

# Pocahontas: Comparing the Disney Image with Historical Evidence

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**“Can anyone name a famous Native American?”** At first, one eager hand went up, and then another in my fourth grade social studies class. Within seconds, there was a sea of hands willing to answer this question. I called on one student who answered, “Pocahontas.” The other hands went down.

## Introduction

Fourth grade students “know about” Pocahontas, but is this knowledge based on historical fact, or on information from the media, specifically the Disney movies *Pocahontas* and *Pocahontas II*?<sup>1</sup> To address this question within the context of the New York State Social Studies curriculum and the New York State English Language Arts standards, I created a critical literacy and history unit of study in which students compared the fictionalized accounts of Native American life and the biography of Pocahontas as shown in the Disney movies with historical accounts from other sources, such as encyclopedia articles, websites, books, and magazine articles. Some of these resources were authored by Native Americans.

The New York State social studies curriculum requires fourth grade students to know that Native people were the first inhabitants of our state, and to learn about their pre-Columbian way of life.<sup>2</sup> This is a good place to start, but more could be done. The curriculum does not ask teachers and students to examine why there are not as many Native people living in this area as there were in the 1400s. I believe that many people in our

society, including teachers, have been taught a Eurocentric view of history, since that is often what is written in our history textbooks.<sup>3</sup> In this unit of study, I wanted to confront the Eurocentric view of Native American history head on.

The New York State English language arts standards requires students to identify different perspectives and judge the accuracy of what they read.<sup>4</sup> Although we may not be able to influence what or how movies are made, we can teach our students to look critically at what they see, hear, and read. The skills of critical thinking might then transfer to other situations in which various media are feeding us alluring, but often erroneous, information. There were many differences between what my students observed in the Disney movies and the evidence they discovered in their research.

## Lesson Outline

Students can watch clips from the Disney movie, *Pocahontas*, and complete a study guide that provided a list of questions (side bar, this page).<sup>5</sup> I encouraged students to ask that the tape be paused in order to complete entries listed on the study guides. When one student requested a stop, it was a clue

## Questions for Comparing the Movie *Pocahontas* with Historical Evidence

What was Pocahontas’ age?

What did Pocahontas look like?

What was John Smith’s age?

What did Smith look like?

What was the first thing the soldiers did when they arrived at Jamestown?

What was the name of Pocahontas’s tribe?

Does this tribe still exist?

What did the soldiers think about the Native people?

What did the Native people think about the soldiers?

Did Pocahontas save John Smith’s life?

Who was Ratcliffe? How did medicine men help injured people?

What special knowledge did the Native people have that the soldiers did not have?

Who was Wiggins? Was he real? Describe him.

Did the settlers all leave for England to never return?

What did the soldiers take with them when they sailed away?

Figure 2. right: This is the only life portrait of Pocahontas (1595–1617), and the only credible image of her. Simon Van de Passe engraved it in 1616 while Pocahontas was in England. She appears stiff in Jacobean court attire, but the costume probably hid tattooing and provided the chaste image wanted by the Virginia Company, which sponsored her trip and probably commissioned the print.



Source: Virginia Historical Society ([www.vahistorical.org](http://www.vahistorical.org)).

Figure 3. far right: This is a detail from a watercolor drawing “Indian Woman and Young Girl” by John White. In 1585–1589, White, an artist and cartographer, was at Roanoke Island for about thirteen months before returning to England. White made a series of more than seventy watercolor drawings of indigenous people, plants, and animals. The purpose of his drawings was to give those back home an accurate idea of the inhabitants and environment in the New World.

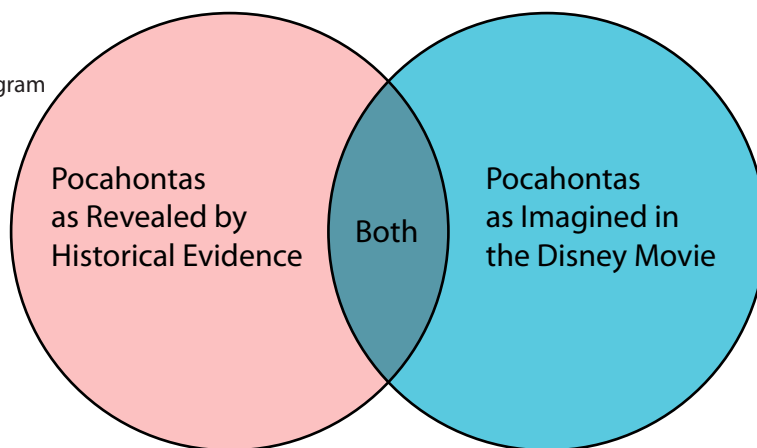


Source: Virtual Jamestown ([www.virtual-jamestown.org](http://www.virtual-jamestown.org)). Image © The British Museum.

to other students that perhaps they too should make notes. I encouraged students to help each other and talk about what they were writing during this activity.

