

## Pocahontas

An Exploration of Facts from Scrutiny of the Fictions

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Illustration of “Princess Pocahontas” by Author Paul Nicholas Matczuk 2022.

### The Original American Hero – The Legend of Pocahontas

America has a great love for its folklore, ordinary people making for extraordinary history.

Pocahontas, President John F. Kennedy, the Winchester legacy, Betsy Ross and Christopher Columbus (just to name a few). Unfortunately, much of what is celebrated of American folk heroes is based on modified narratives, reintegrated into popular culture as different stories, divergent from history. Stories take on a life of their own, permutations with every retelling.

Such is the case the subject of my research paper: Pocahontas, daughter of Chief Powhatan of the Powhatan Confederacy, circa 1600. In order to de-colonize the story of Pocahontas I must peel back the layers of narrative and try to understand why her story was told the way it is today.

Elements of this legend make for fertile embellishment from a pro-European perspective, which has changed at key points over the four hundred years since her untimely death in the early seventeenth century in England. A country so remote from that of her birth and people. This is an exploration of the recognized historical ‘facts’ from the real life of Pocahontas and a scrutiny of the many ‘fictions’ surrounding her amazing story. As her ‘fictions’ are exposed, the incredible story of Pocahontas is revealed.

This study is an exploration of the many historical ‘fictions’, combining a synthesis of past and present scholarship and folklore to uncover her amazing story. “It used to be said the facts speak for themselves, this of course, is untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them<sup>1</sup>[...] and must be reconstructed out of evidence that is never self-explanatory.”<sup>2</sup> The life of Pocahontas must be reconstructed through sources close to her, but never directly from her, leaving her narrative vulnerable to exploitation.

This study deconstructs the popular narrative of Pocahontas, to whom I would credit as one of the Original American Legends. As a human being and a young woman, she seemed to have deftly adapted to her life circumstances. When considering the popular story of Pocahontas, “there is no painless integral satisfaction, she has become [thankfully] complicated beyond the service of the colonial narrative.”<sup>3</sup> She is incorruptible. The story of Pocahontas, in all of its variations touches the heart in a special and inexplicable way. There are no surviving records of her own voice, we therefore tend to ‘insert’ our own selves into the story. As such, she offers us all a strange and comforting love, unique to each of us, despite ethnicity and her role as a woman surviving in a patriarchal world.

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<sup>1</sup> E.H. Carr. *What is History* (St. Martin’s Press New York NY 1961) :11

<sup>2</sup> E.H. Carr. *What is History?* :6

<sup>3</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas:’ The Pocahontas Story as a Myth of American Heterogeneity in the Liberal West” *Papers on Language & Literature*. 54 Issue 1 (2018) :95

## Two [many] Stories and One Legend

There is a curious fact that we are familiar with two main narratives. The first narrative (furthest from the facts as they are known) is that Pocahontas was a Princess, converted to Christianity and married John Rolfe and bore a son [Thomas]. This narrative runs a slow second to the almost entirely fictional story of the romance between Pocahontas and Captain John Smith at the birth of the Jamestown colony.<sup>4</sup> “Obviously, human emotions aside, the story is much more complex as cultures come into contact.”<sup>5</sup> There are much darker dimensions to the latter tale than what is commonly known. There is a legacy of violence and captivity, from both parties. Enmity was temporarily suspended during the brief time when Pocahontas was married and lived in Jamestown, there was peace. This drives a narrative in the form of a children’s book called *Pocahontas – Young Peacemaker*. It seemed sensible to me to start by reading the story commonly told to children, complete with illustrations telling a very light, distorted and colonized; “here was an Indian Princess who wanted to be a part of the English colony.”<sup>6</sup> This story was published in the US in a series called the *Childhood of Famous Americans*, along with *Crazy Horse: Young War Chief* and *Sacagawea: American Pathfinder*, published as historical propaganda for American children in the nineties.

