

# ***The Truth About Pocahontas***

(Primary Level: generally ages 5-7)

The story of Pocahontas has been told again and again from the English colonial point of view; but it is not the true story. This is the true story of Pocahontas.

Pocahontas' dad was named Wahunsenaca and he was the **chief** or leader of their tribe, the Powhatan nation. Her mother died while giving birth to Pocahontas, whose birth name was Matoaka. Matoaka means "flower between two streams." Her dad called her Pocahontas, because it was her mother's name, who he loved greatly. The name, Pocahontas, means "laughing and joyous one." As a Native people, they spent their lives taking care of their land and teaching their children about the Powhatan **culture**, their people's way of life and special **traditions**.

One of the more famous English explorers to travel to North America was Captain John Smith. The Powhatan people wanted to become friends with him and the other colonists, believing that they could help one another.

Sadly, over time, the Native people became afraid of John Smith and unhappy with the colonist's treatment of their people. The Powhatan took John Smith captive for a short time to learn why he and the other colonists had arrived. John Smith lied and told them that the only reason they were living in Native **territory**, land today known as Virginia, was because they were running from the Spanish. The Powhatan people were also enemies with the Spanish. Keeping this in mind, they continued to trust John Smith and hope that the colonists would be a good friend and neighbor to them. Unfortunately, the colonists never planned on becoming friends with the Powhatan people.

The colonists built Jamestown on Powhatan hunting land, with the Powhatan nation's permission. Whenever the Powhatan would visit Jamestown, they would have Pocahontas lead the way. Bringing a young child on a visit to a neighboring tribe was a common way for Native people to show that they wanted to be friends with the people that they were visiting.

Over time, the colonists and John Smith became more and more mean and greedy. They would go into other villages and steal their corn. Wahunsenaca wanted things to be peaceful between them and so he had a meeting with John Smith. During this meeting, he tried to teach John Smith about being peaceful and kind. Sadly, this did not help. The colonists and John Smith continued to take over Native lands and steal from them.

Pocahontas had a **ceremony** known as a “coming of age” ceremony to celebrate her becoming an adult. Soon after this, Pocahontas was married to a warrior named Kocoum. Wahunsenca wanted to hide Pocahontas from the English and keep her safe. He sent her away from her home village to live with her husband in another village far off. Unfortunately, the English, led by Captain Samuel Argall, found and captured Pocahontas anyway. Captain Samuel Argall told her father that they would return Pocahontas if the Powhatan gave the colonists corn and weapons. Even though the Native Americans gave the colonists what they asked for, they still would not let Pocahontas go back home.

After one year of her being kidnapped, she became married to John Rolfe. While in **captivity**, Pocahontas was taken to England to meet the queen and other important people. It was during this trip that Pocahontas learned that the colonists did not care to be friends with her people, the Powhatan, but that they just wanted to take over Native lands for growing tobacco and becoming rich. Pocahontas was determined to return home as soon as possible to warn her people.

On their return sail back to Virginia, the land of Pocahontas’ people, she became very **ill** and died. Many believe that she was poisoned while sailing home, because the colonists did not want her to warn the Powhatan of the colonist’s plans.

More and more colonists came to what they called “The New World” to grow tobacco and other crops. The Powhatan helped them to do this successfully. Despite the kindness and generosity of the Powhatan, the colonists continued to mistreat the Native people, steal their crops, and force them off of their **generational** lands, the lands that their families lived on for thousands of years.

This is the true story of Pocahontas, as told by her people, the Powhatan nation. This is the tale that was passed down from generation to generation.

# ***The Truth About Pocahontas***

(Post-Primary/Comprehensive Level: generally ages 8-12)

*“Only from truthful history can true history be learned. Only by true history can we learn from our mistakes. Only by learning from our mistakes can we create a better life for all mankind. We can only learn from the real history; many don’t see the real history!”*

-Dr. Linwood “Little Bear” Custalow

The story of Pocahontas has been told from the English perspective, romanticized, and fictionalized throughout time; splashing bits of stolen history and tainted truths across big screens and children’s apparel. The Powhatan history of Pocahontas, the tribe of her own people, have been orally passing down her true story from generation to generation, as is their way. The Powhatan perspective differs greatly from the story of Pocahontas that history remembers; the one taught in school, novels, and movies. Read and learn, from the voice of the *quiakros* (Powhatan priests) transcribed here, words borrowed and summarized from *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History* by Dr. Linwood “Little Bear” Custalow. And may we all be changed.

