



Young Pocahontas

Pocahontas was the daughter of the powerful Virginia Indian leader, Chief Powhatan. Born about 1596, she was named Amonute. She was also given a personal secret name, Matoaka, which she never told anyone until years later when she went to live with the English. Pocahontas, a nickname meaning “playful one,” was given to her by her father.

Pocahontas enjoyed playing and turning cartwheels. Chief Powhatan had numerous wives from different villages, and Pocahontas had a large number of half-brothers and half-sisters.

As a young child, Pocahontas lived in her mother’s village. She wore deerskin clothing and slept in a yehakin, a Powhatan house made of bent saplings and covered with reeds or bark. The house was high with a rounded ceiling. There was a central fire, which was kept burning all the time. It was bad luck to let the fire go out. On each side of the one-room dwelling were built in platforms that served as seats or beds. Covered with deerskin or furs they were comfortable. In the morning she bathed at the river’s edge and then spent her days playing and helping the women of the village with their daily work.

There were no schools, and the Powhatan people had no written language. Pocahontas learned by watching her mother and the other adults. Pocahontas gathered firewood and helped prepare meals at the cook circle. She helped roast meat and prepare stews made from meat and vegetables. She learned to plant corn, beans and squash in the early summer and to gather roots, nuts and berries in the fall. Pocahontas learned to make clay pots for cooking and to make twine from the hemp plant. She also helped make clothing from animal skins. Even the daughter of a chief was required to work when she grew up.

When Pocahontas was about eight or ten years old, she moved back to her father’s household, in the village of Werowocomoco on the York River, where she worked with her half-sisters and step-mothers. As she grew older, she could help with heavier work such as scraping and tanning deer hide and canoeing into the marsh to collect reeds. Using the reeds, she made mats that could be used on houses, beds, or on the ground to sit upon. At Werowocomoco, she first met Captain John Smith in December 1607. Smith was one of the English colonists who had come to Virginia. Smith had been captured by several Powhatan warriors and brought before her father. Chief Powhatan dressed in many deerskins and wore jewelry made from shells, copper and freshwater pearls. Smith was in his mid twenties and looked very different from the Powhatan Indians. After the men in her village gave him a feast, they laid his head on two stones as if to beat out his brains. Smith later wrote that Pocahontas took his head in her arms and laid her head upon his to save him from death. Today we think that this was probably a ritual where Chief Powhatan was showing his power over the English colonists.

After this Pocahontas and John Smith became friends. In early 1608 Pocahontas accompanied other Indians who took food to the settlers at Jamestown. In return, she

persuaded John Smith to release some Indian prisoners. The following year she warned him of an Indian plot to take his life.

Smith left Virginia in 1609, and Pocahontas was told he was dead. After this, she did not visit Jamestown. Three and a half years later, the colonists found her in a village on the Potomac River. They kidnapped her for ransom. After learning of his daughter's capture, Chief Powhatan sent seven English prisoners home, along with some tools, broken guns and a canoe filled with corn. He refused other demands. Chief Powhatan decided to leave her with the English, and agreed to peace with the colonists.

From this time onward, Pocahontas lived among the English where she learned about their customs, religion and way of life. She started to dress like the English and lived in an English house. During this time, she was baptized and given the Christian name Rebecca. She also met and fell in love with John Rolfe and married him in April 1614. Chief Powhatan sent one of her uncles and two of her brothers to the wedding. The next year Pocahontas gave birth to a son, Thomas.

In 1616 Pocahontas and her new family traveled by ship to England to raise money for the Virginia colony. They were joined by 10 or 12 Powhatan Indians, including a priest named Tomocomo, who Chief Powhatan sent to count all the people in England. They landed at Plymouth in June and were carried to London by carriage. Over 200,000 people lived in London. Pocahontas was taken to plays, balls and other public entertainments. One such occasion was a party at Whitehall Palace on January 6, 1617, which she attended with Tomocomo. At the party she met King James. Pocahontas liked England, but John Rolfe wanted to return to Virginia. While in the city, Pocahontas became ill and John took her to the country. Here her old friend, John Smith, came to see her. In the spring, the Rolfes set sail for Virginia, but shortly after leaving London, Pocahontas died. She was buried at St. George's Church in Gravesend, England.

Historical background materials made possible by Archibald Andrews Marks.