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MERCED

# POCAHONTAS

*and the*

## POWHATAN DILEMMA

"Townsend . . . writes  
with a sharp sword  
and a crackling whip."

—John Leonard,  
*Harper's Magazine*

CAMILLA TOWNSEND



When Powhatan received Smith a few weeks later, he was reclining in state on a low platform, with long chains of white beads and pearls around his neck, dressed in a gorgeous fur robe decorated with the extraordinary black-ringed tails of *aroughcun*, an animal no En-

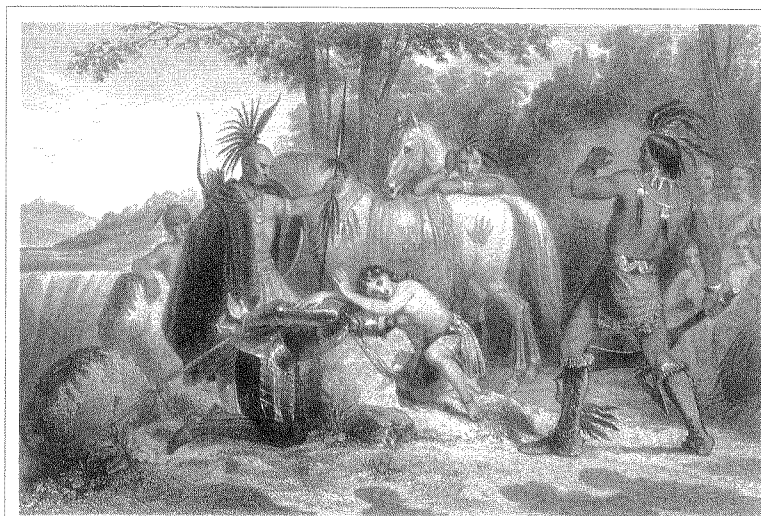
glishman had ever seen before. He was symbolically surrounded by his subject tribes in the persons of his wives—though the political point was lost on Smith, who later referred to them only as “wenches.” After some moments of silence, Powhatan made an elaborate speech.<sup>18</sup>

Years later John Smith painted a fanciful picture of what happened next. As the drums began to beat, Powhatan called for a great stone to be dragged forward, then had Smith’s head placed upon it. Just as a warrior raised a club to beat his brains out and the shrill singing and chanting rose to a pitch, the young Pocahontas, who had been watching in horror, leaped forward and threw her body over Smith’s. Powhatan smiled at the whims of his pretty daughter and signaled suddenly that the white man should be freed.

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 ten 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 all her people.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore—and this is perhaps the clincher—in Smith’s later accounts of his exploits around the world, he never failed to mention



This is a typical nineteenth-century romanticized version of the event that John Smith claimed had occurred while he was a prisoner at Werowocomoco. In this rendition, a nearly naked and adult Pocahontas with curling tresses appears to be European or Middle Eastern. The Indians look like nineteenth-century Plains Indians, even possessing ponies, and a nonexistent waterfall tumbles behind the scene.

(Edward Henry Corbould, 1815–1905, courtesy of the New York Public Library)

that at each critical juncture a beautiful young 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 Banians [the Baths].”<sup>20</sup> (Not surprisingly, an account of such Turkish baths appears in Hakluyt’s work, which we know Smith loved so well.) It had happened again on his escape route, when one “Callamata,” the wife of a Cossack chieftain, supposedly came to his aid. In France, a “Madame Chanoie,” Smith claimed, cared for him after a shipwreck; and elsewhere other



Standing at Werowocomoco, looking out at Purtan Bay, off the York River, the view appears much as it would have to Pocahontas and John Smith in 1607. (Photo by Deanna Beacham, courtesy of Bob and Lynn Ripley)

anonymous women provided him succor. Smith made these stories the toasts of his friends. Richard Brathwait, a well-known poet, wrote, "Tragabigzanda, Callamata's love, Deare Pocahontas, Madam Shanoi's too, . . . / Did what love with modesty could doe."<sup>21</sup>

Smith called his 1630 autobiography *The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith in Europe, Asia, Africke, and America*. He had in fact been shipwrecked in Africa, and Turkey might in some ways be defined as Asian, so his reference to four continents was fair enough. But in general, how true were the "true travels"? Did anyone who read them then really expect them or even want them to be true? No, at least not literally true. Everyone then read travel narratives for the entertaining blend of fact and fantasy that they were. Of course, one might choose to believe that beautiful young women really did throw themselves at the short, stocky, cantankerous Smith every-

where he went, but the idea strains credulity to such a degree that different explanations of what actually happened must be sought.

