

Who was Pocahontas? Is she a Disney princess? Did she protect English colonists? Is she a myth?

In this activity, you will explore the different stories that have been told about Pocahontas and analyze how those different stories portray Pocahontas and why.

Directions:

- SSW: What do you know about Pocahontas? What stories have you heard? Where did you hear those stories?
- Share your responses at your table group and write down in the space below what you heard from your groupmates.
- Watch both clips from Disney’s film *Pocahontas* (1995). As you watch the clips, write down what you notice about how the film portrays Pocahontas and the other people around her. What do you think that shows about how Disney views indigenous people and American history? Complete the chart and then share with your group. Be ready to share out to the class.

	How is Pocahontas portrayed? What does that portrayal show us about how Disney sees her and native people?	How are other people (other indigenous people, colonizers, etc.) portrayed? What does that portrayal show us about how Disney sees colonization?
Clip 1: “Colors of the Wind”		
Clip 2: “Saving John Smith”		

4. Take turns now reviewing the other resource cards with different portrayals of her story. Complete the notetaker.

Resource	How is Pocahontas portrayed? How are other indigenous people portrayed? Be specific	How are colonists portrayed?	What does this show about how the authors view colonization?	Do you think this version of the story is accurate? Why or why not?
Resource Card #1 1906 illustrated book <i>The Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith</i> by E. Boyd Smith				
Resource Card #2: From Christian.net				
Resource Card #3: National Parks Services				
Resource Card #4: The Indigenous Foundation				

5. Discuss what you noticed and answer the following questions:
 - a. What do the different stories have in common?
 - b. What is different about the different stories?
 - c. What do you think is the point of view of the different stories? Who do you think is telling the story?
 - d. Why do you think Pocahontas is portrayed the way that she is? What is the purpose of telling her story that way?
6. Finally, **read and annotate** what historians today understand about her life in the article, [“The Enduring Legacy of the Pocahontas Myth” by Gregory D. Smithers from *The Atlantic* \(2017\)](#)
7. Discuss as a group and write down your answers to these questions:
 - a. What does this story have in common with the other stories you learned?
 - b. How is this story different?
 - c. What does this story tell us about her?
 - d. Why are the stories different? What does this show us about how history is told?

[From the 1906 illustrated book *The Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith* by E. Boyd Smith](#)

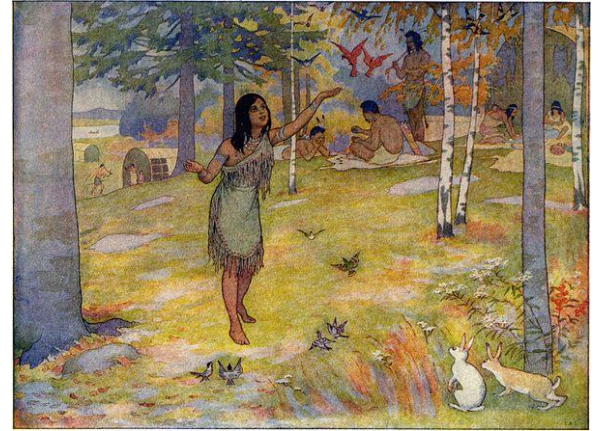
1. POCAHONTAS

“Long, long ago, when the Indians owned the land, there lived in Virginia, near the river afterwards called the James, a little girl, the Princess Pocahontas, daughter of the great chief Powhatan.

Pocahontas was her father's favorite child, and the pet of the whole tribe; even the fierce warriors loved her sunny ways.

She was a child of nature, and the birds trusted her and came at her call. She knew their songs, and where they built their nests. So she roamed the woods, and learned the ways of all the wild things, and grew

to be a care-free maiden.”



9. CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH A PRISONER

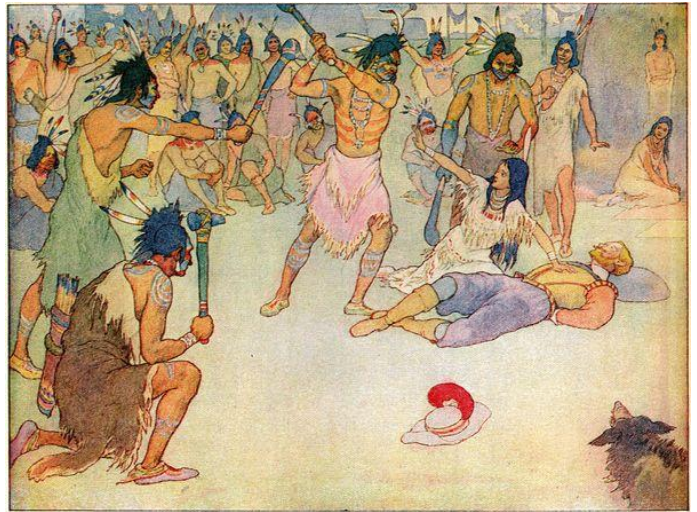
At first they decided to kill him at once, then some thought it better to lead him to their village, that the whole tribe might rejoice in the triumph. But, as one of the Indians shot by the Captain had in the meantime died, the more impatient clamored for speedy vengeance. So they bound him to a tree to use as a target.

