Circumstantial evidence indicates that a shipboard epidemic..." is what killed Pocahontas. (Roundtree, p. 183)

Even in the cause of her death, discrepancies exist. According to Custalow & Daniel, Pocahontas had been well until she boarded the ship and began dining with Captain Argall. At this point, she fell ill and died because she was poisoned. (p.84-85)

Whether the details of her life are drawn from reality or legend, Pocahontas' short life had a very profound and lasting affect on the history of this country. She personified good will between the colonies and the local tribes. Her appeal on the behalf of Smith, whether factual or legendary, helped to change the settler's perspectives of the Native Americans. Pocahontas accepted the settlers and assisted them as they adapted to the "New World", and this brought hope to future settlers.

It is no wonder then, that her legend would continue, and her story would grace the silver screen. The legend of Pocahontas is one of courage and selflessness, and an enduring symbol of compassion and bravery.

Annotated Bibliography –

References

Custalow, D. L., & Daniel "Silver Star", A. L. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas:*

The Other Side of History. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.

In an attempt to dispel the myths connected to the "English colonist's version" of Pocahontas' life, members of the Mattaponi Reservation People tell the history of their ancestor. Taken from accounts of her life that have been passed down through family oral histories, Custalow and Daniel shed new light on what we think we know about one of the country's most famous Native American women.

Pocahontas -- Jamestown Rediscovery. (n.d.). *Home -- Preservation Virginia*. Retrieved

March 15, 2010, from

http://www.preservationvirginia.org/rediscovery/page.php?page_id=26

This site, designed for historic Jamestowne, provides a wealth of information

regarding the historic village. Biographies of hundreds of colonists who arrived in Jamestowne between 1607 and 1624 are available for purchase. Also accessible are calendars of events, and information regarding archeological digs.

Rountree, H. C. (2006). *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown* (New Ed ed.). Charlottesville: University Of Virginia Press.

Anthropologist Helen Roundtree explores the lives of three Native Americans and the affect they had on the shaping of Jamestown. She attempts to dispel the prevalent myths regarding Pocahontas and the romanticized story of her relationships with John Smith and John Rolfe.

Townsend, C. (2004). *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma: The American Portraits Series (American Portrait Series)*. New York: Hill And Wang.

Townsend captures the similarities between the Native Americans and the colonists in this account of Pocahontas' life. Chief Powhatan handled the organizing colonists with all the diplomacy and strategy of modern military officers. Pocahontas' life, on the other hand, tells the story of the part she played in her father's tactics.

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