

Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma: An American Portrait* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

Priscilla Avitia

When the English arrived in 1607, it wasn't the first time the Natives had seen a large ship come onto their land, and they knew it wouldn't be the last. What they couldn't have known; however, was that this group of people would fight back. In Camilla Townsend's book *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma: The American Portraits Series*, she debunks theories about the encounter between the Native Americans and Europeans, as being unintelligent yet kind people who saw them as gods. Powhatan, an Algonkian chief, knew from past occurrences that Europeans did not abide by their customs and would quickly incite violence if threatened. To manage the English and protect his people, Powhatan used all readily available resources - including his daughter Pocohontas. Together, Powhatan and Pocahontas proved to be competent strategists, which is demonstrated in their resistance to the English.

Powhatan was a powerful paramount chief, or the manitowik, who ruled over thirty Algonkian speaking tribes. He inherited six tribes as a young chief from the Arrohattock on James River to the Youghtanund on the upper York River in Virginia. As a result of the European and Iroquoian conquest up north in Canada, many smaller tribes looked to ban together for protection. Powhatan was a strategic businessman that used peaceful alliances, intermarriages, and forced resettlements of war survivors¹ as a method of gaining power and in exchange for tribute from neighboring tribes would ally with them against their enemies. He took advantage of the situation up north to grow his numbers. It was this combination, of wealth and strength, that had many Algonkian tribes siding with the manitowik and it would come into use once the English arrived.

Powhatan knew of the people who arrived on the large ships, he had three encounters before. Forty years before John Smith arrived, in 1567, the Spanish came and took a young boy from a nearby tribe. They returned ten years later with the boy, newly named Luis, who quickly left the Spanish to return to his people. When speaking of Spain, he told them that it was “a land of thousands and should be killed, or many more would come.”² Their tribe tried to get rid of them but failed because the English came back a few years later in 1585, but their settlement in Roanoke would fail. In 1603, the English arrived again and kidnapped more natives. By 1607, Powhatan knew how dangerous the people who came on large ships could be. He would be faced with a dilemma; does he attack the newcomers and force them to leave? They attempted that in the past, and yet more English arrived on large ships. They could allow the English settlers to remain on their land, but would that be enough to save their lives?

It’s important to note that at no point did any Native people think of the English as gods. Powhatan, as I stated above, was a powerful chieftain, but he knew of the advantages in English technology. They had tools and weapons that his people did not have. He was also aware that, despite there being more natives than English people, the chances of more ships arriving was highly likely. It was for this reason why the English were allowed to remain on their lands, rather than be pushed out. In December of 1607, they brought in an English captive, John Smith, who was paraded from tribe to tribe until they arrived at Werowocomoco. Here he remained for a couple of months, before returning to Jamestown. During this time, Powhatan and the other tribe leaders decided to trade with the “coat-wearers,” as was their custom. By doing so, they could keep the English contained and through them, gain a monopoly of weapons and metal and become more powerful politically³. By “adopting” John Smith through a ritual ceremony they established a

kinship, normally used to connect their tribes. They released Smith after he promised to give them weapons and tools in exchange for helping his struggling town.

Pocahontas, unlike what popular culture has led us to believe, was not her father's favorite daughter, nor was she that important. Pocahontas was the daughter of one of Powhatan's many brides who was from a "family [that] had no political significance"⁴. She was most likely brought to Werowocomoco as a captive from a battle. She had an average childhood like other native children. She was free to play but also joined the rest of the tribe when it came to work. However, she was still the daughter of a chief and was given an excess of gifts and food. She eventually became friends with a young boy named Thomas Savage. He was used as a trade agreement when the English weren't upholding their part of the deal. The two children learned each other's language, which would play a big role in Pocahontas's future. Pocahontas was about ten years old when she made her first trip to Jamestown. She was sent by her father, along with Rawhunt, to negotiate the release of native captives. She wasn't sent because she was seen as important, but rather because she was "among the children he could most afford to lose, and thus the one whose safety he chose to risk."⁵ Another theory is that Pocahontas possessed advanced language skills and was likely their best translator. After the success of negotiating the release of native captives, "she became ever more powerful – more welcome at the fort, and more important to her father."⁶ Her frequent visits to the small town were welcomed by the townspeople, as they viewed her as an adventurous little Indian Princess. The praise was short-lived; however, because Pocahontas' fame led to her eventual kidnapping.

