

Pocahontas Revealed

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

NOVA brings together ancient artisans, historians, and archeologists to provide a fresh look at the myth of Pocahontas.

The program:

- reviews how Virginia's Jamestown became the first permanent English settlement in the New World in 1607.
- recounts that Captain John Smith and other English settlers came to America to hunt for exploitable resources.
- notes that the English settlers planned to trade goods for food with the Indians* rather than grow their own.
- recounts how Smith came to be captured by the Indians and was eventually taken to their political center, Werowocomoco.
- presents Smith's recollection of the historical meeting—written 17 years after it occurred—that took place between him and Chief Powhatan in which Pocahontas reportedly saved his life.
- traces how archeologists determined where the Werowocomoco site was and documents key findings indicating the location of the longhouse in which the fabled meeting is said to have taken place.
- states that copper was found at the longhouse site and shows the process by which scientists used a spectrometer to determine it was English copper.
- notes how adoption rituals may have played a role in what happened between Smith and Pocahontas.
- recalls how Pocahontas brought food to the English settlers at a time when Jamestown was on the verge of collapse and relates how Indians may have lived at the Jamestown fort for a time.
- provides a reason for why the Indians stopped providing food to the settlers—tree-ring research revealed that a seven-year drought had begun.
- states how English settlers used weapons to start a war with the Indians, eventually forcing Chief Powhatan and his people to move.
- recounts Smith's return to England following an injury and recalls how Pocahontas was told he had died.
- relates Pocahontas' eventual capture by the English and her conversion to Christianity and marriage to John Rolfe.
- follows Pocahontas' return to England where she discovers Smith is still alive and reveals what took place when they were reunited.



* The word "Indians" or "Virginia Indians" is used in this documentary because that was the preference of the people in the program when referred to as a group. When referred to as individuals, they prefer to be called by their specific nation, tribe, or district names.

BEFORE WATCHING

- 1 Ask students to work in groups to make a time line of major events from the initial discovery of America by Paleo-Indians up until 1607 when the Jamestown Colony was founded. Who were the main inhabitants of America when Jamestown was settled?
- 2 In this program, scientists are discovering a new perspective on an historic event. Organize students into groups and have each group choose an event in U.S. history to investigate from different perspectives. (Some events students may want to explore are the Boston Tea Party, the Battle of the Alamo, the Battle of Gettysburg, or the desegregation of Little Rock Central High.) Ask each group to present its findings.

AFTER WATCHING

- 1 Many of the James Fort colonists died and the community was on the verge of collapse when John Smith came back to the settlement after his month in captivity. What were the prime reasons for their vulnerability? If students had to set up a colony in a new frontier, what would they need to consider? What kind of organizational structure would they set up to improve the chances that the colony might thrive and be profitable?
- 2 Ask students how confident they are in the revised story of Pocahontas based on what they have learned from the program. Have students explain their level of confidence in this interpretation of what happened in the early 1600s. How important is the author in an historical account? How can science help shed light on historical events? What are the potential pitfalls in scientific explanations of historical events?

Taping Rights: Can be used up to one year after program is recorded off the air.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

Activity Summary

Students rewrite the story of Pocahontas based on archeological and historical evidence.

Materials for Each Team

- copy of “Examining an American Myth” student handout
- copy of “The Legend of Pocahontas” student handout

Background

Pocahontas’ story has been told for centuries. The popular legend holds that Pocahontas risked her life to save Captain John Smith. As told by Smith, he was brought to Chief Powhatan, the paramount chief of the Powhatan nation that included many districts and lesser chiefdoms. There Smith was welcomed and offered a great feast. Following the feast, he was grabbed by the Indians and forced to lie on two large, flat stones. Indians stood over him with clubs, ready to beat him. Pocahontas rushed to Smith, took his head in her arms, and laid her own head on him in order to save him from death. Chief Powhatan decided to spare Smith’s life.

