

AN OBJECT OF INTEREST FROM HUNSTANTON HERITAGE CENTRE

Pocahontas – Part 2 – Prepared by Jerry Simmons (H&DCS Committee Member)

In Part 1 of this article last month, we learned how John Rolfe established himself in Virginia, and mentioned (just once) that he went on to marry the lady we know as Pocahontas.



In Part 2 of this article, we will look at the story from the Native American perspective.

The story begins in the 16th Century, and is one of colonialism, trade, international relationships, identity, mixed-heritage marriage, and much more.

Its themes are very relevant to us in the 21st century.

POWHATAN PEOPLE

By the late 16th Century, Native Americans living in the region the English called Coastal Plain Virginia comprised some 30 tribes of Algonquian speaking people, under the leadership of a Paramount Chief named Wahunsonacock.

English settlers used the title Powhatan to identify both the leader of the tribes and the people of the Chiefdom he ruled.

Each of the tribes had their own chief, lived in separate settlements, and spoke in many different dialects. Some 25,000 people lived in an organised confederacy, with all villages within a particular region belonging to 1 tribe. Each village or settlement was comprised of a total of approximately 100 people living in some 10-20 dwellings known as yehakins, built from a sapling framework covered with marsh reed or bark matting.

Powhatan culture dictated that men were responsible for hunting; and women for home-building, farming, cooking, and child-rearing. Inheritance passed through the female line (matrilineal), marriage usually occurred at puberty, and men were allowed an unlimited number of wives. Powhatan people did not communicate in writing - relying primarily on oral means.

It is believed that Wahunsonacock was able to have a wife from each of the tribes long enough for her to bear a child - thereafter she was free to return to her tribe and remarry.

POCAHONTAS

Pocahontas (Playful One) was a daughter of Wahunsonacock, and originally named Matoaka. She is thought to have been born in 1596, and raised by her older sister Mattachanna following the death of her mother either during, or very soon after, her birth. Oral accounts of Pocahontas' life are sourced from Mattachanna - some details of which differ significantly from the written accounts of the English.

Pocahontas is thought to have married her first husband Kocoum at the age of 14 in 1610, and gave birth to a son the following year. By now the initial period of peaceful co-existence between the English settlers in Jamestown and the Powhatans had ended, as the increasing numbers of settlers required more food than the Powhatans were willing to trade, causing the colonists to forcefully take food from the natives. Inevitably therefore, the result was episodes of aggression from both sides, at least until 1614.

Despite this antagonism, there existed a willingness to learn about each others culture and language, and specifically chosen adolescents would be the conduit for this. It appears that Pocahontas was one of these, and hence her status as a daughter of the Paramount Chief would have been known to the English.

In April 1613 a group of English settlers succeeded in kidnapping Pocahontas and killing her husband Kocoum. Other villagers were able to flee with their child who survived. Ransom demands were made (the return of English prisoners and their weapons), agreed by the Powhatans, but reneged upon by the English. Pocahontas was forcibly taken 55 miles upstream of Jamestown to the settlement of Henrico where John Rolfe had his tobacco plantation.

At this point the English and Powhatan accounts diverge.

According to the English, despite being forcibly abducted, knowing that her husband had been murdered, and being separated from her child (who the settlers had intended to kill), Pocahontas willingly converted to Christianity, fell in love with John Rolfe (who aided her conversion), was baptised with the name Rebecca, married John in April 1614, and bore a son Thomas in January 1615.

The oral account from Mattachanna (who subsequently travelled to England with Pocahontas) was that she was mistreated, raped, and had given birth to her second son prior to her marriage to John.

In early 1616 the Rolfe family and a number of Powhatan representatives sailed for England on what was essentially a promotional tour to gain support for Jamestown. Pocahontas was exhibited as a "tamed savage" for the entertainment of royalty (including King James) and wealthy investors. They remained in England from June 1616 until March 1617 (but probably didn't visit Heacham), when they once again set sail for Virginia.

Evidence suggests that Pocahontas had become increasingly unwell during their visit, and by March was gravely ill. Their ship - captained by the same man who led her kidnapping - got as far as Gravesend, when it became apparent that she was close to death. Pocahontas (now Rebecca) was taken ashore with her husband and child, and, aged 21 years, died soon after. Her burial is recorded as taking place in the subsequently demolished Church of St George Gravesend. On her return to Virginia, Mattachanna reported to Paramount Chief Wahunsonacock that his daughter had been poisoned.

JOHN AND THOMAS ROLFE

Thomas was not taken back to Virginia, but was given over to the care of an English guardian. John returned unencumbered to his lucrative tobacco plantation, where he was married to an English settler in 1619. He survived until 1622, by which time the English had invaded deep into Powhatan territory, resulting, yet again, in violent conflict. It is unclear whether he died of natural causes, or was amongst the 350 settlers who were put to death by Powhatans in the Henrico Massacre.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Many questions arise from this story - here are three to consider.

- How was Pocahontas treated during her period of captivity following her abduction? We should remember that she was of different ethnicity to her captors (who had already murdered her husband), regarded as a savage, and a vulnerable female.
- Did she willingly convert to Christianity and agree to marriage, and was her command of the English language sufficient to understand and accept the concepts?
- Was John Rolfe motivated primarily by the success of his tobacco plantation, by his evangelical mission, and by his duty to the King - or did he genuinely care for the wellbeing of Pocahontas and her people?

We have a major display in the Heritage Centre all about Pocahontas – do come and have a look. There are also some books available to purchase.