Pocahontas was not American; she was Powhattan, and Algonquin, and a high-ranking member of her tribe. We cannot know “to what extent she made that conversion [to Christianity] and that marriage [to Rolfe] of her own will.”<sup>7</sup> More cynically, “[Rolfe] marries and takes Pocahontas to London, where [...] in a poignant climax to the tale: she feels sad, dies and

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<sup>4</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell. “What Would Pocahontas think Now? Women and Cultural Persistence” *Callaloo Magazine* 17 Issue 1(1994):152

<sup>5</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell. “What Would Pocahontas think Now?” :152

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Gourse. *Pocahontas, Young Peacemaker: Childhood of Famous Americans* Aladdin Paperbacks USA (1996):126

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas”:71

Rolfe inherits tracts of land.”<sup>8</sup> The tragic end of Pocahontas justifies the first legal transfer of Indian lands into British custody. This is of course not mentioned in the children’s book which concludes with a glimmer of truth: “Indians would come to regret that Pocahontas had helped the English survive, because their endurance spelled the end of Indian rule in North America.”<sup>9</sup> This is a delicate way to describe ethnic cleansing to children, a ‘clean’ way to teach attempted genocide.

The “known” facts are that Captain John Smith “was taken captive after killing two members of Powhatan’s confederacy,”<sup>10</sup> where his life thrice threatened ritually, and tale begins during the final ritual when Pocahontas ‘rescued’ Smith from ‘execution’. The narrative begins its major permutations here. He was about to have his head bashed with a war club when Pocahontas dramatically intervened, saving his life.

The facts concerning the English side are as such during the reign of King James of England, three ships sailed up to what would become the James river in Virginia. Landing on a small peninsula, over one hundred passengers disembarked and established the first permanent settlement in the New World. The site was uninhabited but in the territory of the Paspahugh people. One of thirty Algonquin speaking tribes “that owed allegiance to a paramount chief best known as Powhatan.”<sup>11</sup> The English were interlopers, an unauthorized intrusion into occupied territory. Their incursion incurred violence from the indigenous which would last through the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> There would be a brief peace, during the brief and challenging life of Pocahontas.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Tratner. “Translating Values: Mercantilism and the many “Biographies” of Pocahontas” *Biography*, Biographical Research Centre 32 Issue 1 (2009):133

<sup>9</sup> Leslie Gourse. “Pocahontas, Young Peacemaker” :176

<sup>10</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell. “What Would Pocahontas think Now?” :150

<sup>11</sup> Frederick W. Gleach. “Pocahontas at the Fair: Crafting Identities at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition” *Ethnohistory* 50 Vol.3 NY USA (2003):430

<sup>12</sup> Frederick W. Gleach. “Pocahontas at the Fair” :424

The fiction about Pocahontas begins in the midst of this struggle circa December 1607, Pocahontas makes her dramatic rescue of military Captain John Smith, “the kings dearest daughter, when no in treaty could prevaile [*sic*], got his head in her arms and laid her owne [*sic*] upon his to save him from death [...] the Emperour [*sic*] was contented he should live”<sup>13</sup>, this is Smith speaking of himself in the third person, in a captivity narrative published seventeen years after the event.

The incorruptible narrative of Pocahontas is based on hard truths, “The reality of her story is much less romantic than the myth.”<sup>14</sup> There are no surviving primary documents to tell Pocahontas’ side of the story. The rescue was (probably) a ritual of adoption, this was common practice to replace tribe members killed. How could Smith possibly know this, or understand that his life was now Pocahontas’ tribal responsibility and duty?<sup>15</sup> The narrative is manipulated here, the relationship between Pocahontas and Smith is uncertain, thus exploited to the American narrative. Two cultures engaged; she is the central character. Now as diplomat, provider, and savior of the colony.

