

Who Was The Real Pocahontas? Unlearning the Disney Myth

Grade Level: Middle or high school

Time Required: 2 Lessons and 1 homework assignment

Historical Period: Early 17th Century Virginia (with some comparisons to 16th century Spanish conquest of Mexico)

Lesson Summary/Background: All students bring previous knowledge into the classroom. Much of their historical experience comes from movies and television. Very often dramatic license is taken by film makers and the story is often altered. Disney's *Pocahontas* and the recent production of the "epic" film *The New World* are both cases in point. Our job as educators is to open student minds to a broader perspective based on primary sources, critical inquiry and historical evidence.

Most teenagers will have some basic knowledge of the story of Jamestown. In 1607 Jamestown was established by the Virginia Company of London. Its 104 settlers became the first permanent English colony in North America. Survival of the colony is often credited to Captain John Smith. Smith helped to organize the colonists to work towards survival foremost. His 1624 journal, *The General History of Virginia*, is one of the earliest documents of American history, especially of his explorations and relations with the Powhatan Indian Confederation.

The most famous among these stories is the tale of his life being saved by Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas. This curious young 12 year-old princess spent a large amount of time around the settlement at Jamestown. She eventually married John Rolfe, the developer of the tobacco hybrid that made Virginia profitable, not John Smith. She was baptized Rebecca and the couple later had a son. While in London two years later, she caught small pox and died.

The story's confusion comes first from John Smith's journal in which he described being captured by Powhatan. In what Smith perceived was an execution, Pocahontas threw herself over him begging her father to spare his life. Critics

note that Smith recounts similar stories of being saved by a princess in his tales from Turkey and Poland. However, it is the modern films that implant the idea of a romance between Pocahontas and Smith. John Rolfe is not even in the Disney film. Pocahontas is depicted as a young, voluptuous woman in both films and both portray Smith as a young, handsome, swashbuckler.

In this lesson students will be asked to: (1) rethink the myths surrounding Pocahontas, (2) draw conclusions of the historical accurateness of the stories surrounding the Jamestown settlement, (3) revisit the themes presented in the previous lesson pertaining to Malintzin, as well as draw some comparisons between her fate in the collective memory of people today with that of Pocahontas and (4) put together in writing some concluding thoughts on the subject of how “heroes” are made.

Procedures/Activities:

Lesson One:

1. Introduction of the lesson with KWL chart (What we know, What we **Want** to know, What we have **Learned**). Ask students what they already know about Jamestown and Pocahontas, etc.
2. Have a prepared movie clip of the Disney movie *Pocahontas* which will demonstrate some of the myths and historical inaccuracies portrayed in the film. If possible, do the same with the film *The New World*. Prepare the students to search for things they find inaccurate in the film based on what they know. During the viewing, direct the students’ attention toward certain aspects you want them to notice.
3. After watching the film, lead students in a discussion of the inaccuracies. Make a class list. Ask students how historians go back and research such events. Discuss what primary sources and artifacts are, then how they think historians and archaeologists go about finding such information.

Lesson Two:

1. Utilizing a similar format to that which was used in the lesson on Malintzin, you will provide a variety of materials for students to analyze in their groups of three. These materials should be distributed in a folder and each participant should be writing a journal entry that includes analysis of the material and how it supports and debunks some favorite myths of the time period. Contents should include: (1) Timeline of Powhatan Indians and Jamestown, (2) excerpt from *General History of Virginia by John Smith, 1624*, (3) excerpts from Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma by Camillia Townsend. This review should take just one lesson with a whole-group, teacher –led discussion to wrap up concluding ideas at its completion.

Homework: Write an essay entitled “Comparing and Contrasting Two Native American Women in American History”. Students should be encouraged to explore within their essays the similarities and broad differences between Malintzin and Pocahontas, as well as incorporate a discussion of how these two women have been treated historically. This assignment should be allotted adequate time, thus at least two nights are suggested.

Potential topics students may overlook which you can use to generate ideas:

Similarities:

How both women’s lives are recorded by others. We do not have any documentation of their own thoughts/feelings/experiences.

Both women had their names changed. Who changed them? Why? What did these “re-namings” represent?

Religious conversions

Produced a child with someone European (colonizer)

Differences:

Nahuatl , Malintzin's language, is spoken widely today. The Mexica (Aztec) left innumerable recordings of their experiences/traditions as soon as they began to learn the Roman alphabet in the 1530s. The Powhatan language met a very different fate and is largely lost.

Family/tribal ties

Assessment: Comprehension of the material covered will be evaluated based on the quality of student essays and the journal writings and discussions that follow source readings/viewings.

Materials and Resources:

Smith, John, *General History of Virginia*, 1624.

Townsend, Camilla. *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*. University of New Mexico Press, 2006.

Townsend, Camilla. *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*. Hill and Wang, 2005.

(Excerpts that can be used from *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* by Camilla Townsend attached)

Timeline of Powhatan Indians and Jamestown

Films to be used:



The New World

Terrence Malick, the universally acclaimed American filmmaker responsible for the key 1970s features *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, returns for a rare directorial outing with the sweeping period piece *The New World* -- an epic dramatization of Pocahontas' relationships with John Smith and John Rolfe. Malick's story opens at the dawn of the 17th century, just prior to the colonization of the United States --

Excerpt from *General History of Virginia* by John Smith, 1624.

