The Life, Legend, and Legacy of Pocahontas

By Beth Cusack

Beginning in June of 1995, Pocahontas emerged to the public as a sexy late adolescent/early adult female who betrayed her people for her lover, the dashingly handsome Captain John Smith, only to have him wounded and whisked back to England, while she waves his ship adieu from an overlooking cliff. Although romantic, it was unfortunately untrue.

Pocahontas Saves The Life of John Smith

The Disney movie stimulated a backlash by historians who sought to broadcast the 'true' story of Pocahontas. Henry James once wrote, "The facts of history are bad enough; the fictions are, if possible, worse."[1] But, where did Disney’s version originate? Why did Disney change history; if that is what it did? What are the current notions regarding the 'Indian maiden'? What is America’s fascination with this ‘Indian princess?’ Beginning with Captain Smith’s own words from the early 1600s and following a chronological technique up to the present day, these questions, among others, will be answered in the ensuing essay and, perhaps, a ‘truer’ history of Pocahontas may come to light.

Beginning in 1608, John Smith wrote numerous works relating to his travels and, in particular, the Jamestown settlement. While most historians use his works as a source for the Pocahontas story, discrepancies do exist. In Smith’s "True Relation" printed in 1608, Smith wrote that he and Powhatan agreed upon a truce, but there is no mention of the noble Pocahontas or the savage Powhatan trying to slay the hero. [2] "Generall Historie" not printed until 1623 paints a very different picture of the same event. Smith wrote that "the Queene of Appamattuck" washed and "feasted him" and it was only after a "long consultation" that "great stones" were destined for Smith's head whereupon they were "to beat out his brains." Pocahontas, "the Kings dearest daughter" laid her own head over Smith’s "to save him from death."[3]

"Generall Historie" mentions Pocahontas another time, when Powhatan's 'dearest jewel' traveled through the 'irksome woods' in the 'dark night' to warn Smith of an attack.[4] As Rountree notes, "this 'history' was written seven years after her [Pocahontas'] death, two years after her husband's [John Rolfe's] death and after most of the other early eyewitnesses to the Jamestown Colony were deceased. Hardly anybody was left to challenge Smith's new version of events."[5]

Printed in 1612, Smith’s "The Proceedings" (a collection of writings from various authors) mentions our 'Indian princess.' Richard Pots and William Petchiplace wrote that while Pocahontas was "not past thirteen or fourteen years of age," she often was seen at the fort and clearly "respected" Captain Smith. Pots and Petchiplace also noted that even if Smith had married Powhatan’s daughter "her marriage could no way have entitled him by any right to the kingdom, nor was it ever suspected he had ever such a thought, or more regarded her, or any of them, then in honest reason..."[6] Clearly there were no romantic elopements planned between the older Captain and the young 'maiden.'

In 1855, W.C. Armstrong incorporated Smith’s previous works into his own narrative examining the life of Captain John Smith. Smith was the hero of the story, and Armstrong often wrote in Smith's own words, especially regarding the heathen 'savages.' Pocahontas was merely a ray of hope in the new savage world the colonists hoped to civilize. "Her [Pocahontas'] deeds have covered a multitude of their [heathen savages – the Powhatsans] sins," Armstrong wrote; whenever a person wanted to think about the atrocities of the heathens, their hearts would soften because there must have been at least one "fine element" existing or Pocahontas would never had the saving characteristics which she did.[7] So according to Armstrong’s version, Pocahontas not only saved the colonists and assisted in establishing a great nation that was to be, but she also saved her people from stereotypes of their utter corruption and sinfulness.

According to John R. Musick's *Pocahontas: The Story of Virginia* published in 1894, Captain John Smith was the "real hero"; Smith was "patriotic, brave, and unselfish." Musick wrote that "a careful study of his [Smith’s] books and the works of contemporaneous authors lead one to believe that he [Smith] passionately loved Pocahontas. That she loved him no one can doubt." Musick continued that the only reason Pocahontas married Rolfe, was that Rolfe had tricked Pocahontas into believing Smith was dead. "Cheated of her love and deceived by the man who had married her, the poor girl did not long survive the knowledge that Smith lived, but died of a broken heart at Gravesend."[8] Musick never incorporated a bibliography, footnotes, or endnotes to support his legend of Pocahontas—perhaps none existed. But, Shakespeare himself could not have written a more tragic love saga than Musick's history of Pocahontas and her Captain-o.