#### Multiple Identities of Pocahontas: Captive, Diplomat, Convert, Cargo

Pocahontas acts and is heralded a champion. But from now, and for the rest of her life, history tells us that Pocahontas’ choices do not seem voluntary. The cost of action was personal control. She was taken and held hostage in the Virginia colony for two years, held in the home of a devout priest. Kidnapped by Captain Christopher Newport, held captive as human cargo.<sup>16</sup> There is an ancillary narrative involving the Newport, the kidnapper from the Virginia Colony

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<sup>13</sup> Frederick W. Gleach. “Pocahontas at the Fair” :431

<sup>14</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell. “What Would Pocahontas think Now?” :152

<sup>15</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell. “What Would Pocahontas think Now?” :155

<sup>16</sup> Andrea Severson. “Taming Pocahontas: How a Story of Captivity and Conversion Became a Tool to Justify Britain’s Conquest of the New World” *History Today*, 68 Issue 7 (2018):11

incident. He was mistakenly observed by the Powhatan as the colony's "War Chief" then drops from the narrative, Smith was "Peace Chief", to the English "Governor", Chief Powhatan "Peace Chief", to the English "Emperor", Uncle Openanchecanough, "War Chief", to the English he was a "Prince."<sup>17</sup> This is an abbreviated layout of the (mutually misunderstood) male power structure surrounding Pocahontas, a layout of two cultures politically and culturally incompatible. One cannot understand the other, only give them titles nearest their translations of the other, and there is always much lost in translation. Ergo, these misunderstandings lead to conflict, and taking prisoners is a tactic common in the conflicts of this era. For a captive there is no speculation only adaptation, witnessing and experiencing 'alien' cultural circumstances; contact. Author John Demos elegantly states, "Captivity, after all, meant "contact" of a particularly vivid sort."<sup>18</sup>

Captivity was a tactic used by the English and inflicted on the English, "Captivity for ransom was a common fear among Europeans [...] all over the world,"<sup>19</sup> captivity for the Algonquin was typically ceremonial, "In the case of adoption and incorporation of...single individuals into pre-established households...complete cultural assimilation is understandable:...every new person becomes totally immersed in a [culturally specified] pattern of relationships and expectations."<sup>20</sup> Hostages became privileged members of the tribe. Ritually used to replace tribal members fallen to violence, even given the names and ranks of the dead.

To learn about life in the colonies, the captivity narratives were published by English explorers and "had a major influence on European ethnographic knowledge, captivity came to be

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<sup>17</sup> Andrea Severson. "Taming Pocahontas":25

<sup>18</sup> John Demos. "*The Unredeemed Captive; A Family Story from Early America*", Vintage Books USA (1994):xii

<sup>19</sup> Jordan Savage, "There was a Veil upon you Pocahontus": The Pocahontus story as a Myth of American Heterogeneity in the Liberal West" *Papers on Language & Literature*. 54 Issue 1 (2018):151

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey P. Blick "The Iroquois practice of genocidal warfare (1534-1787)" *Journal of Genocide Research* 3(3)(2001):426

seen as a legitimate way of examining other cultures in an intellectual way.”<sup>21</sup> Englishmen in a savage world, explorers and pioneers, narratives to delight and edify the English, stories being told and stories being sold.

The story that gets sold tends not to acknowledge the fact that she was taken prisoner. Whatever the motives are for the kidnapping of Pocahontas, evidence implies domination, possession, violence and rape. Imagine a young Pocahontas, barely fifteen betrayed by her own, taken by steamship to the priest, leaving “[the image of Pocahontas] furnishing us with a composite that is deeply conflicted and contradictory.”<sup>22</sup> There is no way to know what Pocahontas is feeling or believing.



