

More Than A Disney Princess



Disney movies sometimes get it wrong... at least when it comes to history.

Upon learning that Pocahontas was occupying a place within my family tree, I looked into her life to try and separate fact from fantasy. She was, by all accounts, a remarkable woman who led a tragic life.

She was born to Chief Powhatan, who ruled over 30 Algonquian-speaking tribes around the tidewaters of Virginia. Her mother apparently died at childbirth. She was given the name Amonute but known by her people as Matoaka. She was a precocious child so her father began referring to her as 'Pocahontas' which meant "playful one." She was 10 years old when Captain John Smith was brought into her camp. Romanticized versions of their story have largely been discredited. What is true is that Smith was granted by Powhatan the title of werowance (chief) of his tribe (Jamestown) which granted him access to the other tribes for the purposes of trade and support.

While in their camp, Smith and Pocahontas would teach each other elements of their respective languages to help bridge

the gap between their two peoples. When Smith was released to return to his people, Pocahontas and others would often visit Jamestown, bringing gifts and food to the struggling colonists. The young girl's inclusion in these trips was most likely intended to be a symbol of a peaceful intent.

But the peace between the two cultures began to deteriorate as the colonists' continual insistence for food and land (often accompanied with threats of violence) began to wear on Powhatan's patience. Unfortunately for Pocahontas, who by now had married a member of her tribe and had a child, she became a pawn in the growing hostilities. Abducted by Captain Samuel Argall, she was held hostage to elicit concessions from her father. She was indoctrinated into the "English world", being forced to learn the language, dress, customs and religion of her captors. She eventually was baptized, taking the name Rebecca, and traveled to England to help raise money for the colony, which by then had discovered that tobacco could be a sustainable crop. She died during the return voyage at the young age of 21.

Princess Pocahontas Matoaka Rebecca Powhatan was the mother-in-law of my sister-in-law's 9th great grandfather.

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