

American History Play

# Did Pocahontas Save Jamestown?





Many people believe that she did. But much about her remains a mystery.

Captain John Smith (kneeling) is brought before Chief Powhatan. According to Smith, the Indian girl Pocahontas saved his life.



**GOLD, SILVER, ADVENTURE!** Would these lure you to embark on a journey to a New World?

That is what the Virginia Company of London, England, promised people. The company was starting an English colony in Virginia. For those who joined, it was a risky venture, sailing on three small ships across the Atlantic Ocean.

The ships left England in December 1606 with 105 passengers, reaching Virginia in late April 1607. Upriver from Chesapeake Bay, they built a fort, which they named Jamestown, after King James I.

The colony almost did not last. Jamestown had few skilled farmers. Many colonists starved to death, died from diseases, or were killed fighting Indians.

More might have died if a Native American girl named Pocahontas had not saved the settlement and one of its leaders, Captain John Smith, from death.

Or did she? As the 400th anniversary of Jamestown approaches, there is still a lot we don't know about this Indian girl.

## SCENE ONE

**Narrator A:** From the moment the English arrive, they are watched by the native people. Powhatan, the most powerful chief in the area, is told of their arrival. He meets with his chiefs.

**Powhatan:** Coat-wearers [Europeans] have come here before. Why worry about this bunch?

**Tatacoope:** There are more of them now.

## Words to Know

- **consumption:** tuberculosis, a disease of the lungs.
- **heathen:** what Christians called someone who didn't believe in their God.
- **ritual:** a ceremony with special religious or social significance.
- **symbolically:** used as something that represents an idea or quality.

## Cast of Characters

**Powhatan (POW-uh-tahn),** chief of the area's Native American tribes

**Tatacoope,** a son of Powhatan

**Opechancanough (oh-puh-KAHN-kuh-noo),** Powhatan's war chief

**Captain John Smith,** a leader of Jamestown

**Pocahontas (POH-kuh-HAHN-tus),** a daughter of Powhatan

**Captain Matthew Scrivener,** a Jamestown settler

**Captain John Ratcliffe,** a leader of Jamestown

**Reverend Alexander Whittaker,** a minister and Jamestown settler

**Uttamatomakin (OO-tah-mah-toh-MAHK-un),** a kinsman to Powhatan

**Royal official**

**King James I of England**

**Narrators A-E**

They have even built a settlement with wooden walls.

**Opechancanough:** They can't grow food themselves, so they try to trade for corn with our people. Or they shoot their weapons and take the corn. We should get rid of them!

**Powhatan:** Have patience. Let's see what they want, and what we can get from them. Then we'll make sure they move on.

**Narrator A:** Jamestown almost does not survive through its first summer. More than half of the original 105 colonists die of disease and starvation.

## SCENE TWO

**Narrator B:** To get food, Captain John Smith goes on trading expeditions. When he gets close to Powhatan's village, he is captured and taken to the chief. Smith witnesses many rituals with strange dancing and much feasting, which he does not understand.

**Powhatan:** What brings you to our



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land? How long do you plan to stay?

**John Smith** (*hiding the truth*): We were fighting our enemy, the Spanish. Our ships were leaking, so we took refuge here.

**Narrator B:** Smith doesn't want Powhatan to know that the English plan to stay. But Powhatan is not fooled. Suddenly, the rituals take an alarming turn. Years later, Smith will write this account:

**Smith:** *Two great stones were brought before Powhatan. They laid hands on me and dragged me to the stones. They were ready to beat my brains out with their clubs.*

**Pocahontas:** Stop! Father, spare his life.

**Narrator B:** Pocahontas, the chief's dearest daughter, throws her body over Smith's to save him. Smith is astounded when Powhatan grants her wish. Two days later . . .

**Powhatan:** I can see that you are a leader. I invite you to bring your people here to live. In exchange for your tools of metal, I will give you corn. Forever, I will esteem you as my son.

**Smith:** I am honored by your offer and will call you Father.

**Narrator B:** Smith returns to Jamestown, having forged a special relationship with Powhatan. But did Pocahontas really save Smith's life? Some historians believe that it was all part of a ritual by which Powhatan **symbolically** adopted Smith. Others think that he made the incident up. We will never know for sure.

## SCENE THREE

**Narrator C:** Powhatan sends regular shipments of corn to the fort. Each time, the shipments are accompanied by a welcome visitor—Pocahontas. The girl and Smith teach each other words from their languages.

**Smith:** "I am very hungry." Say that.

**Pocahontas:** I am very hungry. (*in her language*) "What shall I eat?" Say that.

**Narrator C:** Smith repeats the words in the Algonquian [*al-GAHN-kwee-un*] language. Then Pocahontas has a new question for him.

