

Introduction

Nearly every American knows the story of Pocahontas. Yet in most versions Pocahontas's Christian baptism gets only a sentence, if that.

Pocahontas's conversion was probably the most important event in her short life. This book reveals things about that conversion—how she met Jesus—never previously reported. In so doing, it reveals a lot about gospel, culture, and the mythologies of nationhood—all contemporary issues.

This is a true story, and it's a love story. It is also a wrenching tragedy in ways still hard to grasp four centuries after Pocahontas's death. It involves intrigue, deception, sex, violence—but also faith, love, and mission.

Pocahontas was about ten when English colonists waded ashore in Tsenacomoco, now called Virginia, in 1607. Once they'd seen her, the early settlers never forgot her. They were fascinated by this precocious native child who in turn was just as curious about them. Seven years later she would marry one of them—John Rolfe—becoming the firstfruits of what English Christians hoped would be a great gospel harvest and the key to British control of North America.

But Pocahontas's story raises hosts of questions.

Was her conversion to the Christian faith *real*? Did she truly fall in love with Jesus?

Was Pocahontas actually an “Indian princess,” as the British thought?

Were Pocahontas and John Rolfe truly in love?

How could it be that Pocahontas's husband triggered the great tobacco boom?

And what about famous Captain John Smith? Did he and Pocahontas really have “a very mad affair,” as Peggy Lee sang in the 1950s hit “Fever”?¹

1. See Price, *Love and Hate*, 5. Peggy Lee released the song in 1956. Pocahontas sings of Captain Smith: “He gives me fever with his kisses, fever when he holds me tight. . . .”

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More importantly: what does all this have to do with gospel, mission, and nationhood today?

FACT OR FICTION

Pocahontas was born near the end of England's Elizabethan era. This remarkable period is well captured by historian Samuel Eliot Morison: "Under Elizabeth I (1558–1603), England embarked on a course of expansion, spiritual and material, such as few nations have ever experienced. It was the age of Sir Philip Sidney and Shakespeare, of Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Sir Walter Raleigh, of highest skill in matters maritime, and supreme achievements in poetry, prose, and music. In England during that happy era, the scholar, the divine, and the man of action were often one and the same." Although "every attempt at colonization in Elizabeth's reign failed," things were about to change dramatically.²

This also was the age of Pocahontas. Her story takes us quickly to the heart of the myth of America's romantic, benign, and pious beginnings. The true story shakes national foundations. It is also an instructive case study in evangelism, mission, and gospel encounters with culture.

In popular imagination, Pocahontas often gets lifted out of her real Jamestown home and merged into the Plymouth Rock story. Psychologically, Pocahontas blends into the pretty tableau of Pilgrims and Indians at the first Thanksgiving.³ I remember grade school—strutting turkeys, orange pumpkins, dressed-up Pilgrims that we drew or made of construction paper.

Jamestown and Plymouth were both founded in the early 1600s. Commercial Jamestown embodied the American spirit just as much as did pious Plymouth. Together, these colonies capture the dynamics and contradictions of American culture and highlight perennial issues of church and mission.

The myth of Plymouth has to be corrected by the truth of Jamestown. The Jamestown story, the Pocahontas story, is a lot more complex than it first looks.

Here are the facts. Jamestown came first, then Plymouth. Investors in England and about a hundred "adventurers" founded Virginia's Jamestown colony in 1607. The Pilgrims, also numbering about a hundred, landed at

2. Morison, *Oxford History*, 43.

3. See McKenzie, *First Thanksgiving*.

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Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts more than a decade later—in December of 1620. Captain John Smith had actually visited the site seven years earlier and named it Plymouth, after England’s port city. He pronounced it “an excellent good harbour, good land, [with] no want of any thing but industrious people.”⁴

Pocahontas was a real person—an American Indian with her own family and culture. She was born about 1596, professed Christian faith in 1614, and married John Rolfe soon afterwards (a second marriage for both). She was born about the time young Will Shakespeare was writing *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Pocahontas died in 1617, within a year of Shakespeare’s own death, and could have met him in England.