*The Baptism of Pocahontas* by John Gadsby Chapman  
Oil on canvas, 12' x 18' Commissioned 1837; placed 1840  
Rotunda of the United States Capitol

Figure 1 - "Baptism of Pocahontas, United States Capitol Rotunda, Washington, D.C." by Ken Lund is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse&atype=rich>

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21 Andrea Severson. "Taming Pocahontas":584

22 Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. "Redesigning Pocahontus" *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 24 Issue 6, (1996):91

The painting of the baptism of Pocahontas (*fig. 1*) “[circa] 1613/14, it is believed that Pocahontas was the first native to convert to Christianity after the arrival of the English, christened Rebecca. She then revealed her [secret native] name Matoaka,”<sup>23</sup> the beautifully rendered fresco of the event (*fig. 1*), painted by John Chapman in 1837. As the first recognized conversion, be it tactical, diplomatic or spiritual, her synergistic motives remain elusive. The painting features Pocahontas looking as the Virgin Mary basking in ‘white’ light, in close proximity to both of the Englishmen in her life; Military Captain Smith and Governor John Rolfe, present is her uncle Opechancanough looking at Chief Powhatan (they seem to be disagreeing), and two cousins wearing hide. These are the “noble savages” that would attend her wedding to John Rolfe (except for her father), not her christening, which was attended exclusively by the English, making the story told by the painting (*fig 1*) a fiction.<sup>24</sup>

#### Rebecca Pocahontas Matoaka Anumonte Rolfe

The painting by John Gadsby Chapman (*fig 1*) represents “the dominant view of Native Americans that has always originated with Euro-American culture, reflecting Anglicized attitudes and preferences and ultimately pushing native perspectives to the margins of society.”<sup>25</sup> The ‘becoming’ of Pocahontas to ‘Rebecca’ looked at closely, and through an enlightened lens, “it is a process of “untranslating”, of stripping off the strange artificial exterior provided by another culture.”<sup>26</sup> The baptism scene above “underplays or ignores peripheral outlooks [of] the

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<sup>23</sup> *Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia & Humanities Online*, “Baptism of Pocahontas” accessed Jan. 11, 2022, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/162hpr-0b40f70e50f6b83/>

<sup>24</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. “Redesigning Pocahontas”:94

<sup>25</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. “Redesigning Pocahontas”:94

<sup>26</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. “Redesigning Pocahontas”:94

historical reality underlying the legend.”<sup>27</sup> The complex composite of a young native woman, crossing cultural and now religious boundaries. She is the First recognized native baptism, she is remarkable, courageous. Not only an American legend; she transcends her own mythology.

This is “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”<sup>28</sup> According to the propaganda in *Young Peacemaker*, “The English have treated me very well. [...]. I was kept prisoner for a while. Then I felt at home in the colony and accepted by Christian religion.”<sup>29</sup> Her story is part of a bigger picture, the role of Indian women of the time, “they were the major mediators of cultural meaning between two worlds [...] a mythology has grown up around Indian women that obscure their values, women’s actions are seen through the veil of European assumptions about [Pocahontas’] roles and motivations.”<sup>30</sup> The painting imposes a narrative on Pocahontas, a young native woman being christened Rebecca, secretly Matoaka. The European culture of patriarchy could never comprehend that women were not ‘others’ they were ‘equals’. Often, women were more than ‘equals’, they were ‘leaders’, clan mothers, teachers, healers even warriors. European men would fail to heed to the teaching that women were not less than men, they were more. Pocahontas had the courage to show the world she lived in that she was able to bridge cultures. There is only speculation about her spiritual transformation to Christendom. The narrative evolves, “[whether] progressive or escapist, enlightened or racist, feminist or retrograde...”<sup>31</sup>

### Strange Wives – Temptations in the ‘New World’

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<sup>27</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. “Redesigning Pocahontas”:95

<sup>28</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. “Redesigning Pocahontas”:94

<sup>29</sup> Leslie Gourse. *Pocahontas, Young Peacemaker* :132

<sup>30</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell. “What Would Pocahontas think Now?”:150

<sup>31</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas”:95

Leading up to her christening Pocahontas lived for two years with the devout priest. Was she under duress, was every day of her captivity focused on her spiritual transformation? Hours spent in prayer, learning the bible in English. Was the priest able to guide her into the light and path of Jesus? Should this be true there is a synthesis of identity, religion and culture made real by our high-ranking tribal member, now the first indigenous Christian convert. The closest word to translate her tribal rank is “Princess”, although this title was not only hers alone; the Native American Princess became an object of conquest. She was advertised as the English sexual frontier. The poster-girl for the exotic possibilities in America.