Jumping to 1906, Ella Loraine Dorsey, published *Pocahontas* using Smith’s writings as her primary source. Conveying the idea that Pocahontas, 'the Indian princess,' welcomed the Europeans with open arms, sheltering and protecting them, not only to justify their being in the Americas, but also to sanctify their presence, Dorsey wrote "it was not until the little Snow Feather of Powhata[n] took under her special care the English soldier Captain John Smith and his handful of adventurers, that the Anglo-Saxon race found a permanent foothold in the new world."[9] While historically Pocahontas was helpful to the colonists of Jamestown, Dorsey magnifies her myth for "...it is not too much to say that this young girl did more to influence the fate of the Western continent than any other woman in the world, except Queen Isabella."[10] Dorsey seemed content with the image of
Pocahontas as sanctifier and as one of the heathens the colonists 'saved.' "She lives civilly and lovingly with him [Rolfe], and I [Sir Thomas Dale] trust will increase in goodness, as the knowledge of God increaseth in her."[11] Thus it was that through the colonists 'saving' Pocahontas in exchange for her 'assistance,' Pocahontas sanctified the colonists 'conquering' the 'new, savage' world. Dorsey concluded her book with, "of all the figures that loom against the green background of the primeval forest none is so distinct, none so undimmed in its soft luster, as Pocahontas of the Gentle Heart."[12]

Also published in 1906 was Garber's Pocahontas. The story was told in the first person by a woman who had spoken with Omawada, the Indian handmaid of the Princess Pocahontas. According to Garber's story, Pocahontas had a vision, "that the God who made the heavens, and the earth and all things therein, wished her to befriend the white man, who was coming o'er the ocean," and, thus, Pocahontas threw herself upon John Smith and saved his life, just as God wanted.[13] According to Garber's interpretation of 'the princess' legend, Pocahontas was destined by God to save Smith, Jamestown, and the future colonists for they were to establish a country as He had pre Destined.

In 1916, Virginia Watson published The Princess Pocahontas. "To most who have read of the early history of Virginia only in our school histories, Pocahontas is merely a figure in one dramatic scene—her rescue of John Smith. We see her in one mental picture only, kneeling beside the prostrate Englishman, her uplifted hands warding off the descending tomahawk." Watson attempted to correct the stereotype by nourishing the "new spirit of understanding...We [Watson and other scholars of her time] are finding out how often it was the Indian who was wronged and the white men who wronged him."[15]

Watson asserted the following two notions regarding the Indian girl's importance: the colony at Jamestown and the future United States would have perished if not for the 'protection and aid' of Pocahontas, and to a lesser extent, Pocahontas is to Jamestown (and ultimately the United States) what Joan of Arc is to France.[16] While attempting to rectify the stereo-typical image of Pocahontas and acknowledging the 'white man's' wrong-doings (in part), her book still sanctifies European domination with Pocahontas' heroism and approval.

Garnett used a different approach in the 1930s to convey his notions of the Indian maiden; he wrote her history in historical fiction novel format from an omniscient viewpoint in an 'unbiased perspective.' By employing this omniscient and unbiased perspective, Garnett is continuing the 'new spirit of understanding' alluded to by Watson. While Garnett, perhaps because he was a British writer, seems unconcerned with the sanctification Pocahontas image, rather he empresses 'the heathen savage' rejecting her idolatric past due to the heroic Christians who fought to 'save' her. Garnett ended his novel with her deathbed in England, where as, she coughing up blood and convulsing, thinks of Jesus' crucifixion, whereby "she smiled; she was happy, and so fell limply into death."[17] In this work, she was the perfect exemplar of savage heathen turning noble savage via British 'salvation.'

With World War II underway, Mildred Criss' book Pocahontas: Young American Princess, "the sympathetic and absorbing story of Pocahontas is most timely, because in the early days of American civilization the courageous Indian Princess was willing to die for the best in her Indian way of living, which had so much in common with all that we are fighting for today."[18] Criss divides her work into three main sections: White Doe, White Warrior, and Romance, ending with the marriage proposal of John Rolfe to Pocahontas in hopes of a lasting truce emerging through their love. Criss simply used Pocahontas as propaganda for the war and aspirations toward lasting peace.
the church has been named after her, and through the countless people who gather there to worship, her legend will live on.[19]

The 1960s in America with its cultural and social turmoil was a blessing for the image of the 'Indian princess.' In 1969, Barbour published Pocahontas and Her World. Barbour began with the disclaimer that, "the tale has been told countless times, always by white men. But to see Pocahontas as she was, we must think of her as an Indian, in an Indian setting...Pocahontas was a child of the forest."[21] Barbour sheds new light on Smith's 'rescue' writing, "The ceremony of which Smith was the object was almost certainly a combination of mock execution and salvation, in token of adoption into Powhatan's tribe...Powhatan himself was probably his [Smith's] foster-father, but Pocahontas had been chosen to act in his stead. Relations with the dangerous Englishmen were still problematical, and Powhatan must stand aloof."[22]

While Barbour wrote of Pocahontas' kidnapping by Samuel Argall, her stay at Jamestown, and her baptism and marriage were more of peace treaty securities than noble savage transformations. Barbour portrayed Pocahontas in her own world, with her own people, and, in doing that, argued against the sanctification and noble savage her image so often portrays.