Dying young, Pocahontas left just one son. Yet today thousands of Americans claim the blood of Pocahontas runs warm in their veins. Pocahontas’s son Thomas “left descendants now numbering in the thousands, such that the first and finest among the planter aristocracy, including some residents of the White House trace their line back to Pocahontas and thus to her famous father, Chief Powhatan, notes Edward Wright Haile.⁵ As David Price puts it, Pocahontas would become “the ancestral mother of Virginia’s elite,” with such Virginia aristocrats in her family tree as John Randolph.⁶ Thomas Jefferson, though not a descendant, was pleased that both his daughters married men who were.⁷

Pocahontas was an Indian of the Powhatan federation. I call her and her people “Indians” simply because this is the way the story has been told from the beginning. “Indians” is inaccurate, of course; these are Native Americans, or First Americans, or First Nations peoples—designations that are more culturally apt. But within the understanding of the time, the story is about settlers and Indians—as it still is in popular mythology and in most of the considerable literature and film about Pocahontas.⁸

4. Price, *Love and Hate*, 171.

5. Haile, ed., *Jamestown Narratives*, editorial comment, 794. Estimates of the number of Pocahontas’s descendants in the US vary widely due (in some cases) to uncertain genealogies. Descendants number at least in the thousands; some sources put the number at over one hundred thousand. See Tilton, *Pocahontas*, 2; Brown et al., *Pocahontas’ Descendants*. There is also a compact disc, “Pocahontas Descendant Genealogy Resource CD.”

6. Price, *Love and Hate*, 242.

7. Tilton, *Pocahontas*, 11.

8. I have written or commented on Native Americans in some of my previous books: Snyder, *Populist Saints*, *Concept and Commitment*, “*Live While you Preach*,” and *Signs of the Spirit*.

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But Pocahontas was not her real name. It was a childhood nickname. Her real name was secret and—as we shall see—important to her true identity. Much of the story covered here is in fact about the potency of names and naming.

Names, and sensitivity to them, are important. In 2013 a *Washington Post* editorial called on the Washington Redskins football team to change its name because it's "a racial slur of Native Americans so offensive that it should no longer be tolerated."⁹ Since then a number of others have joined the call or raised questions about similar uses of Indian tribal names¹⁰—bringing to public attention what has long been a simmering issue.¹¹

How did "Redskins" become the name of a professional football team based just a couple days' journey from the spot where Pocahontas was kidnapped by white men many years earlier? Why has no one objected till now?

WHY POCAHONTAS NOW

Four things prompt this fresh look at Pocahontas and her relationship with Jesus and with American national myths.

First, today we know much more about Pocahontas. New research has been done, new books written. Ironically, we know more about her than the Jamestown settlers did.

Second, culture's role in the Christian faith is an increasingly pressing issue. Culture is key in both the Pocahontas and Jesus stories. Of course "culture" means something quite different today than it did in the 1600s. Still, the Christian faith—all religious faith, in fact—is deeply rooted in culture.

Inevitably faith is in bed with culture. In this book we trace the roles culture played and then reflect on it more deeply in the last chapters.

Today the interplay between religion, culture, politics, and economics is increasingly obvious, globally and locally. For Christians, the culture question grows more pressing—not just in "foreign" missions, but "at home" as the church finds burgeoning cultural diversity all around. The

9. "Washington Post Demands Change."

10. Katzenstein, "Time to sideline Washington's race-based team name?"; Huetteman, "Lawmakers Press N.E.L. on Name of Redskins"; Huetteman, "Senator Urges Redskins Change."

11. King and Springwood, eds., *Team Spirits*.

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Pocahontas story is one of the most instructive and well documented—yet neglected—case studies in Christianity and culture in all history. It is a case study in Christian missions. The 2010 book *Remembering Jamestown: Hard Questions about Christian Mission* recognized this, but said next to nothing about Jamestown.¹²

Pocahontas is especially instructive for North Americans (including Canadians) because her story is so deeply embedded in our cultural genes. This means the story has global import as well.

Third, the true story of Pocahontas and her relationship with Jesus turns out to be much more fascinating and prophetic than the popular myth. It has all the elements of a good tale—romance, mystery, subplots, faith; ignorance and arrogance; betrayal and murder; greed and cruelty; love and kindness; shattered hopes and heartbreaking disappointments; harrowing, improbable rescues; even cannibalism (by the British, not the natives).

Amazement at what was, and ache for what might have been.

