

Pocahontas

Born about 1595, the daughter of Indian Chief Powhatan, was affectionately called Pocahontas, which means “playful one.” Pocahontas’ relationship with the Jamestown colonists proved invaluable to the struggling community.

Over winter, reports came that white men were building a fort near the James River. Months later, news of a fierce battle came from Powhatan’s brother, Opechancanough: some Indians had been taken prisoner. Captain John Smith proposed to set the Indians free only if some were brought to Jamestown. Powhatan agreed to the demands.

Months later, Opechancanough’s men captured Captain Smith himself during another skirmish and took him to Powhatan in the village of Myanowococo.

When Captain Smith was delivered by his captives, however, he was honored by the villagers. Opechancanough was furious! Two of his brothers had been killed; the young chief demanded Smith’s life in exchange. Yielding to his younger brother’s demands, Chief Powhatan ordered Smith’s men to death. As the popular—and much-debated—story goes, girls called their war clubs, but Pocahontas dashed forward and held herself upon Smith to save him. A displeased Chief Powhatan gave in to his daughter’s wishes and ordered the guards to drop their weapons.

Two days later, Smith was told that they were now friends. Indeed, Pocahontas brought food to the settlers when they were starving. In 1609, she married Smith of an impending embark. In return, Smith taught the Indian princess English words.

When Smith was seriously injured in a gunpowder explosion in 1609, he returned to England before the severe winter and “the starving time” set in. Hoping to improve relations with the Powhatan, Captain Samuel Argall kidnapped Pocahontas and took her to Jamestown. There she was made to live at Reverend Alexander Whitaker’s residence in Henric, a town sprung from Jamestown. Pocahontas was taught how to read and given instruction in the English ways. When she was baptized into Christianity, she was given the name Rebecca.

In 1614, she married John Rolfe, a plantation owner. This marriage brought peace among the settlers and the Native Americans. One year after the birth of Thomas, the Rolfs’ only child, the family traveled to England to promote the Jamestown colony.

Known to the English as Lady Rolfe, Pocahontas was presented at the court of King James I. Unfortunately, Pocahontas’s health began to fail, mostly likely because Native Americans had little resistance to European diseases. After regaining some strength, Pocahontas and her family boarded a ship bound for America in 1617. As the ship was anchored in the Thames River, Pocahontas became weak and died at the age of 21. She was buried at Gravesend on March 21, 1617.