Recent archeological excavations have uncovered the site to which Smith was brought, Werowocomoco, and artifacts found at the site and historical evidence paint a different view of that possible meeting—that Smith was there to establish a trade relationship, that the chief may have been interested in bringing Smith into his tribe in order to rule over him, and that Pocahontas’ actions may have been part of traditional adoption rituals by the Indians.

In this activity, students explore the differences between the traditional Pocahontas legend and the story that archeological and historical evidence has revealed.

Procedure

- 1 Tell students that they have been hired by a textbook company. The company is about to revise its most popular history textbook and the publishers would like them to write a new story of Pocahontas based on the most recent scientific research.
- 2 Organize students into teams of three and distribute the “Examining an American Myth” student handout to each team. Have team members decide which of the historical figures each team member will take notes on while watching the program: John Smith, Pocahontas, or Chief Powhatan.
- 3 As they watch, have students take notes on their chosen historical figures. When they have finished viewing, have students work in their teams to exchange information they have learned about their figures.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- recount the traditional story of Pocahontas.
- describe ways in which the traditional story has changed based on scientific findings.

STANDARDS CONNECTION

The “Examining an American Myth” activity aligns with the following National Science Education Standards (see books.nap.edu/html/nses/).

GRADES 5–8

History and Nature of Science

- Nature of science

Grades 9–12

History and Nature of Science

- Historical perspectives

*Video is required
for this activity.*

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY (CONT.)

- 4 Distribute “The Legend of Pocahontas” handout to each team. Have students discuss and compare their new observations with the traditional story. Then have students individually write a new version of the story based on what they have learned.
- 5 Ask students to volunteer to present their rewritten stories. After the volunteers’ presentations, compare stories and discuss any major differences among them. Do students think that Pocahontas was at the meeting between Chief Powhatan and Smith? Why or why not? If she was, what might have been her role there?
- 6 As an extension, have students read *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History* by Angela L. Daniel and Linwood Custalow (2007), which presents Pocahontas’ story from the viewpoint of the descendants of her own tribe. After reading the book, have students revisit and further revise their stories about Pocahontas’s role in relations with the English colonists.

Classroom Activity Author

Developed by James Sammons and WGBH Educational Outreach staff. Sammons has taught middle and high school science for 30 years. His teaching practices have been recognized by the National Science Teachers Association, the Soil Conservation Service, and the National Association of Geoscience Teachers.

ACTIVITY ANSWER

The following story lists some of the information learned and conclusions drawn from archeological and historical evidence. Students may list additional information from the program; accept all reasonable answers.

Possible New Story

Archeologists identified the Werowocomoco site and uncovered evidence of a longhouse like the one described by Captain John Smith. Pocahontas may or may not have been at the meeting in the longhouse between Chief Powhatan and Smith. Because she was the chief's chosen child, and was likely with her father much of the time, she may have been there. If she was, and if she did throw herself onto Smith to save him, it may not have been because of a romantic impulse. Some historians believe she may have done it because she was playing her appointed role in an adoption ritual.

Because copper was found at the site, which was determined through testing to be English copper, some archeologists believe Smith may have been meeting with the chief to discuss trade. Smith may have wanted to trade scraps of copper for food for the colonists, while the chief may have been more interested in adopting Smith as a Powhatan and placing Smith under his domain. After freeing Smith from captivity, Chief Powhatan called him son.

While no one knows for sure whether Pocahontas and Smith had a romantic relationship, historians doubt this is true. Smith respected Pocahontas and Pocahontas seemed fond of him, but nothing indicates that they were romantic.

In 1608, Pocahontas brought food to the English colonists when their settlement was on hard times. Good relations ensued between the two cultures—until the Indians stopped bringing food. Tree-ring research showed this occurred when a severe drought affected the region and the Indians may have feared they would not have enough food to feed themselves.

LINKS AND BOOKS

Links

NOVA—Pocahontas Revealed

www.pbs.org/nova/pocahontas

Provides articles, interviews, interactive activities, and resources in a companion Web site to the program.