The first mention of Pocahontas in print is in regard to her marriage to John Rolphe, by newsie David Stymeist in an article entitled “Strange wives; Pocahontas is Early Modern Colonial Advertisements”. A 1615 brochure by Ralph Hamour “indicates parallelism between colony and marriage ... and the success of affairs there ... in relation to ... the christening of Powhatan’s daughter”<sup>32</sup> quickly becomes a derisive promise to “have married with the Indian... and make ‘em bring forth [...] as they drop their treasure at your feet.”<sup>33</sup> These are invitations and promises made to the English to come to the New World, advertised with promise of possibility, exotic and infinite complete with ‘strange wives’. The legacy of the promises made by the New World have “made a virtue of violence against indigenous women [and by] analyzing the representation of indigenous women in the earlier texts will show their [forced] submission.”<sup>34</sup>

The submission told in Pocahontas’ story is one of passion, “the flame of love was now lighted in the bosom of the Indian maid.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the union of Pocahontas and John Rolfe

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Tratner. “Translating Values”:129

<sup>33</sup> Michael Tratner. “Translating Values”:130

<sup>34</sup> Andrea Severson. “Taming Pocahontas”:11

<sup>35</sup> Michael Tratner. “Translating Values”:131

(1585-1622) would produce an heir, Thomas Rolfe (1616-1680), he would marry Jane Poythress. “It would be through his daughter, Jane Rolfe [Oct 10, 1650], that the [genetic] legacy would continue to live.”<sup>36</sup> This is legacy, living proof in her DNA. Narrative differs from legacy, in that legacy is immutable. “In the history of our national culture there is no continuity or unity. The affirmation of continuity [narrative] and unity [legacy] is only rhetorical [and/or] amounts to mere evocative propaganda.”<sup>37</sup>

The Pocahontas Principal evolves from this legacy and narrative, “[which] allows the long literary and cinematic history of this trope to become reintegrated into the history of lived experience [allowing for the English] to define themselves as liberal by their attitude towards the “Indian problem.”<sup>38</sup> The conflicts will grow increasingly violent and dark over the next four centuries, then a ‘recoloring’ of inconvenient truths, broken treaties, systematic racism and land-grabs, into a trope from Pocahontas (the Disney production) to *The Revenant* (Academy Award winning motion picture), beginning with Buffalo Bill Wild West Shows. The optics of the violent frontier have been sanitized in accordance with the Pocahontas Principal. The result is contemporary “meta-intolerance – that is, intolerant of any view that is judged intolerant.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, “an attitude that relativizes one’s own self and country... open-minded people who respect heterogeneous people and consider everybody at home and abroad as neighbors... free from oppression and prejudice.”<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, “their union [Pocahontas and Rolphe] did have an effect on both the colony and Powhatan’s tribe, leading to better relations between the Native Americans and the British

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<sup>36</sup> *Ancestors Family Search Online*, accessed Jan. 11 2022, <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/LYLW-1K3/jane-rolfe-1650-1676>

<sup>37</sup> Antonio Gramsci. “*Selections from Cultural Writings Second Ed.*” (Lawrence & Wishart USA 2012):253

<sup>38</sup> Andrea Severson. “Taming Pocahontas”:12

<sup>39</sup> L. Philips. “Examine your own limits” *Social Research*. Brighton MA: Academic Studies Press 83 no.1 (2016) :221

<sup>40</sup> Bruce W. Davidson. “Political correctness in the land of Conformity” *Springer Science + Business Media* New York (2013) :187

and helping to facilitate peace between them for the remainder of Pocahontas' life,"<sup>41</sup> The peace would not last, persistent conflicts and broken promises and treaties by the English would push uncle Opechancanough to violence, "in March 1622 and again in April 1644 [the confederacy] led massive assaults against the colonists, killing hundreds."<sup>42</sup> Uncle Opechancanough understood as "relations gradually deteriorated as the colony expanded, violent incidents began to occur with distressing frequency."<sup>43</sup> Without his niece Pocahontas acting as diplomat, there would be blood.

