

Pocahontas

c. 1595–1617



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Pocahontas played an important role in the early days of the English colonies. Through her compassion for the colonists and her willingness to help those in need, Pocahontas helped to ensure the survival of Jamestown.



As you read the biography below, think about how Pocahontas's courage helped bring peace between the Powhatan and the colonists.



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Pocahontas was the daughter of Chief Wahunsonacock (wah-hoohn-suh-nuh-kahk), the leader of the powerful Powhatan **Confederacy** in Virginia. She was one of more than 100 children in her family. Pocahontas was also known as Matoaka, her Powhatan name. Only her people used this name, though. They believed harm would come to a person if outsiders knew his or her true name.

Outsiders nearby included the English settlers at Jamestown. Pocahontas and the Powhatan observed the colonists as they struggled to establish a permanent settlement. In 1608, the Powhatan captured John Smith, the leader of Jamestown. They brought Smith to Wahunsonacock. According to legend, just as John Smith was to be killed, Pocahontas threw herself over him. She begged her father to spare Smith's life. Only twelve-years-old at the time, Pocahontas's bravery protected a stranger whose language she did not even speak. The legend states that her plea for mercy saved Smith's life.

For a while, colonists and the Powhatan got along peacefully. Pocahontas visited Jamestown often. When famine and disease struck the colony, she brought food and supplies to the settlers. In time,

VOCABULARY

confederacy a league for common action

relations slowly worsened between the colonists and the Powhatan. The Powhatan captured some of the colonists. A colonist then kidnapped Pocahontas in hopes of exchanging her for the English prisoners. During her captivity, Pocahontas was treated well and allowed a great deal of freedom. As time passed, she converted to Christianity. She even fell in love and married John Rolfe, a successful tobacco farmer. This marriage received the blessing of both the colonists and her father, Wahunsonacock. The union also eventually led to the release of the English prisoners.

In 1616 Pocahontas and John Rolfe traveled to England with their son, Thomas. Pocahontas was introduced to English society, where she received a royal welcome. She even had her portrait painted by famous artists. In March of 1617, as Pocahontas and her family prepared to return to Virginia, she became ill and died. She is buried in Gravesend, England.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

- 1. Finding the Main Idea** How did Pocahontas help make peace between the Jamestown colonists and the Powhatan?

- 2.** Would you have helped the colonists if you had been a member of the Powhatan Confederacy? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY

- 3.** Make a list of questions that Pocahontas and John Smith might have tried to ask each other to learn more about each other's culture.