At last they brought him to Meronocomoco, where was Powhatan, their emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had been a monster; till Powhatan and his train had put themselves in their greatest braveries. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe, made of raccoon skins, and all the tails hanging by. On either hand did a sit a young wench of sixteen or eighteen years, and along on each side the house, two rows of men, and behind them as many women, with all their heads bedecked with the white down of birds, but everyone with something; and a great chain of white beads about their necks.

At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queen of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, instead of a towel, to dry them. Having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperor was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselves. For the King himself will make his own robes, shoes, bows, arrows, pots; plant, hunt, or do anything so well as the rest. Two days after, Powhatan having disguised himself in the most fearful manner he could, caused Captain Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. Not long after, from behind a mat that divided the house, was made the most doleful noise he ever heard; then Powhatan, more like a devil than a man, came unto him and told him now they were friends, and presently he should go to Jamestown, to send him two great guns and a grindstone, for which he would give him the country of Capahowosick, and forever esteem him as his son Nantaquod.

So to Jamestown with twelve guides Powhatan sent him. That night they quartered in the woods, he still expecting (as he had done all this long time of his imprisonment) every hour to be put to one death or other, for all their feasting. But almighty God (by his divine providence) had mollified the hearts of those stern barbarians with compassion. The next morning betimes they came to the fort, where Smith having used the savages with what kindness he could, he showed Rawhunt, Powhatan's trusty servant, two demiculverins and a millstone to carry to Powhatan: they found them somewhat too heavy; but when they did see him discharge them, being loaded with stones, among the boughs of a great tree loaded with icicles, the ice and branches came so tumbling down that the poor savages ran away half dead with fear. But at last we regained some conference with them, and gave them some toys, and sent to Powhatan, his women, and children such presents, as gave them in general full content.

Now in Jamestown they were all in combustion, the strongest preparing once more to run away with the pinnace; which with the hazard of his life, with saker falcon and musket shot, Smith forced now the third time to stay or sink.

Some no better than they should be, had plotted with the President, the next day to have put him to death by the Levitical law, for the lives of Robinson and Emry, pretending the fault was his that had led them to their ends: but he quickly took such order with such lawyers that he laid them by the heels till he sent some of them prisoners for England.

Now every once in four or five days, Pocahontas, with her attendants, brought him so much provision that saved many of their lives that else for all this had starved with hunger.

His relation of the plenty he had seen, especially at Werawocomoco, and of the state and bounty of Powhatan (which till that time was unknown), so revived their dead spirits (especially the love of Pocahontas) as all men's fear was abandoned.

Thus you may see what difficulties still crossed any good endeavor; and the good success of the business being thus oft brought to the very period of destruction; yet you see by what strange means God hath delivered it.

Timeline of Powhatan Indians and Jamestown

- circa 1500 Powhatan Chiefdom Created
- 1525 First European Contact with Indians in Virginia
- 1584 Attempted English Colony at Roanoke Island, N.C.
- 1607 Jamestown Established
- 1608 John Smith Captured by Powhatan
- 1609 John Smith Returns to England
- 1614 Pocahontas Marries John Rolfe
- 1615 Thomas Rolfe, son of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, born
- 1616 Rolfe family visits England
- 1617 Pocahontas dies in England
- 1618 Powhatan dies in Virginia
- 1622 First Opechancanough War
- 1634 Thomas Rolfe returns to Virginia
- 1644 Second Opechancanough War
- 1646 Opechancanough Dies
- 1677 Powhatans give up all lands in Treaty
- 1722 Powhatans believed extinct

Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma by Camilla Townsend

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In recounting Smith's story of his famous encounter with Pocahontas where she saved him from her father's wrath, Townsend writes:

It is quite a story. But did any of it happen? There have been those who have wanted to believe it for four hundred years, starting with Smith's first audience and continuing right up to the present day. Yet the answer is unequivocally no. The truth, as it happens, is not only more complicated but also more interesting.

How do we know it did not happen? It is not enough to point out that Pocahontas was only about 10 years old at the time. There is far better evidence against it than that. John Smith himself never wrote any such story until 1624, when, as he knew quite well, there was no one left alive who could refute it, and Pocahontas had—for other, unrelated reasons—become a celebrity in London whose very name could sell books. He did not mention the story in the report he sent back to England shortly after the events. He did not mention it in either of the books he published on Virginia in 1612, which he directed to a London audience parched for tales about the region. Nor did he mention it when Pocahontas came to London. He only told the story seventeen years later, in 1624, in the wake of an Indian rebellion, at which point Powhatan's kindred were viewed as the devil incarnate, and Pocahontas was suddenly being interpreted as exceptional among her people.

Furthermore--and this is perhaps the clincher--in Smith's later accounts of his exploits around the world, he never failed to mention that at each critical juncture a beautiful woman had fallen in love with him and interceded on his behalf. It had happened, he said, in Turkey, where a young Muslim woman he identified as "Charatza Tragabigzanda" had purportedly begged her brother to treat the enslaved prisoner of war well, hoping to marry him someday. For the pleasure of speaking with him, "this noble gentlewoman...would feigne herself sick when she should go to the Baths."