The 'New World' in which Pocahontas finds herself in is one of transformation and translation, she is christened 'Rebecca'. Is there Christian mercy to be found here? Her name to now is Rebecca Matoaka Pocahontas [Amonute] [Rolphe].<sup>44</sup> Her conversion "sets new rules for interactions between indigenous people and their colonizers [...] she as a model for the conversion of more indigenous women."<sup>45</sup> Now a Christian convert, "she was finally married to John Rolfe, an English tobacco planter for reasons that can be read benignly as an encouragement of cultural meddling through intermarriage, or more cynically as a form of hostage taking to assure Powhatan's continued peaceful relationship with the English."<sup>46</sup> As for her captivity, what purpose did she serve the English? What purpose did she serve the Powhatan? Diplomatic, symbolic or symbiotic, whatever role she played and to what ends, her narrative transcends all boundaries and she is becoming more. She is becoming a legend. Pocahontas has become incorruptible from any perspective as fact and fiction become entwined.

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<sup>41</sup> Andrea Severson. "Taming Pocahontas":33

<sup>42</sup> Frederick W. Gleach. "Pocahontas at the Fair":430

<sup>43</sup> William L. Shea. "Virginia at War, 1644-1646." *Military Affairs* 41, no. 3 (1977):142

<sup>44</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. "Redesigning Pocahontas":92

<sup>45</sup> Dan Blumlo. "Pocahontas, Uleleh, and Hononegah":153

<sup>46</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell. "What Would Pocahontas think Now?":151

There is some historical irony found here for John Rolfe, requesting permission from the royal governor, petitioning for a wedding license to marry a native woman. He promised he was to wed her ‘for the glory of Britain’, insisting there was completely in control of his “carnall (*sic*) affection” for Pocahontas, and he most certainly wasn’t “going native”<sup>47</sup>!



The only surviving record of Pocahontas sitting for a portrait in England in the early 1600s is an engraving by Simon van de Passe, part of The National Portrait Gallery's collection.

Figure 2. "Pocahontas, age 21, 1616" by lisby1 is licensed under CC PDM 1.0. <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/?ref=openverse&atype=rich>

She has been traded again, an agent for a cause, Again, what about the girl herself? She was only thirteen when she met Smith, taken captive by Captain Newport at fifteen. Christened at seventeen, married to Rolphe that same year, a man well over twice her age. She gave birth to

<sup>47</sup> Michael Tratner. “Translating Values” :131

her son Thomas, where the hybrid family went to England in 1617 where she finds herself ‘the toast of London’. Her narrative becomes more complex and Pocahontas becomes an anomaly, “an elevated class system [...] what we see constructed here, then is the archetype of the “Noble Savage””: (fig.2) a racial other who proves to be honorable even if culturally illegible and alien.”<sup>48</sup> Rolphe thus presents her to the Royal Court. She is now Rebecca Matoaka Amonute Rolphe. She is the toast of London, the “strange wife” of Gentleman John Rolfe (fig.2).

In March of that year she dies tragically and is buried in Gravesend, England. She died in Europe, martyred and becoming myth. Laid to rest across the ocean, far from her people. She had achieved such fame that Captain Smith was able to publish the story of his encounter/captivity/salvation among the Powhattan seventeen years after the fact and make money telling his version of the story. The tale is “most intemperate and contagious,”<sup>49</sup> the narrative of Pocahontas is “one of the quintessential stories the US tells about itself.”<sup>50</sup>

Pocahontas folklore lies dormant for two hundred years. Her narrative is resurrected by John Davis. He writes an ‘Indian/English hybrid love story’, this is the version that remains. The narrative changes into a romance between Pocahontas and Captain Smith. This is an origin story of Jamestown, Virginia; the cradle of American civilization.