It must be asked if anything remotely resembling what John Smith described could have occurred that December day in 1607. Unfortunately, the issue was thoroughly clouded by academics before it was eventually clarified by them. In the nineteenth century it became fashionable, amidst a certain circle of dignified white gentlemen scholars (several of whom were of Puritan descent), to denounce Smith as a braggart and a fraud. This caused those who loved him and his legend (a number of whom were of southern descent) to rally to his cause and insist on his absolute veracity in every particular. To this day there are scholars who seek to defend him by showing how biased his initial detractors were.<sup>22</sup> Only very recently have other scholars set aside the debate over John Smith's character and looked instead to the Algonkian culture to settle the question of whether a ritual such as Smith described could have taken place.

It is impossible to believe that Powhatan ever intended to "brain" John Smith. That was a punishment reserved for criminals; it was never meted out to captured warriors of enemy peoples. Captured warriors were ceremonially tortured, allowing them an opportunity to prove themselves before dying; it would later happen to other Englishmen. In 1607 and 1608 Smith probably did not even know about the practice of death by clubbing, but a few years later, back in London, Henry Spelman, an English boy who lived for a while among the Powhatans, published an account of the months he spent with them, including an oft-repeated description of the braining of criminals. In addition, the sequence of events in Smith's story is implausible. He claimed there was religious divining on the part of priests, followed by feasting, then negotiating with the political leaders, and finally the attempted execution. Culturally speaking, this makes no sense: Algonkians might have undertaken any activity on the list but, according to all the evidence that we have, definitely not in that order.<sup>23</sup>

For those who have liked the story, though, it may come as wel-

come news that there is a broad consensus among experts that Powhatan probably did in some way ritually adopt John Smith.<sup>24</sup> Pocahontas conceivably might even have played some small part in a vivid ceremony, along with other wives and children. Adopting Smith would have been in keeping with the Algonkian culture. The paramount chief, as we know, preferred actual sons to rule over subject tribes, but he was certainly willing to work with ritually adopted ones. Establishing kinship ties was the principal means of ensuring his expanding control. Even ordinary prisoners of war were often adopted rather than killed. Furthermore, later events prove that Powhatan and Smith both believed some sort of special tie to have been established between them at that time.

Some of the specifics of what happened emerge by looking at what Smith had to say in each of his successive writings, placing each statement in the context in which it was written and juxtaposing it against confirming or damning external evidence. In 1608 Smith sent a report back to one of his benefactors in England. It was published almost immediately, without his knowledge. Most of what he wrote there is corroborated by the letters and writings of other colonists: there is less reason to doubt it than any of his other writings. Regarding his meeting with Powhatan, Smith wrote that he "kindly welcomed me with good words" and that the first question he asked was "the cause of our coming" to his lands. Indeed, this might well have been the chief's first question: it was certainly what he most needed to know.

By now Smith knew that the Indians did not want the English to stay. He claimed that he managed to convey to Powhatan the following story: that in retreating from a battle with their enemy the Spanish (whom Powhatan apparently knew of), the English sought refuge in the Chesapeake, and since their pinnace was leaking, they were forced to wait until Captain Newport returned from England with another ship. Smith did not claim in this early account that Powhatan was easily duped: very well, said Powhatan, but in that

case, why did the newcomers persist in traveling upriver in their smaller boats? Ah, said Smith, that was because they were looking for the great salt water on the other side of the mountains, where a child of the English king had been slain who needed to be avenged. They supposed the deed had been done by Powhatan's dastardly Iroquoian enemies. Would he, by the way, happen to know the way to the great salt sea? This exchange probably did take place: it was a relevant question on Powhatan's part, and Smith had every reason to suggest that the English king typically avenged any lost "children," that the English were willing to make common cause with the Algonkians against the Iroquoians, and that they would be generous to those who led them to the Northwest Passage.

Powhatan's unintelligible answer, as recorded by Smith, indicates either that he held only a vague notion of continental geography or that Smith did not understand him—probably more the latter. Smith then claimed to have said more—and what he claimed rings true, for the statement he attributed to himself is just the sort of thing that can be conveyed with signs and simple vocabulary: "In describing to him the territories of Europe, which was subject to our great King whose subject I was, and the innumerable multitude of his ships, I gave him to understand the noyse of Trumpets, and terrible manner of fighting."<sup>25</sup>

Pocahontas and the other children would have listened breathlessly to this exchange, watching the pantomiming and dramatic Smith. Then Powhatan made his prisoner a most exciting offer: he would take special care of the stranded English, if they would agree to become his tributaries. He would in fact give them the territory of Capahowasicke, near Werowocomoco. He would supply them with corn and venison if they needed it, and protect them from any enemies, in exchange for "hatchets and copper [that] wee should make him." Most of Powhatan's tributaries produced beads, clothing, and featherwork, but he could see that the English were more adept at making metal tools—and these would be most acceptable to him.

Would the English accept? Would they come to live there? Smith was in no position to point out that the English in fact had the opposite arrangement in mind: they expected Powhatan to become their vassal, not their lord. He said only that they would consider the arrangement.