**Pocahontas:** In how many days will more English ships come?

**Smith:** Did your father have you ask that? Don't lie.

**Pocahontas:** I do not lie.

**Narrator C:** Quickly, Pocahontas becomes a part of life of the fort.

**Captain Matthew Scrivener:** Look at her, Smith. Out there doing cartwheels with

hatan, there is terrible tension in the air.

**Powhatan:** You come to our villages and demand food. You set them on fire, kill our people, and take hostages. Why?

**Smith:** Your people steal tools and guns from us. You pick us off with arrows when we go outside the fort.

**Powhatan:** We act only in self-defense. It is clear that you do not intend to live here in peace with us. But let me warn you. If you continue to demand food from us, we will desert our villages and flee into the woods. Without our corn, you will starve.

**Narrator C:** According to Smith's



the boys. They are amazed by her.

**Smith:** She puts them to shame, she is so strong and athletic.

**Captain John Ratcliffe:** I am worried about her influence on our children. She is a **heathen**, after all.

**Smith:** The **Naturals** [Indians] are as advanced in their way as we are. Besides, without her, we could not have survived.

**Narrator C:** But relations between Jamestown and Powhatan get worse. The English have no intention of living under Powhatan's rule. By December 1608, when Smith again visits Pow-

hatan, Pocahontas appears at his camp that night in tears.

**Pocahontas:** You must leave immediately. My father plans to kill you all.

**Smith:** You have risked much to come here. I will not forget you.

## SCENE FOUR

**Narrator D:** For more than four years, Pocahontas disappears from our story. Despite the arrival of new colonists, Jamestown almost disappears as well. Two eyewitnesses tell different stories about how it survived.

**Reverend Alexander Whittaker:** John



Smith returned to England in September 1609. That winter, hundreds of us died in what we called the Starving Time. Fortunately, a new Governor, Lord De La Warr, and additional colonists arrived the following summer [1610] with food. Then, in April 1613, we found Pocahontas again. **Uttamatomakin:** Actually, the English discovered Pocahontas visiting kinfolk in Patowomeck country—and kidnapped her.

**Whittaker:** Though unhappy at first, Pocahontas grew accustomed to life with us. We thought it best to tell her that John Smith had died. In time, I converted her to Christianity, and we renamed her Rebecca. In 1614, Rebecca married John Rolfe, one of our new colonists, which made us all happy. Powhatan even gave his blessing!

**Uttamatomakin:** Pocahontas wished to keep the peace in her father's land. Often, a princess of our people will marry a foreign prince to do this. In any case, we saw that the English simply took what they wanted.

## SCENE FIVE

**Narrator E:** Pocahontas becomes famous in England, and is invited to visit London, where she meets the King.



Pocahontas often brought food to the fort.

**Royal official:** Your Majesty, may I present Lady Rebecca of Virginia.

**King James I:** Oh, the famous savage maiden. You must be pleased to be among civilized people.

**Narrator E:** What did Pocahontas really think of the English? Some of her feelings came out when she had an unexpected visitor.

**Smith:** Forgive me for taking so long to call on you.

**Pocahontas (upset):** They told me that you were dead. Your people think nothing of lying!

**Smith:** I thought you would be glad to see me.

**Pocahontas (angrily):** Glad? Look what

you English have done to my father's land! You were a stranger in our midst, and we helped you. But you caused fear in all my father's people.

**Narrator E:** There is too much emotion in the room for Smith. He leaves. Pocahontas and Smith never see each other again.

## AFTERWORD

Pocahontas was already very ill, probably from **consumption**. Native Americans had no immunity to illnesses common among Europeans. She died in 1617 and was buried in England.

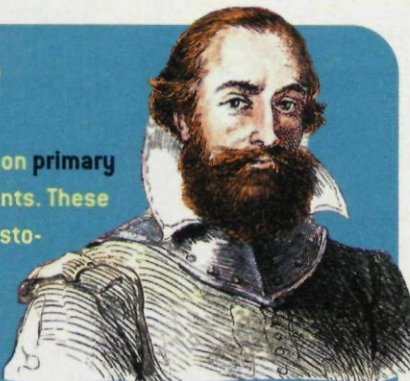
Jamestown thrived, mainly from tobacco crops. Powhatan's kingdom passed into history. One by one, the other native tribes of the Americas would also be pushed aside by the unstoppable tide of Europeans. **JS**

—Bryan Brown

## Reliable Source?

**T**o learn more about the past, historians rely on **primary sources**—firsthand evidence of historic events. These may include diaries, maps, documents, oral histories, and other eyewitness accounts. While extremely valuable, primary sources may not always be reliable. John Smith (right) wrote about Pocahontas and events at Jamestown.

Historians disagree on how accurate Smith's writings are. We have no accounts at all from Pocahontas or the Powhatan Indians, since they did not have a written language. Only gradually have we gained some understanding of their point of view.



## Think About It

1. What offer does Powhatan make to John Smith at their first meeting? Does he accept it in the end?
2. How did Pocahontas view the English at first? Why do you think she changed her mind?