Following Two hundred years (the 1805 publication of Davis’ novel “*Captain Smith and Pocahontas: An Indian Tale*”), three hundred years (Pocahontas can be found in print on collectable postcards, a series of 19 renderings of the heroine, found on ‘The Warpath’, the 1907

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<sup>48</sup> Roland Takaki. *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb*. Little, Brown & Company NY (1<sup>st</sup> American ed. 1995):77

<sup>49</sup> Michael Tratner. “Translating Values”:133

<sup>50</sup> Michael Tratner. “Translating Values”:131

World Fair in Virginia in the ‘Indian’ culture exhibit)<sup>51</sup>, now four hundred years (Disney rewrites history in full technicolour)<sup>52</sup> her story is told and sold over and over. The retelling that made Pocahontas a household name was the Disney version. When it comes to history and Disney, “you have to approach it carefully. The Disney version becomes the definitive version.”<sup>53</sup> Ninety million dollars to tell her story, a production team that turned to the Powhatan people as production consultants for the sake of optics. Custalow McGowan, among the indigenous consultants had this to say about the production, “I wish my name wasn’t on it, I wish Pocahontas’ name wasn’t on it.”<sup>54</sup> At great expense and with little success the Disney team crossed cultural lines, to develop “an aerobicized Native American superbabe, with long muscular brown legs, regal shoulder blades and silky black hair flowing down to her waist. With her vacuous Asian doll eyes, she...”<sup>55</sup> is a composite of all things beautiful, a hybrid design of physical beauty, in an animistic world with talking trees. The narrative follows the second Popular Narrative, the romance between Pocahontas and Captain John Smith. The production of Pocahontas raised her status from American Legend to Pop Star. Everyone knows her name, but not her story. This is the narrative embedded in the American psyche. The challenge issues of “racism, colonialism, environmentalism and spiritual alienation”<sup>56</sup> are avoided in the most in the most popular version of this heroine’s story, as is “the kidnapping by the English and her isolation.”<sup>57</sup> The result is a ninety-million dollar “reshaping of Pocahontas as the finest creature the human race has to offer.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Frederick W. Gleach. “Pocahontas at the Fair”:423

<sup>52</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas” :95

<sup>53</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas” :90

<sup>54</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas” :95

<sup>55</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas” :96

<sup>56</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. “Redesigning Pocahontas”:92

<sup>57</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. “Redesigning Pocahontas”:92

<sup>58</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontas”:97

As for our protagonists, Pocahontas' father died shortly after she did, and uncle Openchancanough was taken prisoner and "killed by a soldier who basely shot him in the back."<sup>59</sup> The colonists and the confederation signed a peace treaty in 1646 after tremendous and vicious bloodshed. The colonists and their expansionism knew no boundaries, violating treaties made in 1646 and 1647. The Powhatan people were displaced and reduced, the only surviving descendants live today on two small reservations: Pamunki and Mattaponi, Virginia.<sup>60</sup> The Powhatan people, generally "disregarded by most Virginians" are seeking recognition for their role in founding the US.<sup>61</sup> The tribes "remain largely invisible in the broader sweep of colonial and US history [...] but they never forget their part in history, nor lost the desire to be treated as equals."<sup>62</sup>

Four centuries of stereotypes, "noble anachronisms" or "savage reactionaries" and "Indian Princesses" leave much to unlearn in the tragic tale of Pocahontas. As asserted (ambiguously) by Disney Exec. [.] Schneider, "[The story of Pocahontas] is an important message to a generation to stop killing each other because of the color of your skin."<sup>63</sup> A sweet sentiment that lies in the message of this American Legend, the ultimate beauty who demonstrates her passion by saving Smith's life. "Is it more acceptable because [savage] is used reciprocally? But then does this not downplay the role of colonial ideology and savagism played in the extermination and dispossession of indigenous people?"<sup>64</sup> Pocahontas, in all her mercy, compassion and empathy would come at such cost, a trail of tears for the indigenous. "Did she deliberately betray her people and contribute finally to the European conquest of the Indians in