In 1976, Mossiker published Pocahontas: The Life and The Legend. Mossiker agreed with Barbour that 'Smith's rescue' might have simply been an adoption ceremony in their culture. Throughout her book, Mossiker dispelled the fiction of the Pocahontas legend and presented the facts as historians of that time knew them. In the 1970s society was still reeling from the turmoil of the 1960s, still trying to seek 'true' identities. It was during all this, Mossiker wrote her version of the 'Indian maiden.' Mossiker believed that even though facts are coming to light, society wants to hold to the fictional society, wanted to believe "the tableau vivant at the altar-stone—the death defying embrace, white man and red woman a swoon with love and terror—seems fixed, frozen in time, indelibly imprinted on the mind’s eye, reminding us that at least once in our history, there existed the possibility of inter racial accommodation. For that one fleeting moment—with the blood-thirsty blades arrested in midair—came a flicker of hope that on this continent, at least, there would be no cause to mourn man's inhumanity to man."[23]

In 1979, Anderson published the article "The Best of Two Worlds: The Pocahontas Legend as Treated in Early American Drama" for The Indian Historian writing, "Pocahontas served as the perfect embodiment of the resolution of the conflict that faced the White man in all his dealings with Indians. Pocahontas' saving the life of John Smith, her later baptism, and her marriage to John Rolfe, all provide means by which the Indian can be idealized and at the same time remain subordinate to the White man."[24] Anderson's scathing article against the inaccuracies and inferior mindset of the Pocahontas story railed the plays that have been created for her legend. Anderson summed it up that, the Pocahontas legend allowed Americans to ease their consciences about coming to America and edging the Indians further and further West; it perpetuated the delusion that America was a unique land, in which they could live in harmony with nature while enjoying the blessings of Western civilization. The plays...salved the consciences of the White Americans, who were eager to look on their own nation as bringing together the best of two worlds."[25]

Anderson's work furthered the idea of the search for 'true identities' that encompassed the 1960s and 1970s. Anderson was not afraid to write what she believed and her work was published by Native Peoples.

Sundquist, in 1987, published Pocahontas & Co: The Fictional American Indian Woman in Nineteenth-Century Literature: A Study of Method. While Sundquist analyzed numerous descriptions of female American Indian characters in nineteenth-century literature," she also showed, "that these portrayals tended to conform to nine teenth-century prevailing stereotypes of white women, and hence, contained very few specific 'Indian' features."[26] According to Sundquist, Pocahontas would be of the Angel stereotype. "She is young, beautiful, innocent and pure; she loves and helps the white man, converts to Christian religion, and is a victim of a cruel fate."[27] This is not to say that Sundquist believes the legends, but merely that nineteenth-century literature endorses the notion of Pocahontas as a saving Angel.

The decade prior to the Millennium was a turbulent time for the Pocahontas legend. Beginning in 1990, Rountree wrote Pocahontas' People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia Through Four Centuries. This scholarly work originated out of her thesis dissertation and shed new light on the 'rescue' of John Smith. Rountree notes that according to Pocahontas traditions they never would have welcomed Smith, feasted and consulted with him, and then beat his brains out on an altar stone. Rountree expressed that this theory was "highly unlikely." Furthermore, Rountree asserted, that while adoption procedures were in occurrence by other tribes (i.e. Iroquois), Smith never acknowledged the event as a ritual and no sequence of subsequent or identical events are ever recorded.[28] Rountree continues in her work describing Pocahontas not as an Angel or savior, but as a young girl existing within her people and their customs. She often visited the fort and played with the English boys, earning herself the nickname "Little Wanton" (Little Mischievous One).[29] According to Rountree, Pocahontas was not a savior, nor a symbol of noble savagery, rather she was a girl, part of the Powhatan tribe, a tribe that would adhere to the myth of 'vanishing Indians.'[30]