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Pocahontas was born to the paramount chief of his time, Wahunsenaca, and his favorite wife who died giving birth to Pocahontas. The name she was given at birth, Matoaka, translates as “flower between two streams”. After her mother’s death, Pocahontas was all that her father had left of the wife whom he cherished. Wahunsenaca would often call Matoaka, Pocahontas, which was her mother’s name and means “laughing and joyous one”. Life for the Powhatan people was filled with **tradition** and rich in **culture**, days spent **cultivating** and cherishing the land their **ancestors** had lived on for thousands of years before them.

Upon the first arrival of the English colonists, Captain John Smith included, the Powhatan people made great attempts to secure the colonists as friends. At this time Captain John Smith was twenty-seven years of age and Pocahontas a mere 9 or 10 years old. Rather than attacking and overcoming the colonists, which the Native people could have done upon first arrival, Wahunsenaca and the *quiakros* were in agreement that a friendship with the colonists would be mutually beneficial.

In the winter of 1607, Captain John Smith ventured deep into Powhatan territory, encountering Powhatan warriors while they were out hunting for food. During this encounter, Smith was taken **captive**.

The Powhatan people grew greatly afraid of Smith and the colonists alike because they used “thunder sticks” to kill. Because of their weaponry, some even began to believe that Smith was a **deity** of sorts. He would raid villages, traumatize the people with his weapons, demand a ransom of food, and throw down a few blue beads in his departure under the guise of trade. Opechancanough, the warrior who captured Smith, took him around to each village in an attempt to dispel the rumor that Smith was a deity. Following their tour of each village, Opechancanough brought Smith to Wahunsenaca. During this visit, Wahunsenaca questioned Smith about the colonist’s presence in their land. Smith **misdirected** Wahunsenaca by telling him that they had come to this territory to escape the Spanish. Having found a common enemy in the Spanish, Wahunsenaca offered Smith a position to be a *werowance* (chief) of the English colonies, becoming the leader of the English and bringing them under the fold of the Powhatan nation. With this generous offer, Wahunsenaca believed that the English had come in peace.

Although later, Smith alleges that Pocahontas saved his life while he was in the custody of the Powhatan nation on this occasion, his life was never in danger. In truth, he was in the process of becoming a Powhatan *werowance*, participating in a four-day ceremony. This sacred ceremony was not one where children were present, and it is likely that Pocahontas was nowhere on the scene during this event in history, as she was so young in age and also female.

After Smith’s initiation as a *werowance*, he pledged to protect the Powhatan people from the Spanish. Sadly, it is not until much later that Wahunsenaca and his people discover that both Smith and the colonists never had any intention of honoring this pact. Much to the demise of this once strong and formidable nation and Pocahontas herself, the English maintained no honorable intent at all in regard to the land of whom they invaded and its Native people.

Smith returned to England for a time and life continued for the Powhatan people. Meanwhile, life for the colonists continued to be a struggle. Still believing that the colonists had come in peace, Wahunsenaca allowed them to build Jamestown upon Powhatan hunting ground and were **hospitable** towards them. Wanting to become friends and establish an **alliance**, Wahunsenaca allowed his tribes to supply the colonists with food and assistance as the colonists worked to establish a new life in this beautiful and different land that was not their own.

On several of these occasions, Pocahontas attended the Powhatan entourage as a peace gesture from her father, Wahunsenaca. As it was customary at that

time to bring a child in the head when approaching another group to demonstrate that they came in peace and on official business; the Powhatan would often travel with Pocahontas in the lead when arriving to visit Jamestown. Wahunsenaca sending his favorite child, Pocahontas, on these occasions further demonstrated his sincere desire to befriend the colonists and his mistaken understanding that an alliance was forming between them.

