

# AMONUTE

{1596-1617}

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THE REAL-LIFE POCAHONTAS WAS A POWHATAN WOMAN NAMED AMONUTE, DAUGHTER OF THE POWERFUL RULER WAHUNSENACAH. AS A YOUNG WOMAN, SHE ACTED AS AN INTERPRETER BETWEEN HER PEOPLE AND THE SETTLERS AND DELIVERED GIFTS OF FOOD TO THE ENGLISH, AS WELL. THE FACTS OF THIS STORY ARE, HOWEVER, DISPUTED.

THE 1995 WALT DISNEY PICTURES FILM *POCAHONTAS* TOLD THE STORY OF A YOUNG NATIVE AMERICAN WOMAN WHO FALLS IN LOVE WITH ENGLISH SETTLER JOHN SMITH, SAVES HIM FROM BEING KILLED BY HER FATHER, "CHIEF POWHATAN," AND BRINGS PEACE BETWEEN THE ENGLISH AND THE POWHATAN PEOPLE.

THE STORY WAS NOT ENTIRELY MADE UP BY DISNEY WRITERS. THERE WAS A REAL POWHATAN WOMAN NAMED AMONUTE WITH THE NICKNAME "POCAHONTAS" ("PLAYFUL ONE"). THE MOVIE IS BASED PARTLY ON AN ACCOUNT WRITTEN BY JOHN SMITH, WHO CLAIMED AMONUTE SAVED HIS LIFE, AND ALSO THAT SHE SOMETIMES BROUGHT FOOD TO THE ENGLISH SETTLEMENT BECAUSE OF THIS LOVE.

"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."\*

\*JOHN SMITH, *THE GENERALL HISTORIE OF VIRGINIA, NEW ENGLAND, AND THE SUMMER ISLES*, 1624.

## THE GENERALL HISTORIE OF

Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles with the names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governours from their first beginning An 1584 to this present 1624

With the PROCEEDINGS OF THOSE SEVERALL COLONIES and the Accidents that befell them in all their Journyes and Discoveries

SHOULD WE BELIEVE THIS ACCOUNT? SMITH WROTE ABOUT HIS ENCOUNTER WITH AMONUTE IN 1624, 16 YEARS AFTER THE EVENTS HE DESCRIBED. HE WROTE THEM IN A BOOK THAT HE TRIED TO SELL IN EUROPE, AND SOME HISTORIANS, SUCH AS KAREN ORDAHL KUPPERMAN, BELIEVE HE MADE UP THE LOVE STORY BECAUSE IT WOULD SELL WELL TO EUROPEAN AUDIENCES.

THEY ALSO ARGUE THAT AMONUTE DID NOT VISIT THE ENGLISH SETTLEMENT OUT OF LOVE FOR SMITH, BUT RATHER THAT YOUNG GIRLS WERE FREQUENTLY PUT AT THE FRONT OF VISITING GROUPS TO SHOW THEY WERE PEACEFUL.

"Wahunsenaca allowed his favorite daughter, Pocahontas, to accompany these entourages ... But the food was actually coming from the leader of the Powhatan people."



IN 2007, TWO SCHOLARS OF THE MATTAPONI PEOPLE, DESCENDANTS OF THE POWHATAN, PUBLISHED *THE TRUE STORY OF POCAHONTAS*, BASED ON ORAL TRADITION.

THEY ARGUE THAT JOHN SMITH WAS NEVER IN DANGER OF BEING KILLED. RATHER, BECAUSE THE ENGLISH SETTLERS WERE STARVING, THERE WAS A CEREMONY TO INTEGRATE THEM INTO THE POWHATAN PEOPLE. SMITH, THE SCHOLARS ASSERT, MISUNDERSTOOD THE CEREMONY.

Dr. Linwood "Little Bear" Custalow, oral historian

THERE ARE SOME DOUBTS ABOUT THESE ACCOUNTS AS WELL. FOR EXAMPLE, ANTHROPOLOGIST HELEN ROUNTREE, WHO WORKS IN THIS REGION, DOUBTS THAT THIS STORY WAS REALLY TRANSMITTED UNBROKEN ACROSS 400 YEARS OF POWHATAN HISTORY. BUT CERTAINLY, THIS EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT SMITH'S ACCOUNT WAS LIKELY INACCURATE.



WORLD HISTORY PROJECT BIOGRAPHIES

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