Four Faces of Pocahontas

www.co.henrico.va.us/manager/pokeypix.htm

Shows four depictions of Pocahontas and recounts her story.

Pocahontas

www.apva.org/history/pocahont.html

Tells the story of Pocahontas' life from birth to death.

Powhatan History

www.powhatan.org/history.html

Describes the Powhatan Renape Nation and includes information about Powhatan history and the Powhatans today.

Virtual Jamestown

www.virtualjamestown.org/page2.html

Includes virtual recreations of the Jamestown fort, interviews with contemporary Indians, interactive maps, source documents, and classroom use tips.

ACTIVITY ANSWER (CONT.)

The English started a war with the Virginia Indians to take what they wanted; Chief Powhatan and his people abandoned Werowocomoco in 1609 because of the hostilities. Smith was badly burned in a gunpowder explosion during this time and returned to England, and Pocahontas was told that Smith was dead. The English later captured Pocahontas. She eventually converted to Christianity, married John Rolfe, and returned with Rolfe to England. While in England, she learned that Smith was still alive and saw him again for the first time in eight years. She expressed her sadness to him that Smith, as a tribal family member, did nothing to try to contact her or her father or come back to help them. A few months after the meeting, Pocahontas died.

Funding for NOVA is provided by David H. Koch, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and public television viewers.

David H. Koch

HHMI



LINKS AND BOOKS (CONT.)

Books

Pocahontas

by Joseph Bruchac.

Harcourt, 2005.

Chronicles what happened to the Powhatans and the Virginia colonists from two different perspectives, that of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith.

Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma

by Camilla Townsend.

Hill and Wang, 2004

Traces Pocahontas's life from her childhood and youth to her eventual marriage to John Rolfe and her move to England.

Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia Through Four Centuries

by Helen C. Roundtree.

University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.

Tells the story of the Powhatans from 1607 through the late 1900s.

The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History

by Angela L. Daniel and Linwood Custalow.

Fulcrum Books, 2007.

Shares the previously unpublished oral history of the Mattaponi tribe—one of the original core tribes of the Powhatan chiefdom—and its memories of 17th-century Jamestown.

Examining an American Myth

The legend of Pocahontas has it that she risked her life to save Captain John Smith when her father, Chief Powhatan, seemed ready to have him beaten to death. But is this legend true? In this activity, find out what scientific evidence has revealed about this tale.

Procedure

- 1 You will be asked to choose one of the historical figures listed on this handout to track while watching the program. Create a chart that includes the name of your historical figure, any evidence archeologists and historians found related to the figure, and what conclusions were drawn based on that evidence. As you watch the program, take notes on the information outlined for your historical figure.
- 2 After the program ends, each of your team members should report to each other what they learned about the historical figures they were following in the film.
- 3 Each team member should read "The Legend of Pocahontas" handout. After reading Smith's original account of what happened, each team member should write a one-page paper summarizing the new story of Pocahontas. The paper should include what researchers now think happened at the meeting between John Smith and Chief Powhatan, what Pocahontas' role was between her tribe and the English colonists, what her relationship was with Smith, and what happened when she saw Smith the final time. Include information about any evidence that supports the new story.

Historical Figures

Captain John Smith:

Record information about who Smith was, what happened to him after he arrived in the New World, and his relationship with Pocahontas.



Pocahontas: Take notes on who Pocahontas was, what role she played between her tribe and the colonists, her relationship with Smith, and what role she may have played at the meeting between Smith and Chief Powhatan.



Chief Powhatan: Write down information about what the chief's role was, how he regarded the English settlers, what his relationship was with Pocahontas, and what his relationship was with Smith.



The Legend of Pocahontas

The legend of Pocahontas has lived on in books, movies, and art. That legend is based, in part, on John Smith's own account of the historical event 17 years after it happened. In the following quote, written by Smith in his 1624 "General Historie," he describes his rescue by Pocahontas.

Having feasted him [Smith]...A long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could lay hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour [Powhatan] was contented he [Smith] should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper....