During the summer of 1608, the true climate of their relationship began to show with the contentious behavior of the English colonists toward the Powhatan tribe. Smith, back in Jamestown, becoming increasingly violent and insatiably greedy, lead other English colonists to invade villages and demand they give them corn. On one such occasion, Smith found himself arriving at the Powhatan capital village of Werowocomoco, Pocahontas' home, unannounced. Wahunsenaca met with Smith during this unsolicited visit and further expressed his desire for peace despite the poor behavior demonstrated by Smith and his comrades. Wahunsenaca possibly shared the Powhatan philosophy of respect, stating: "Why do you take by force [that which] you may quickly have by love? Or to destroy them that provide you food?" (p30 *True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History* by Dr. Linwood "Little Bear" Custalow)

Smith, and the men with whom he traveled, were allowed to leave in the morning. The Powhatan provided them with loads of corn to take with them in their departure.

There are two sets of historical writings regarding Jamestown written by Smith. The first, a letter he wrote in 1608, which does not mention Pocahontas saving him on any occurrence. The second, an extensive set of writings, was published in 1624. Here Smith contradicts his previous telling, by illustrating in this new set of writings Pocahontas' saving his life on the two occasions that he was in Powhatan custody. The stark contrast between the two writings might have been politically motivated, as the everchanging times brought about conflict for the English and the relationship between the Powhatan and the colonists grew increasingly tense. The English would have benefited from the encouragement sewn throughout the 1624 depictions of Smith, with all of its bolstering words of English strength, victory, and honor, however fabricated.

As the population of the English colonists increased, so did their atrocities against the Native people. Coveting the already cleared land of the Powhatan, the colonists wiped out numerous Powhatan villages by force. The English attacked the Natives unprovoked and enslaved their children, while claiming their actions were justified by Christianity. During this same time, Pocahontas became of age. With the increasing danger surrounding her, as the *quiakros*

had learned that the English began to plot her kidnapping as a means of strong-arming Wahunsenaca to teach them how to successfully grow tobacco on their land, her coming-of-age ceremony was discreet. During this ceremony, it is customary for you to choose a new name to indicate a change in identity. Matoaka, already being called Pocahontas, chose this name after her mother. A short time after her coming-of-age ceremony, she was married to Kocoum, a fine warrior.

To further protect her and hide her from the ill-will of the English, Wahunsenaca sent Pocahontas to live with her husband Kocoum in his remote home village. After several attempts and extensive searching and spying, the English were able to find the location of Pocahontas. Captain Samuel Argall, upon learning of Pocahontas' whereabouts, led a mission to capture her. Once he successfully captured Pocahontas, he sent a ransom demand to her father for corn, weapons, and the return of English colonists held prisoner.

Immediately conceding to the demands, Wahunsenaca believed that the English would make good on their end of the deal to return Pocahontas to her people unharmed. Once the ransom demands were satisfied, Argall betrayed Wahunsenaca's trust further by refusing to return Pocahontas and sailed to Jamestown instead. Pocahontas was about fifteen or sixteen during this time.

The events that followed the kidnapping of Pocahontas are as tragic as the injustices that led up to it. With Wahunsenaca paralyzed from action with his constant fear that any such move might result in the harm of Pocahontas, time passed. A year into her captivity, Pocahontas was baptized into the English faith, **Christianity**, and married, possibly against her will, to John Rolfe.

The English say that this marriage between Pocahontas and John Rolfe brought peace between the colony and the Powhatan nation, but what true peace could come from such circumstances, and it was evident that peace was not what the colonists truly desired. With the marriage solidified, the Powhatans shared their knowledge of tobacco growing with the colonists, further satisfying the unquenchable thirst the English had for capitalizing on the stolen lands.

In sad irony, the Powhatan actually saved the English colony by teaching the colonists how to successfully grow, cure, and manage tobacco on their land. Seizing opportunity, the colonists rushed in to conquer more and more Powhatan land to develop tobacco plantations.