- After observing crucial passages on the screen, students researched historical evidence and compared it with information provided in the movie. My students used multiple sources including encyclopedias, books, web sites and magazines. I had previously collected sources that I thought my fourth grade students could read (mostly) independently, and I made all of these available. Included were some sources written by Native people.
- In a large group, we discussed historical differences between the Disney image of Pocahontas and the personal story of Pocahontas as revealed by historical evidence. Since each student researched just one or two questions on the study guide, the discussion allowed students to learn from their classmates.

Figure 1.  
Venn diagram



During our discussions, we recorded all inaccuracies using a Venn diagram. (Figure 1)

- The Venn diagram was then used as a graphic organizer to help students write short essays, which they did by themselves or with partners, depending on interest. These essays analyzed which parts of the movie clips appeared to be historically accurate and which appeared to be incorrect. Students supported their opinions with details that compared and contrasted information from the movies and from other sources. The main

points of these analytical papers were shared through discussion with the whole class.

- Once it was determined that the movies were in many ways inaccurate accounts of Pocahontas' life, I led the class in a discussion about stereotypes. We discussed the “fine line” between harmful stereotypes and artistic license regarding details of “insignificant” nature in the telling of a story. Students became aware during this discussion that a person's perspective on what is significant and what is not depends a lot on who is speaking.



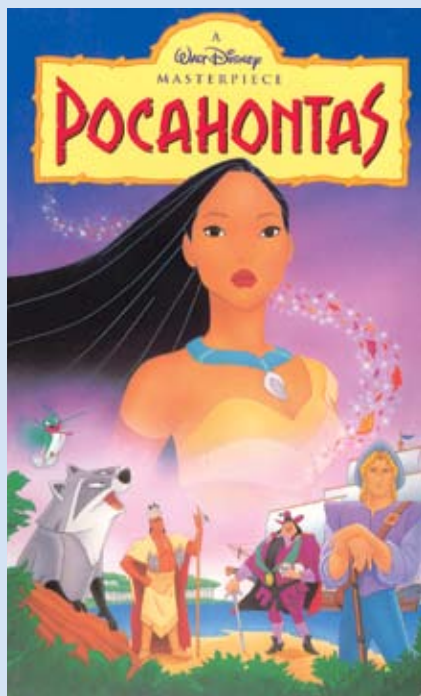


Figure 4. left: This is Pocahontas as recreated by animators at Disney. She sports very long hair, displays an hourglass figure, and wears an off-the-shoulder mini-dress. Eastern Native women wore long dresses with removable sleeves, and some clothing items were decorated with beads, but the style did not include short hems or bare shoulders.

- The final class discussion focused on why people need to be critical about the information they hear, see, and read, and why it is important to know the difference between different sources, such as historical documentary versus a movie made for entertainment. This discussion included reflection on where students should look for accurate historical information.
- The class repeated the process by studying information presented in the movie *Pocahontas II*, which is an optional activity for teachers to pursue as time allows.

### Historical Inaccuracies

Although much of Pocahontas' history is not well documented and is perennially argued by historians, there are some aspects of both movies that are clearly historically incorrect. In addition, both movies subscribe to stereotypes about Native People that may have helped with movie marketing, but were not of service to Native Americans.

First of all, Pocahontas did not look the way she is imagined in these movies. An

engraving that was made of Pocahontas during her lifetime is the "oldest item in the National Portrait Gallery's 18,000-piece collection."<sup>6</sup> Disney animators could have used the original engraving as a model, but they changed the image to one that resembles an Asian Barbie doll. (Figures 2–4)

What are the cultural implications of changing Pocahontas' looks? Why wasn't Pocahontas drawn with Native features? My students decided that perhaps from the animators' viewpoint it was enough that Pocahontas did not look white. Were the animators thus suggesting that people can look one of two ways: white and not white, and all else is unimportant detail?

My students also discussed the drawings of Pocahontas' dress compared with what we know about the way eastern Native people dressed. Disney's Pocahontas wears an off-the-shoulder mini-dress. She runs barefooted. In reality, eastern Native women wore long dresses with removable sleeves. Some clothing items were decorated with beads, but the style did not include short hems or bare shoulders.<sup>7</sup> My students discussed why Pocahontas' outfit was drawn so unreal-

istically in the films. They concluded that the Disney Pocahontas fits the image of beauty to which Americans subscribed in 1995 C.E..

