

Facts and myths about Pocahontas

Historian Camilla Townsend gives her point of view about the American Indian princess.

Pocahontas might be a household¹ name, but the true story of a short but powerful life has been buried in myths that have persisted since



the 17th century. To start with, Pocahontas wasn't even her actual name. Born about 1596, her real name was Amonute, and she also had the more private name Matoaka. Pocahontas was her nickname, which depending on who you ask means "playful one" or "ill-behaved"² child.

Pocahontas was the favourite daughter of Powhatan, the formidable ruler³ of the more than 30 Algonquian-speaking tribes in and around the area that the early English settlers would claim as Jamestown, Virginia.

Years later – after no one was able to dispute the facts – John Smith wrote about how she, the beautiful daughter of a powerful native leader, rescued him, an English adventurer, from being executed by a father.

This narrative of Pocahontas turning her back on her own people and allying with the English, thereby⁴ finding common ground between the two cultures, has endured for centuries. But in actuality, Pocahontas's life was much different than how Smith or mainstream⁵ culture tells it. It's even disputed whether or not Pocahontas, age 11 or 12, even rescued the mercantile soldier and explorer at all, as Smith might have misinterpreted what was actually a ritual ceremony or even just lifted the tail from a popular Scottish ballad.

www.smithsonian.com, March 23, 2017

¹ a famous name worldwide

² undisciplined

³ Leader

⁴ and so

⁵ conventional