In 1613, Captain Samuel Argall, learned that "the Great Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas was with the great King Patawomeck"⁷. While Pocahontas had more value to her father, because of her language and her relationship with the settlers, she still wasn't of a royal bloodline. She was

not “one of the favorites,” and was able to marry whom she pleased because a union with her did not result in a strengthened political status. The English, however, felt differently. Argall saw the young “Indian Princess” and decided to use her for ransom to get what he wanted from the Natives. He forced Yapassus to strike a deal with him, give him Pocahontas in exchange for the English captives, or they would attack. They were at the edge of Powhatans borders and therefore weren’t as well protected. After Yapassus and his wife tricked Pocahontas, a notice goes out to Powhatan, who quickly offers up whatever they desire as a trade for his daughter. Rather than going towards the village, they go to Jamestown, where her father sends back seven captive colonists and some damaged muskets⁸. Argall would claim that this wasn’t enough for them to return his daughter. The English were starting to expand more rapidly and taking power away from the natives, the very thing that Powhatan wanted to avoid.

Pocahontas met her next husband, John Rolfe, in the town of Henrico. There they attempted to assimilate her into their English customs, such as changing her clothes and teaching her Christianity. With the help of Reverend Alexander Whitaker, by April of 1614 she was able to convert easily, “Whitaker was not all surprised by her quick intelligence; he did not expect her to be stupid”⁹ While it was clear that her husband Rolfe loved her, she most likely agreed to marry him to continue her father’s efforts to maintain relations with the English. She agreed to the union because it was customary to create alliances between groups through marriage. Rolfe could now have his own land and thanks to the union with Pocahontas, didn’t have to worry about crossing into Native land. However, the English used the marriage to their advantage to force the chief to give them the rest of their prisoners and bundles of corn. Years later, after changing her native name to her baptized name, Rebecca, and the birth of her son, Thomas, the Rolfe family were invited by the Virginia company to go overseas to London. For the English, it became a chance to

show the English people the willingness of the Natives to convert into law abiding citizens. For Powhatan it was an opportunity to understand the English, something he had regretted the last time a captive was sent to England. By having Rebecca there, along with Uttamatomakin, they would be able to bring back their report of the English while knowing that they would not be mistreated.

There, Rebecca and her family were used as symbols rather than people and became attractions to the English, fascinated by the native's foreign features and mannerisms. It may have been entertaining to both parties in the beginning, but the pressure of keeping up the "Indian Princess" act was most likely mentally exhausting. It won't be until much later that she starts to experience the physiological effects of being a symbol rather than a person.¹⁰ In March of 1617, Rebecca and her family set sail to return home but wouldn't make it very far before they had to stop at an inn in Gravesend when she and the other Natives were struggling against diseases that their bodies were not equipped to handle. At the age of 21 Rebecca passed away within the inn and on March 21st a small funeral was held at the St. George Gravesend where she was buried in an unmarked grave. Rebecca left no written diaries or journals during her time in London, so no one knows what the young Native American transplant was thinking or feeling while she was away from home. Only assumptions can be made based on others' records. Rolfe, widowed again, made the decision to leave their son in the care of his brother, Henry from London, unknowing that that would be the last time he would see their son.

Back home, Powhatan still held power, though he retreated further into the forest to escape the English. Powhatan was able to hold the English off for as long as possible. He used what was around him, the land and his people, his young daughter included. Unfortunately, the final blow came from his grandson, Thomas Rolfe, who had returned from London at twenty-one years of age to manage his father's tobacco fields. In the 1644 Opechankeno rebellion against the English,

Rolfe chose to fight alongside the English turning his back on his mother's people. In 1647 he was awarded the title Lieutenant and four hundred acres of land in addition to the land he had inherited from his father, where he was born, that he would sell off little by little. Had Powhatan chosen to fight the English, rather than try and make alliances with them in 1607, the end result would have been the same. More English ships would inevitably arrive and settle on their land. However, Powhatan and Pocahontas' efforts were not in vain. Because of them, the Algonkin people, though small in numbers, survived.

¹ Camilla Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma: An American Portrait* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 12.

² Townsend, 5.

³ Townsend, 61.

⁴ Townsend, 13.

⁵ Townsend, 70.

⁶ Townsend, 71.

⁷ Townsend, 101.

⁸ Townsend, 107.

⁹ Townsend, 112.

¹⁰ Townsend, 143.