Now, as the arrows began to strike dangerously near, Captain John, ever quick-witted and resourceful, brought forth his pocket compass and showed the Indians the dancing needle; and when they found they could not touch it, because of the glass, they were amazed, for of course they had never seen glass before, and could not understand it. A feeling of awe crept over them; they thought him a magician, and were afraid to kill him. So at last they marched him off in their midst, through the forest, to consult with the rest of the tribe as to what should be done with him.



11-12. POCAHONTAS SAVES CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH'S LIFE

At last, after long deliberation, the Indians decided that, since he had killed one of their tribe, Captain John must die, for this was their law. So they dragged him, bound, before the great chief Powhatan, who sat in mighty state surrounded by his warriors. They stretched the prisoner on the ground with his head on a large stone, to beat out his brains with their cruel clubs. And it seemed as though at last the gallant Captain's time had come. But just as the Indian brave was about to strike, his great war club swinging high in the air, Pocahontas rushed forward and threw herself between him and his victim. With her own body she shielded the Captain from harm, for her heart was moved to pity for the stranger, and she could not bear that he should die. And now aroused, with flashing eyes she waved the executioner back. Then she pleaded with her father that the captive's life be spared.



At once there was wild confusion of shouting and threatening, many crying, "Kill, kill!" while but few were willing to

spare his life, for the Indians feared the white men, and wished to drive them from the land.

But Pocahontas, as Princess of the tribe, claimed her right, and would not yield them up their victim. Then Powhatan, who ruled them all, raised his hand and stopped their clamor. In sullen silence the angry warriors awaited his decision. For a moment he hesitated, and the fate of Captain John hung wavering in the balance. Then, to please his favorite daughter, whom he dearly loved, he decreed that she should have her will.



"Let Pocahontas keep the stranger as her own, to make her toys," he said, for Captain John, during the idle days of weary captivity, had often whittled curious playthings for the little maid.

And thus was Captain John Smith's life saved by the gentle Indian girl, and with it the Jamestown colony, for without their sturdy and resourceful leader the settlers would have lost courage and abandoned the town.



Do you know the true story of Pocahontas (Rebecca Rolfe)?

Many people have seen the popular Disney movie, *Pocahontas*. But, here is the true story of an Indian princess and the English settlers at Jamestown.

In 1607 the English established a colony at Jamestown, Virginia. But the harsh winters were more difficult than the settlers had planned and they soon found that their supplies were becoming dangerously low.

One day, during 1608, Captain John Smith and some of his men were captured by Native Americans while they were out searching for food. Captain Smith's men were all killed and he was taken to Chief Powhatan. The mighty Indian Chief ordered that Smith be killed. At the last moment, the Chief's daughter, 13 year old Pocahontas, pleaded with her father and saved Captain Smith's life.



The body of Pocahontas is laid to rest under this statue of her at Saint George's church, Gravesend, Kent, England.

Pocahontas

A few years later, Pocahontas would once again save the lives of many in Jamestown by warning the settlers of an Indian attack. She made friends with the settlers and was soon trusted by them.

In 1613, when she was 18 years old, Pocahontas accepted [Jesus into her life](#) and was [baptized](#). She also took the "Christian" name of [Rebecca](#) to mark the beginning of her new life.



Pocahontas (1595?-1617)

Soon after her baptism, Pocahontas fell in love and married a Jamestown settler named John Rolfe. They had a child named Thomas (1615). In 1616, John, Rebecca and their son all traveled to England where they were given an audience from the royal court. As they prepared to return home to Virginia in 1617, Pocahontas became ill and died. She was buried in England.

Pocahontas will always be remembered as the Indian princess who risked her own life to save Captain John Smith and the settlers of Jamestown. But the really notable aspect of her short life is that **she was the first Native American in the new world to be [converted](#) and accept [Jesus Christ](#).**

Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend

Not much is known about this memorable woman. What we do know was written by others, as none of her thoughts or feelings were ever recorded. Specifically, her story has been told through written historical accounts and, most recently, through the sacred oral history of the Mattaponi. Most notably, Pocahontas has left an indelible impression that has endured for more than 400 years. And yet, many people who know her name do not know much about her.

The Written History

Pocahontas was born about 1596 and named "Amonute," though she also had a more private name of Matoaka. She was called "Pocahontas" as a nickname, which meant "playful one," because of her frolicsome and curious nature. She was the daughter of Wahunsenaca (Chief Powhatan), the *mamanatowick* (paramount chief) of the Powhatan Chiefdom. At its height, the Powhatan Chiefdom had a population of about 25,000 and included more than 30 Algonquian speaking tribes - each with its own *werowance* (chief). The Powhatan Indians called their homeland "Tsenacomoco."

