



Where Does Pocahontas Fit into The Story?

Most of what we “know” about Pocahontas is legend that grew up long after she died. She was not a prominently powerful diplomat among her own people, being first the non-inheriting female child of a male chief and later the wife of Kocoum, a mere “private captain” rather than a chief in his own right. Her second marriage was to an English gentleman, John Rolfe, who left few writings that mention her, and when she went to London as the guest (and the exhibit) of the Virginia Company of London, she was briefly a celebrity about whom little was written. Her father had taken another daughter as his favorite after Pocahontas married among the English. The only portrait of her created in her lifetime was an engraving, not a painting and certainly does not resemble the Europeanized image she has been given by artists since then. The tradition that the King of England made much of her, even being miffed with Rolfe for daring to marry “royalty,” is just that: tradition. Its nucleus began with John Smith’s 1624 account and blossomed thereafter. Indeed much of the legend of Pocahontas began with Smith’s 1624 embroidery on his more matter-of-fact 1612 account.

The facts that contemporaries recorded about Pocahontas and the places in Virginia where she is known to have set foot are very few. It is not known where she was born (probably in 1597) or who her mother was, but if Henry Spelman was correct about Powhatan’s children living in their mothers’ hometowns for their first several years, then we have no idea where she lived as a child. Later in her childhood she joined her father and his household, which by that time was probably at Werowocomoco on the York River (his earlier headquarters being Powhatan town, near modern Richmond). There she was living when John Smith was introduced as a captive, when he and Christopher Newport and an entourage made formal visits in the late winter and fall of 1608, and finally when he returned with a force of soldiers to take her father’s winter stores of corn. (In all fairness, it should be noted that Powhatan had planned to ambush Smith during this visit as well.) That incident served to break the alliance between Powhatan and the English, which had been shaky since the late spring of 1608. It is most likely that Pocahontas accompanied her father’s councilors on their visits to the Jamestown fort in that spring, while relations were good.

After altercations with the English in January 1609, Powhatan moved his headquarters, and Pocahontas with it, to a new site called Orapax in the swampy headwaters of the Chickahominy River near where Interstate 64 crosses it today. That location was not tenable as a political center for a powerful man, so by 1614 the headquarters—and Pocahontas’s home—was at Matchut, on the upper Pamunkey River near today’s U.S. 360 bridge, beyond the reach of English watercraft. Pocahontas was married by then, but apparently she was living close to or with her father, for she had remained his favorite child.

Pocahontas and the English

Pocahontas was captured on the Potomac River in early April 1613 by Samuel Argall. No one recorded what she was doing there, other than Ralph Hamor saying later that she was visiting “friends.” She was not visiting the chief, though: she was visiting Iopassus (Japazaws), the ruler of one of his satellite towns, located on Passapatanzy Creek. Kocoum was not mentioned in the accounts of the incident.

Instead of taking Pocahontas at once to her father's headquarters to bargain for her exchange, Argall took her to Jamestown, where she remained for almost a year while her father refused to pay ransom. During that time, she met John Rolfe who fell in love with her, and she learned English culture as well as the colonists' religion, which the English clearly wanted her to accept. In late March 1614 the Jamestown governor took her away again, all the way to Matchut by boat, to force her father's hand, and it was there that Rolfe revealed his desire to marry her. Through messengers, Powhatan agreed to peace terms, and gave permission for Pocahontas to remain the child of the English governor, thus tacitly consenting to her marriage. The couple and the governor returned to Jamestown, where Pocahontas formally accepted the English religion in early April, and was married to Rolfe the next day. Three of her relatives—although not her father—were in attendance.

The English viewed Pocahontas's change of religion as a conversion, and it is still commonly referred to as such today. But for a captured Algonquian woman, taking the religion of her captors, becoming immersed in their culture, and making the best possible marriage, were all desirable goals. It is notable that Pocahontas did not make these final steps until the English agreed to terms of peace with Powhatan. Regardless of her feelings for Rolfe, whom she may have truly loved, her actions as a young woman helped to further peaceful relations between the English and her father's followers.

Tradition holds that, after marrying, the Rolfes settled at Varina, several miles down the James from modern Richmond; the same tradition asserts that they married there, too. But there is no documentary proof of these events. On the other hand, John Rolfe had claimed and had begun to farm land across the river from Jamestown (now called Smith's Fort), on a creek then called Rolfe's Creek and now called Grays Creek. That would be a very likely place for the Rolfes to have lived. Also missing is a contemporaneous record about where and when the couple's only child, Thomas Rolfe, was born. In 1616 Pocahontas went to England with her husband and child. The cost of her tour was underwritten by the Virginia Company of London who touted her conversion to Christianity and English ways. She died there, and her widower returned to Virginia, leaving his sickly son to grow up among the Rolfes as an Englishman and then follow him to Virginia nearly twenty years later.