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<sup>59</sup> Frederick W Gleach. "Pocahontas at the Fair":4

<sup>60</sup> Dan Blumlo. "Pocahontas, Uleleh, and Hononegah":155

<sup>61</sup> Dan Blumlo. "Pocahontas, Uleleh, and Hononegah":149

<sup>62</sup> Andrea Severson. "Taming Pocahontas":33

<sup>63</sup> Gary Edgerton & Kathy Merlock Jackson. "Redesigning Pocahontas":92

<sup>64</sup> Andrea Severson. "Taming Pocahontus":33

the New World?”<sup>65</sup> Given the manner in which she was ‘stolen’ or ‘offered’ by the men in her life, her father, her uncle, Smith, Rolphe and even Captain Newport, her kidnapper, maybe “she did not betray her people as much as they betrayed her.”<sup>66</sup> She becomes “in various ways, as translator, informer, mistress and sexual pawn.”<sup>67</sup> Such methods and calculations must have affected her, the heroine as a human being. Really, just a girl. She was only thirteen when she made history.

In the telling of the tale of Pocahontas tale, there are so many dark avenues this essay could travel through. The male domination, human greed and proclivity for violence are the opposite lessons of what we want to learn from the Pocahontas legend. She is a spiritually unfettered, animistic, peaceful young woman very much alive. The strange love that she offers us remains today. The effect the narrative of Pocahontas in the mind’s eye is all things beautiful in the forest and of humanity. This idea is incorruptible, albeit far from harsh reality. Such is the power of American mythology, and I will not disparage the effect that Pocahontas has on us all with inconvenient truths. American mythology is not bound to history. I wrote this paper to uncover the truth of Pocahontas’ life story hidden in the many fictions written about her life. “It is long past time to replace the fictional account of this signal even in American history with what can be discerned through documentary and other evidence. The living descendants of Powhatan’s people deserve no less.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Cara Sue Kidwell, “What Would Pocahontus think Now?”:152

<sup>67</sup> Jordan Savage. “There was a Veil upon you Pocahontus”: 93

<sup>68</sup> Frederick W. Gleach. “The Ritual World of Pocahontas” *Natural History Magazine* 115 Issue 9 (Nov.2006):41



Illustrations of Pocahontas by Author Paul Nicholas Matczuk 2022

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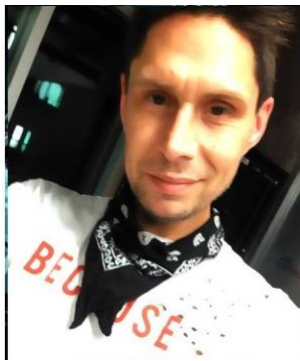
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### **Author’s Bio:**

Paul Nicholas Matczuk is currently enrolled in his third year of the education program on UCN Thompson campus. He is a history major and he wants to become a teacher just like his father. Paul believes that it is important for him to tell the story of Pocahontas. His story is based on many fictions of Pocahontas, He believes that his story is close to the truth.



**Instructor’s Remarks:** When he was enrolled in *United States History: Beginnings to 1865* in 2020-21, Paul Matczuk focussed his research efforts on the historical figure of Pocahontas of the Tsenacommacah. This woman and her people would find their worlds transformed in the early seventeenth century with the arrival of English colonists and conquerors. As Matczuk explores “the facts” of Pocahontas’ life have been stretched, skewed, and outright fabricated to fit various narratives and the historical figure has gone through numerous incarnations to fit into colonial narrative and serve various political and historical agendas. While the name by which the colonists primarily knew her has become nearly universally known through monographs,

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histories, and film the real flesh and blood person has often been lost in the shuffle. In this worthy paper Matczuk details this woman's story and the legends and distortions that have accrued over the intervening centuries. (Dr. Greg Stott)