As the daughter of the paramount chief Powhatan, custom dictated that Pocahontas would have accompanied her mother, who would have gone to live in another village, after her birth (Powhatan still cared for them). However, nothing is written by the English about Pocahontas' mother. Some historians have theorized that she died during childbirth, so it is possible that Pocahontas did not leave like most of her half-siblings. Either way, Pocahontas would have eventually returned to live with her father Powhatan and her half-siblings once she was weaned. Her mother, if still living, would then have been free to remarry...

When the English arrived and settled Jamestown in May 1607, Pocahontas was about eleven years old. Pocahontas and her father would not meet any Englishmen until the winter of 1607, when Captain John Smith (who is perhaps as famous as Pocahontas) was captured by Powhatan's brother Opechancanough. Once captured, Smith was displayed at several Powhatan Indian towns before being brought to the capital of the Powhatan Chiefdom, Werowocomoco, to Chief Powhatan.

What happened next is what has kept the names of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith inextricably linked: the famous rescue of John Smith by Pocahontas. As Smith tells it, he was brought in front of Chief Powhatan, two large stones were placed on the ground, Smith's head was forced upon them, and a warrior raised a club to smash in his brains. Before this could happen, Pocahontas rushed in and placed her head upon his, which stopped the execution. Whether this event actually happened or not has been debated for centuries. One theory posits that what took place was an elaborate adoption ceremony; its adherents believe that Smith's life was never in danger (though, he most likely would not have known that). Afterwards, Powhatan told Smith he was part of the tribe. In return for "two great guns and a grindstone," Powhatan would give Smith Capahowasick (on the York River), and "forever esteem him as his son Nantaquoud." Smith was then allowed to leave Werowocomoco.

Once Smith returned to Jamestown, Chief Powhatan sent gifts of food to the starving English. These envoys were usually accompanied by Pocahontas, as she was a sign of peace to the English. On her visits to the fort, Pocahontas was seen cart-wheeling with the young English boys, living up to her nickname of "playful one."

The English knew Pocahontas was the favorite daughter of the great Powhatan, and was consequently seen as a very important person. On one occasion, she was sent to negotiate for the release of Powhatan prisoners. According to John Smith, it was for and to Pocahontas alone that he finally released them. As time passed, however, relations between the Powhatan Indians and the English began to deteriorate, but Pocahontas's relationship with the newcomers was not over...

In 1610, Pocahontas married Kocoum... The fact that he was not a chief, and thus not high in status, suggests that Pocahontas may have married for love. Kocoum may have been a member of the Patowomeck tribe...

[In 1613 Pocahontas was captured by the English and taken to Jamestown.] Eventually, she was probably taken to Henrico, a small English settlement near present-day Richmond. Powhatan, informed of his daughter's capture and ransom cost, agreed to many of the English demands immediately, to open negotiations. In the meantime, Pocahontas was put under the charge of Reverend Alexander Whitaker, who lived at Henrico. She learned the English language, religion and customs. While not all was strange to Pocahontas, it was vastly different than the Powhatan world.

During her religious instruction, Pocahontas met widower John Rolfe, who would become famous for introducing the cash crop tobacco to the settlers in Virginia. By all English accounts, the two fell in love and wanted to marry. (Perhaps, once Pocahontas was kidnapped, Kocoum, her first husband, realized divorce was inevitable (there was a form of divorce in Powhatan society). Once Powhatan was sent word that Pocahontas and Rolfe wanted to marry, his people would have considered Pocahontas and Kocoum divorced.) Powhatan consented to the proposed marriage and sent an uncle of Pocahontas' to represent him and her people at the wedding.

In 1614, Pocahontas converted to Christianity and was baptized "Rebecca." In April 1614, she and John Rolfe married. The marriage led to the "Peace of Pocahontas;" a lull in the inevitable conflicts between the English and Powhatan Indians. The Rolfs soon had a son named Thomas. The Virginia Company of London, who had funded the settling of Jamestown, decided to make use of the favorite daughter of the great Powhatan to their advantage. They thought, as a Christian convert married to an Englishman, Pocahontas could encourage interest in Virginia and the company.



The Rolfe family traveled to England in 1616, their expenses paid by the Virginia Company of London. Pocahontas, known as "Lady Rebecca Rolfe," was also accompanied by about a dozen Powhatan men and women. Once in England, the party toured the country. Pocahontas attended a masque where she sat near King James I and Queen Anne. Eventually, the Rolfe family moved to rural Brentford, where Pocahontas would again encounter Captain John Smith...