In the mid 1990s, following opinions of Pocahontas such as 'the Indian maiden' being the "first lady of Native Americans," remembered for her kindness and love for all people.[31] And "though she was only twenty-two or twenty-three years old, her courage and intelligence had already saved many lives in colonial America,"[32] the genesis of Walt Disney's Pocahontas came from co-director Mike Gabriel who "wanted to do a Western." The Pocahontas narrative was perfect for depicting two cultures coming together and, also, it "furnished source material that could easily conform to the coming-of-age and romantic dictates of the Disney formula as well as provide a spunky heroine as protagonist in the mold of Ariel...Belle...and Jasmine."[33] During the inception of this movie, "Disney's Pocahontas (dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg) promised [it] to be an intriguing departure from the usual, male-centered story line, as well as the general [false] portrayal of American Indians." Furthermore, Disney publicists asserted that "in every aspect of the storytelling, the filmmakers tried to treat Pocahontas with the respect she deserved and present a balanced and informed view of the Native American culture...[and] we also tried to tap into Pocahontas’ spirituality and the spirituality of the Native Americans, especially in the way they relate to nature." Just before its release, Russell Means said, "When I first read the script, I was impressed with the beginning of the film. In fact, I was overwhelmed by it. It tells the truth about the motives for Europeans initially coming to the so-called New World. I found it astounding that Americans and the Disney Studios are willing to tell the truth."[34]

Upon release of the film, Disney's executives and representatives said things like, "Moviemakers shouldn't be handcuffed when using real stories as jumping-off places for works of entertainment." and "We never wanted to do a docu-drama, but something that was inspired by legend."[35] If Disney did not want it to be historically accurate, then why did they employ (and never listen to) Native American advisors, including chief Native American consultant, Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan? This was because Disney was structuring a plot to support the 'Disney game plan' and increase profits with an assimilated Pocahontas loving and saving John Smith, both of whom are approximately the same age, thus sanctifying the colonists at Jamestown and, ultimately, the present-day United States. Disney furthered Kidwell's argument that this myth of colonization is not a 'real' person but a myth—a savior of European colonialism who explicitly betrayed her people for passion and, ultimately, submitted to the men of the dominant society.[36]
According to O'Brien, "a case study approach was used to reveal that the company [Disney] has relied on the same basic formula for the creation of its animated films since 1938. This formula works to alter the messages of the classic fairy tales in order to foreground the ideals of conservatism, patriarchy, and Puritanism."[37] Thus, Disney had a format and they fit the Pocahontas story into their format. One might ask, why is it even necessary to investigate a Disney movie? According to Bush,

only a thorough examination of popular cultural sources can provide an adequate explanation for the continuing vitality of such historical legends and how most Americans understand their history...A scholarly understanding of the numerous popular historical portrayals of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas is essential to bridging the gap between popular and scholarly history...Popular cultural forms rely on the continued support of the general public and therefore serve as excellent cultural barometers to historians who are willing to open themselves to unconventional sources.[38]

This pitiful portrayal of a girl from the once proud people, the Powhatans, ignited the powder keg for future historians and authors to correct the 'popular' version.

In 2004, Allen published Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat. In an interview, Allen said that she "relied on the Mossiker book a lot, but her [Mossiker] story of Pocahontas is largely concerned with the English. Pocahontas has at best a supporting role to the central story...what I wanted to do in my book was to make Matoaka [Pocahontas] the central figure." The goal of Allen's book was to "take Pocahontas from the situation of victim to that of actor; from object to subject of her own story."[39] Allen also incorporated her own Laguna Pueblo traditions into this 'hybrid' account of Pocahontas for an exciting and refreshingly new account of the 'Indian maiden.'

Also in 2004, numerous books and articles offering opinions about Pocahontas were published. Camilla Townsend wrote that "when we allow our [Pocahontas'] own story to unfold, we see not only that she herself was more than we thought, but that the moment of this country's inception was different from what we have been led to believe...when we consider the real events of Pocahontas' life, we learn more not only about another human being but about our own past, and ourselves."[40] An article Kutsuzawa Kiyomi wrote titled "Disney's Pocahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism, and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire" effectively argued "that an analysis of Disney's Pocahontas reveals the strategic tension between the plea for a multicultural world, on the one hand, and the reproduction of the structure of a white, western, and male domination on the other."[41]

