

Pocahontas essay



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When Disney released an animated film about a young Indian princess who fell in love with an Englishman, it brought another account of the true story of Matoaka , better known as Pocahontas. Several stories abound about the life of Pocahontas and her contribution to US history. For one, she was unjustly portrayed in history as a supporter of the invading settlers, giving her the reputation among American Indians as an “ apple or sell-out”. However, contrary to these accounts, Pocahontas was a strong supporter of her people.

Even at such a young age, she was already placed in a difficult position of acting as interpreter and ambassador between two cultures. As the English colonists saw the significance of her political position, she was kidnapped and held her as a political prisoner. Unfortunately though, despite showing the colonists how remarkable an Indian woman can be, this was lost to these people as she was exemplified as a princess by the British.). It is unlikely that the “ celestial princess” concept was known to the Indians before Englishman bestowed that title upon Pocahontas.

Yet the images and roles generated by a misinformed Europe continue to dominate the popular concept of who Pocahontas was. Pocahontas was born Matoaka in 1595. She was the daughter of Powhatan, chief of the Algonquian Native Americans. She is better known as Pocahontas because it was believed that it was dangerous if outsiders learned their tribal names. As the chief Powhatan had many wives, little is very known about Pocahontas’ mother as she was sent away right after giving birth.

According to The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiques, Pocahontas was considered a “ representative of Virginia Indians. ” She made sure colonists received food from the Native Americans and intervened to save lives when tensions rose between the Native Americans and the colonists. Among the popularized and romanticized stories about Pocahontas involved an Englishman named Captain John Smith. Contrary to the story portrayed in the Walt Disney movie, Pocahontas was only 10 or 12 years old when she allegedly “ saved” Smith from imminent death.

The account goes that when the English arrived in Virginia in 1607 and started building houses, Captain John Smith went on an expedition and was taken captive by Powhatan’s people. As he was brought back to the village and laid on a rock surrounded by the Indians with clubs, Pocahontas was said to have rushed in, placing herself between her tribe and Smith. In his “ General Historie”, published in 1624, Smith details his controversial “ rescue” by Pocahontas.

Nonetheless, this story has been refuted by historians and scholars because this was retold 17 years after it allegedly happened and it was only one of the other three stories that Smith told. In fact, Smith never mentioned anything of this sort right after the winter he was captured. On the other hand, he reported that “ he had been kept comfortable and treated in a friendly fashion as an honoured guest of Powhatan and Powhatan’s brothers. Most likely, this story was perpetuated in order to justify waging war against the Powhatan nation.

Others claim it was possibly some kind of ritual the tribe performed. He was never going to be beaten or killed. It was actually supposed to symbolize the fact that he was being adopted as Powhatan's subordinate chief, therefore "dying" and starting a new "life". For the next year or so, relations among the Native Americans were friendly. Powhatan even considered John Smith to be one of his sons. While stories about the Smith and Pocahontas' romantic affiliation abound, there is no real evidence however that Pocahontas carried a romantic relationship with him.

She did visit him in Jamestown when she accompanied other Native Americans who travelled there to trade. She spoke highly of Smith and considered him a friend. Pocahontas also travelled to Jamestown in order to deliver messages from her father. Some say she was married to a Powhatan warrior around this time, but there is no further information or evidence to support it. Trade continued between the Native Americans and colonists, but with the English expanding their settlements closer to the Native Americans, tensions were once again building. Her visits became less and less because of the hostility.

John Smith returned to England because of a severe injury involving a gun power explosion. When Pocahontas asked about her friend, she was told he had died. As the tension between the Indians and the colonists heightened, Pocahontas was treacherously lured into a British ship and held captive by an Englishman, Captain Samuel Argall who used her in order to force Chief Powhatan to release his English captives. She was held captive for over a year and was brought to Jamestown. Even though she was being held

captive she claimed she has been treated well and lived in a house with a minister.

His name was Alexander Whitaker. He helped her with her English and talked to her about Christianity. During her captivity, she met a 28-year-old widower named John Rolfe. Some say she “fell in love” with him, but others insist she agreed to marry him as a condition of her release. Either way her father consented to the marriage. He did not attend the wedding but he did send a pearl necklace as a gift to his daughter. This marriage was regarded as a peace making marriage. Since Rolfe was a very religious man, he had a hard time accepting the fact that Pocahontas was not a Christian herself.

Pocahontas became the first Native American ever to convert to Christianity. She was baptized and changed her name to Rebecca. They were married on April 5th, 1614. The Native Americans and the English were finally able to put their problems behind them. During this time, Pocahontas had become well known. Virginia governor Sir Thomas Dale even brought her to London along with many other Native Americans when he sought financial support for Virginia. Her husband and young son Thomas who was born the previous year also went to London with them.

As the Virginian Colony was struggling and it was becoming difficult to convince people to move and settle in Jamestown, Pocahontas played the role as an ambassador. The real purpose of bringing her to London was to show to the white people that Virginia was a safe place to live and that the natives could be “tamed”. Her arrival and stay in London became highly publicized and many artists sought after her and painted portraits of her. As

she was well-respected, she was able to attend various formal functions while in London.

It was during one of these parties that Pocahontas was reunited with John Smith. Again, there were conflicting accounts of this meeting. According to one account, Pocahontas was surprised and flooded with emotion and Smith claimed that they “spoke of old times” and she referred to him as “father” and insisted she was his “child”. However, there is another account wherein she was so furious with him that she turned her back to him, hid her face, and went off by herself for several hours. Later, in a second encounter, she called him a liar and showed him the door.

Unfortunately when Pocahontas was preparing to leave London, she became ill and died from pneumonia and possibly some other illness. It was most likely because of London’s smoky air that she was very sensitive to while she lived there. She was only about 22 years old. Her last words were: “all must die. ‘Tis enough that a child liveth”. Pocahontas was buried in Gravesend, England but she left a permanent mark in American History as well. Her funeral took place on March 21, 1617 in the Parish of Saint George’s. A life-size bronze statue was erected in her memory.

Her husband returned to Virginia. Rolfe developed a popular type of tobacco which made him a successful colonist. Their only child, Thomas, received his education in England. He then returned to Virginia at the age of 20 and became an influential member of his society. After Pocahontas died, her life story was gradually becoming exaggerated and romanticized. The fictionalized story depicts Pocahontas and John Smith involved in a

passionate love affair, and that Rolfe was the one who told lied to Pocahontas about John Smith's death, so she would marry him instead.

Fortunately, she is being seen more as a representation of genuine Native American values rather than an entertaining love story. In 1616, John Smith wrote that Pocahontas was " the instrument to pursurve this colonie from death, famine, and utter confusion". In her short life she was a major contributing factor in keeping the peace between the colonists and natives. Pocahontas saw to it that the colonists received food from the Indians despite the hostilities and in so doing saved Jamestown from becoming the " Lost Colony".