In March 1617, the Rolfe family was ready to return to Virginia. After traveling down the Thames River, Pocahontas, seriously ill, had to be taken ashore. In the town of Gravesend, Pocahontas died of an unspecified illness. Many historians believe she suffered from an upper respiratory ailment, such as pneumonia, while others think she could have died from some form of dysentery. Pocahontas, about twenty-one, was buried at St. George's Church on March 21, 1617.

Simon van de Passe engraving of Pocahontas while she was in England.
Only image of Pocahontas done from life.
Unknown British Museum

The True Story Behind Disney's Pocahontas

Written By [Meera Baswan](#)

Contrary to Disney's portrayal of this well-known 'family film,' the true story of Pocahontas is not one of a romance, but a tragedy. Pocahontas was one of the first real-life Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW).

Historical Inaccuracies and Whitewashing:

While many may know this historical figure as Pocahontas, to family and those around her, she was known by different names. Her primary name at birth was Amonute, and her secondary name was Matoaka, meaning "flower between two streams." The heartbreaking life of Pocahontas was one of tragedy and violence - the story of a young girl who was brutally raped, kidnapped, and allegedly murdered by those who were meant to keep her safe.

Disney's version of Pocahontas centers John Smith, the man Pocahontas supposedly fell in love with. In reality, John Smith came to her town when she was only 9 or 10 years old, while he was 27 years old. Despite Disney's narrative, the two were never romantically involved. In fact, John Smith was feared by many Indigenous children in the area he was in, and was known to enter villages and hold various chiefs of tribes at gunpoint, demanding food and supplies.

Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls

The early 1600's were an incredibly dangerous time period for tribes near Werowocomoco, including Pocahontas' tribe. When English colonizers arrived in Werowocomoco, they began targeting women and young children, and began sexually assaulting Indigenous girls. Many planned to kidnap Pocahontas, as she was the chief's daughter. When she was only 15 or 16, the threat of possible kidnapping increased. Sadly, Matoaka ended up being kidnapped and was forced to give up her first child. Her husband, Kocoum, whom she had only been married to recently before, was killed by those who kidnapped her. An English colonist, Captain Samuel Argall sought to find her, thinking that a captured daughter of the chief would prevent attacks from certain Indigenous tribes. Argall threatened the chief that if he didn't relent, he would attack the village. He also told the chief that Pocahontas would only be gone temporarily. This was a promise he quickly broke.

The disregard white colonists had for Indigenous peoples was shown when Argall, (prior to leaving), gave the chief a pot made of copper, and claimed he traded it for Pocahontas. This essentially meant he equated the value of her life and freedom to that of a copper pot. Prior to leaving her village, Pocahontas had to give her baby (known as little Kocoum) to the women of the village. "Trapped onboard an English ship, she was not aware that when her husband returned to their village, he was killed by the colonists" (Indian Country Today).

Upon being kidnapped, Pocahontas was brought to England. During this time, she was allegedly raped and abused by her English captors. Later on, she gave birth to another son, Thomas. She was eventually converted to Christianity, and her name was changed to Rebecca.

Due to the atrocities committed by white settlers against Indigenous peoples, there were many English individuals who disapproved and were against the injustices that Indigenous groups endured at the hands of colonization. As a result, Pocahontas was brought to England as a political symbol, a show of peace between English settlers and Indigenous groups. "According to the accounts of Mattachanna, she realized that she was being used and desperately desired to return home to her father and little Kocoum. During her travels in England, Pocahontas did meet John Smith and expressed outrage due to the mistreatment of his position as leader of the colonists and the betrayal to the Powhatan people" (Indian Country Today). Some time after the journey was made, Pocahontas was set to return to her home in the Spring of 1617. At the time, Pocahontas was perfectly healthy and in good condition to return, according to accounts by Mattachanna. However, shortly after having dinner along with John Rolfe and her Argall, she vomited and died. She had not even turned 21 at the time of her death, and despite her family requesting that her body be laid to rest in her tribe, Rolfe and Argall brought her to Gravesend in England where she was buried at a church. Her father was heartbroken at the news after having learned from Mattachanna that his daughter had died. He ended up dying from grief less than a year after Pocahontas.

Disney's Romanticization of Pocahontas

When comparing the portrayal of Pocahontas through Disney's lens as opposed to the accurate historical accounts, there is a stark difference. Not only has Disney inaccurately portrayed the life of Pocahontas - they have also romanticized her life, and in extension, sugarcoated the trauma Indigenous peoples faced through colonization. The life of Pocahontas was filled with sorrow and is not one that should be seen as a love story. The romanization of Pocahontas' life is extremely problematic, as it veils many of the harsh realities Indigenous peoples faced at the time. The true story of Pocahontas strays far from her seemingly perfect life.

Works cited:

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Pocahontas was a MMIW.

Artwork by Meera Baswan