**Pocahontas Saves Captain John Smith from Execution**

**Legend of Women's History - Is It True or a Myth?**

By [Jone Johnson Lewis](http://womenshistory.about.com/bio/Jone-Johnson-Lewis-3849.htm), About.com Guide



An image reflecting the story told by Captain John Smith of being saved from Powhatan's death sentence by Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas.

*Adapted from an image courtesy of US Library of Congress.*

A picturesque story: Captain John Smith is innocently exploring the new land, when he is taken captive by the great Indian chief Powhatan. He is positioned on the ground, with his head on a stone, and Indian warriors are posed to club Smith to death. Suddenly, Powhatan's daughter appears, throws herself on Smith, and positions her head above his. Powhatan relents, and allows Smith to go on his way. Pocahontas, the young daughter, becomes a fast friend of Smith and the colonists, helping the English colony in Tidewater Virginia to survive in its fragile early years.

Truth or fiction? Embellished? We'll never know for sure. Here are the three positions that historians take on the story:

**Fiction?**

Some historians believe that the story is not true. The earliest surviving story of the incident by Smith is quite different, and he only told the version of being saved by an "Indian princess" after she became famous. Smith was known to go to great lengths to promote himself and his role in the early colony.

In 1612, he writes of Pocahontas' affection for him, but his "True Relation" does not mention Pocahontas or an execution threat when he tells of his expedition and meeting of Powhatan. It is not until 1624 in his "Generall Historie" (Pocahontas died in 1617) that he writes of the threatened execution and Pocahontas' dramatic role in saving his life.

**Misunderstood Ceremony?**

Some historians believe that the story reflects Smith's mistaken interpretation of the "sacrifice." Apparently there was a ceremony in which young Indian males underwent a mock execution, with a sponsor "saving" the "victim." If Pocahontas was in the role of sponsor, this would explain much of her special relationship with the colonists and Smith, helping in times of crisis and even warning Smith and the colonists about a planned ambush by her father's warriors.

**True Story?**

Some historians believe the story happened largely as Smith reported it. Smith himself claimed to have written of the incident in a 1616 letter to Queen Anne, wife of King James I. This letter, if it ever existed, has not been found.

**Conclusion?**

So what is the truth of the matter? We will never know. We do know that Pocahontas was a real person whose help probably saved the colonists from starvation in the colony's first years. We have not only the story of her visit to England but also clear records of her genealogical ancestry to many of the First Families of Virginia, through her son, Thomas Rolfe.

**Pocahontas - Her Age in Popular Images**

What *is* certain is that many Hollywood versions and depictions in popular art are embellishments even on the story told by Captain Smith. Pocahontas was a child of ten to twelve at the time and Smith was 28, according to all contemporary accounts, though they are often depicted as young adults in love.

There is one charming report from another colonist, describing the young "princess" doing cartwheels through the marketplace with the boys of the colony -- and causing more than a bit of consternation because she was naked.

**In Love with Captain John Smith?**

A few historians believe that Pocahontas was in love with Smith, noting her absence from the colony when Smith left and she was told he had died, and noting her extreme reaction when discovered that he was still alive when she visited England. But most historians see the relationship more as Pocahontas having a deep friendship and respect for a father-figure.

**Another Pocahontas Mystery/Myth?**

Another small possible myth connected with Pocahontas: was she married to an Indian man before she married John Rolfe? There is a reference to Pocahontas marrying Kocoum, a "captain" of her father's tribe. She may have -- she was absent from the colony for a few years. But just as possible is that the nickname Pocahontas ("playful" or "willful" one) was applied to another daughter of Powhatan. The source says the one who married Kocoum was "Pocahuntas ... rightly called Amonate" so Amonate was either another daughter of Powhatan, or Pocahontas (real name Mataoke) had yet another name.