While in captivity, the English made a voyage to England with Pocahontas in tow. They desired to show her off and use her to ease concerns regarding the Jamestown settlement, sway the English perception of the relations with the Natives, and silence inquiries regarding the success of the colony in the “New World”. The presence of Pocahontas in England masked the true appalling treatment of the Powhatan people and helped the colonists secure support and financial backing for the expansion of Jamestown.

Pocahontas impressed those that she encountered while in England, even meeting the British Crown. Dressed in the finest of English wear, Christianized, and intelligent in her own right, Pocahontas’s visit accomplished precisely what her captors had hoped it would. While in England, Pocahontas was exposed to the true intentions of the English people, learning the full extent of their plans regarding her homeland, and finally understanding the sad and contentious motives they had in bringing her to England in the first place. To further intensify the situation, Pocahontas learned that Captain John Smith was alive and well, after having long believed that he was no longer living. Upon confronting Smith before her departure, she expressed her rage in the discovery of his deceptions and betrayal against the Powhatan. She could not fathom such treachery, especially after he pledged to be the English *werowance* and defend the Powhatans. Her horror growing, Pocahontas was eager to return home with this new knowledge and warn her family.

Arrangements were officially made for their return to what was now called Virginia in the spring of 1617. Pocahontas was in good health upon the ship’s departure. With a strange turn of events, immediately after dining with Rolfe and Argall in the captain’s chambers, Pocahontas became violently sick to the stomach and died. It is widely believed among her people that Pocahontas was poisoned during this final meal in an effort to prevent her from returning home. Had she lived, she might have shared her newfound knowledge with her people and possibly hampered English efforts to expand their tobacco growth and continue their crimes against the Powhatan. Much of this information has been attained by Mattachanna, Pocahontas’s dear sister, and the *quiakros* who both were permitted to remain with Pocahontas and comfort her during much of her captivity, even traveling with her to England and aboard the ship during her final moments. Rolfe convinced Argall to turn the ship around and leave Pocahontas’ body in England before returning to Virginia to continue pursuing his land lusts. Once Mattachanna and the *quiakros* returned to their homeland, all that they had learned and observed was shared and carefully recorded.

The rest of the story is basically history as we know it. Mourning the death of his most beloved daughter and regretting his failure to act, Wahunsenka died of a broken heart in April 1618, less than a year after Pocahontas. Pocahontas

died when she was around the age of 21 and was buried in Gravesend, England. The Powhatan people have made several failed attempts to recover her body in hopes of returning it for burial on her homeland beside her father.

Smith's accounts of the events surrounding Pocahontas were written years after her death when no one was there to contradict what he had written or provide the Powhatan perspective. He died June 21, 1631 unmarried.

John Rolfe returned to Virginia in 1617, quickly remarried, and became a successful landowner in the "New World". With tobacco becoming the "gold" that the colonists originally sought after, English presence increased rapidly as the growth and prosperity associated with tobacco also increased. Conflict ran rampant across the Native lands and the Powhatan people, along with Natives throughout North America, experienced great loss, injustice, and hardship.

This is the true story of Pocahontas. Not the famed story of a forbidden love between two strangers from foreign lands and not the English version of heroic and valiant colonists taming wild lands and civilizing savage people. The true story of who Pocahontas was is a sorrowful tale of a mighty and majestic people wronged and taken advantage of. Of a once joyful young girl stolen from her homeland and forced to become a symbol for a cause she did not support. This true story of betrayal and injustice must be told and told again. Let Pocahontas be known for who she truly was and may we all remember.



# Pocahontas True or False

**Directions:** Using information that you have learned this week and have gathered from personal research, cut and paste from the answer box into the correct section.

True

False

John Smith was a captain

Pocahontas' name at birth was Matooka

Pocahontas was an influential leader to her Powhatan people

Pocahontas' father was a chief named Wahunsenaca

Pocahontas was a child when she first met John Smith

Pocahontas was taken from her family against her will

Pocahontas was an adult when she first met John Smith

John Smith was an honorable explorer and helped keep peace between the Native people and the colonist

The Powhatan people were peaceful and hoped to befriend the colonists