Fourth, this is a story for now. The United States has never fully faced its violent origins. The conquest of native peoples and lands was neither a minor subplot nor a necessary evil. The Pocahontas story is a strategic conquest story. It initiated three hundred years of relentless “ethnic cleansing as the American Empire expanded westward,” as Professor Dan Hawk of Ashland Theological Seminary recently wrote.¹³ The conquest theme was sanitized as a mythic civilizing crusade, as we shall see. Hawk notes that “conquest narratives as narratives of origin *unify* and *identify*, and they do so through the rendering of oppositions.”¹⁴

At the very beginning of the American narrative Pocahontas becomes the “indigenous helper” who is co-opted in the service of conquest and national myth. By purportedly saving John Smith and then marrying John Rolfe and adopting his faith, Pocahontas fulfills a key mythic function. “The popular account shapes the story to the contours of the Myth, so that Pocahontas occupies a place in American imagination, literature, and cinema second to no other Native American,” notes Hawk.¹⁵

So there is much to learn here, and it comes in the form of a strange story that happens to be true.

12. Yong and Zikmund, eds., *Remembering Jamestown*.

13. Hawk, “Indigenous Helpers,” 112.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 121.

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We focus especially on Pocahontas “the first Native Christian”—so the British claimed. In all the writing and myths about Pocahontas, no one seems to have asked: in what sense did Pocahontas become a true follower of Jesus Christ? What happened to her spiritually? How much did she understand of Jesus and the good news he offered and enacted?

Instead, what developed was the Pocahontas myth. Yet, as Camilla Townsend insists:

Pocahontas . . . was a real person. She was not always a myth. Long before she became an icon, she was a child who walked and played beneath the towering trees of the Virginia woods, and then an adult woman who learned to love—and to hate—English men. Myths can lend meaning to our days, and they can inspire wonderful movies. They are also deadly to our understanding. They diminish the influence of facts, and a historical figure’s ability to make us think; they diminish our ability to see with fresh eyes. What has the myth of Pocahontas kept hidden? And if the real woman could speak, what might she tell us about our country’s inception?¹⁶

OVERVIEW

This book moves generally from narrative to analysis. First we introduce Pocahontas and her world. Next we see how Jamestown survived—but nearly didn’t—then see the key role of John Smith, and learn whether Pocahontas really rescued him (Chapters 1–6).

We focus next on how Pocahontas met Jesus—the crux of the book. This is also the story of John Rolfe and Anglican missionary Alexander Whitaker. We explore the key role of the Church of England catechism in Pocahontas’s conversion (Chapters 7–9).

We deal then with the tragedy of Pocahontas. This includes her fateful voyage to England, her life as a London celebrity, and her tragic death (Chapters 10–11).

Chapters 12 through 15 reflect on the meaning of the story and the questions of gospel, mission, and national mythmaking. We trace what became of the Pocahontas story in the four hundred years since her death, up to and including Disney and the dreamy 2006 movie *The New World*,

16. Townsend, *Pocahontas*, ix–x.

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starring young Q'orianka Kilcher as Pocahontas. Gazing at the many faces and uses of Pocahontas we may want to ask, “Did Pocahontas die for our sins?”

Chapter 16 summarizes the “long, bitter trail” from Pocahontas’s time to our own, identifying recurring patterns.

Finally, we glimpse Pocahontas in heaven; hear her speak. This leads to a discussion of the “so what” questions—the urgencies that are still with us (Chapters 17–20).

The book thus becomes a case study in mission practice and theory, interlaced with dynamics of culture and national mythology, with this added plus: unlike mission studies that deal with today’s events, in this case *we know the rest of the story*. We know much about what the early settlers thought and said and how things turned out.

With one big exception. We know almost nothing of what Pocahontas herself actually thought. We have nothing written from her own hand (true also of Jesus) and very few records of conversations. We wish we knew what was going on in Pocahontas’s mind and emotions!

But we do find some intriguing clues and some clear hints.

Here then is the real Pocahontas story you won’t find anywhere else.

Rayna Green, curator of the American Indian Program for the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, wrote in 1975: “Perhaps if we explore the meaning of Native American lives outside the boundaries of the stories, songs, and pictures given us in tradition, we will find a more humane truth.”¹⁷

17. Green, R., “Pocahontas Perplex,” 715.