Clearly by 2004, new arguments were being entertained with new points of view being analyzed. In 2005, Jill Peters wrote that "these stories [Pocahontas myth] have been created...in the collective American consciousness because these strong, Native 'princesses' not only helped European-American men establish the nation, but also realized the 'superiority' of white civilization." Peters continued that the "Indian princess imagery was constructed to equate Native women with the virgin frontier, both to be subdued and conquered."[42] Peters concluded that "the new American mythology was constructed because, like the mythology of the Greeks, it explains the beginning and building of a 'great society.'"[43] The same year, Helen C. Routtree wrote Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown. This scholarly work was written from Routtree's ethnohistorical perspective using anthroplogy in conjunction with written record. It encompasses Pocahontas with the Powhatan people and examines the English "not as heroes, but as strangers, invaders, even squatters."[44]

In 2007, Neil Rennie put a new spin on the Pocahontas saga in writing Pocahontas: Little Wanton: Myth, Life, & Afterlife. Never before had anyone examined her myths, the facts of her life, and the lasting effects of her afterlife and published their findings. Rennie separated her afterlife according to how various literati wanted her portrayed. Pocahontas in history was the "wonderful humanitarian"; Pocahontas in prose was simply "She"; in paint she was "more feminine than Indian"; she was the heroine of America filled with patriotism for a great nation; on the stage, she was the "gentle/noble savage"; Pocahontas in verse was "that heroic maid"; while in biography she was the broken-hearted; finally, Pocahontas at the movies was simply the "little wanton."[45] Rennie's point is simply that her legend belongs to each individual who takes it and makes it their own; the individual 'real life' Pocahontas does not exist in an afterlife based in truth.

The same year, a very different story of Pocahontas emerged. "The Powhatan history of Pocahontas has been orally passed down from generation to generation. You have not read this story before; this is the first written history of Pocahontas by her own people. It is vastly different from the history you have been taught from school, novels and movies."[46] It is startling to read the opening sentence, "The story of Pocahontas is first and foremost a great love story." Yet, further reading identifies not the romantic love between the "Indian princess" and Smith or Rolfe, but the moving force of love within Pocahontas' life, the spiritual bond and filial affection between Pocahontas and her father, Chief Powhatan Wahunsonoca and the love they had for the Powhatan people. [47]

Custalow, in writing his people's oral traditions of the girl, places her in context with her people. While other historians and authors have attempted this in previous years, none succeeded as Custalow has done. According to Mattaponi oral tradition, Pocahontas was the Powhatan peace symbol. The Powhatan people extended their arms in friendship via Pocahontas, and colonists kidnapped and murdered the Powhatan peace symbol, Pocahontas.

Whether she should be seen as a sanctifier, a noble savage, as the Powhatan peace symbol, or as the little wanton remains debatable, but what must always be kept in mind is that she was a real, living, breathing female of the Powhatan tribe. Perhaps we will never know the 'true history' of Pocahontas, though countless claims have been made in the previous four hundred years. Perhaps Charlotte Gullick said it best, "We need to remember that because of both the historical documents and the fluid nature of a life so integrally connected to the manito aki, we will never entirely know Pocahontas."[48] Perhaps the point is not in trying to quantify the 'true history' of her, for in doing so we mythify her. Perhaps...but then again, perhaps not?

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The life of Pocahontas fulfills a specific role in American culture and history. Her short life holds a bittersweet tragedy that is part of the mythology of Native America, especially the first encounters between English settlers and the local native tribes. The meaning of her name, "little plaything" or "little wanton," suggests that she was destined to be bandied about by the powers in her life. The men of the time simply assumed a young Native American girl did not deserve or even want respect. It also analyzes their reputations and legacies. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about Pocahontas and John Smith like never before. ...more. Get A Copy. Kindle Store. But in actuality, Pocahontas' life was much different than how Smith or mainstream 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 tale from a popular Scottish ballad. Now, 400 years after her death, the story of the real Pocahontas is finally being accurately explored. In real life, Pocahontas was a member of the Pamunkey tribe in Virginia. How do the Pamunkey and other native people tell her story today? It's interesting. Pocahontas saving the life of Captain John Smith by the New England Chromo. Lith. Co. circa 1870. Library of Congress. Pocahontas at the court of King James by the artist Richard Rummels. 1907. Library of Congress. While Pocahontas did marry the Virginia colonist Rolfe and gave birth to a son, Thomas, there's no archival evidence that she ever converted to Christianity or was baptized. Her tale became so compelling, in fact, that for a short time in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Pocahontas's Pamunkey descendants used her legend as a means of asserting their Native identity. The Pamunkey Players acting troupe, for example, recreated the story of Pocahontas saving John Smith at the 1907 Jamestown Exposition.