Historical accounts indicate that Pocahontas was approximately 10 to 12 years old when she met Captain John Smith, who was in his late 20s.<sup>8</sup> In the films, both Pocahontas and Smith look to be about 20 years old. Changing their ages allows Disney to perpetuate the love story myth. In the movie, Pocahontas and Smith fall in love, and this romance saves all the other settlers. In the movie, Smith is shown as the only white man with compassionate feelings toward the Native people. Historically, the reason these colonists came to this country was for financial gain. There is no evidence that Smith had motives different than the other settlers.

There is no historical account of a romantic relationship between Pocahontas and Smith.<sup>9</sup> Pocahontas was probably curious about the white settlers, and the white settlers may have seen her as a link to the other Native people. The settlers were anxious to establish a relationship with the Native people, hoping this would help ensure their survival in the early years. The settlers also hoped the Native people would help them find the "riches" they were seeking.<sup>10</sup>

In the movie, Pocahontas saves Smith from death at the hands of her father, Powhatan. Smith may not have been aware of it, but it is likely that he was participating in a ritual adoption ceremony.<sup>11</sup> It was tribal custom to have a mock execution that symbolized death and rebirth as a Native person. Pocahontas, as the chief's daughter, most likely had a role in the ceremony.<sup>12</sup> This was a ritual, and not part of a romance. Smith returned to England after only one year. The legend of Pocahontas saving Smith's life probably came from Smith's writing, which he published after her death.<sup>13</sup>

There is a historical inaccuracy in the movie with regard to the first leader of Jamestown. The first elected official's name and title, President (not governor)

Edward Maria Wingfield, are part of the public record, yet this name was not used in the Disney movies.<sup>14</sup> Why does Disney choose to change this name, but not that of Pocahontas or John Smith? There are other characters in the movie who may have been real people. Again, Disney does not portray them in their roles as determined through historical evidence, but borrows their names for invented roles.

At the end of *Pocahontas*, the English settlers abandon their colony and sail back to England, empty handed. This is not an accurate telling. “Jamestown is the site of the first permanent English colony in America. On May 13, 1607, one hundred seven Englishmen arrived in three small ships and moored them to the trees on this island. The following day the English came ashore—never to leave.”<sup>15</sup> When settlers did return to England, they brought resources and curiosities from the New World. One of the most important “commodities” was Native people, who were sold as slaves.<sup>16</sup> This is the history that is necessary for our students to understand.

### ***Pocahontas II***

With the commercial success of *Pocahontas*, Disney studios released a sequel three years after the original. Since many of the characters are the same from one movie to the next, the stereotypical images continue. The plot line also continues to be untrue. In *Pocahontas II*, Pocahontas finds out that Smith died, and she sails to England as a diplomat. In reality, Pocahontas married a white man, John Rolfe, who is credited as the first person to grow tobacco in the New World. Her marriage was part of her negotiated release from the colony (she was held without her consent). According to historical accounts of the Powhatan Renape Nation, Pocahontas’ descendants, Pocahontas was not given a choice whether or not to marry John Rolfe; it was one of the conditions of her release.<sup>17</sup> She was converted to Christianity and her name was changed to “Rebecca.” Rebecca, John Rolfe, and

their infant son sailed to England when Pocahontas was 21 years old.<sup>18</sup>

The Virginia Company of London, sponsors of Jamestown, paid for Rolfe’s journey. The Rolfe family’s mission was to raise additional funds for the colony. Rebecca’s role was to show financial backers that Native people could be converted to white, Christian ways. The sponsors of the Jamestown Colony saw marketing possibilities in this regal, converted, English-speaking Native princess. Pocahontas never returned home; she died of disease while still in her early 20s.<sup>19</sup> Scholars argue whether or not Pocahontas saw John Smith in England, and whether or not she wanted to see him.<sup>20</sup>

In the first film, Pocahontas wants to go to England with Smith, but stays behind to help her own people. In *Pocahontas II*, she is well received by English society. Historical records show that she was indeed wined and dined, but her reception was probably more of a curiosity than an embrace. Pocahontas could be recognized as “first and almost the last Native to be accepted into British society...through marriage.”<sup>21</sup> Interracial couples were more readily accepted into Native culture than white culture. The children of Native people and white people were often given positions of political power by the tribe, because their knowledge of both cultures was considered an asset. In contrast, white culture rejected interracial couples and termed their children “half-breeds.” In fact, the descendants of Rolfe and Pocahontas were called the “Red Rolfes.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Stereotypical Characters**

As discussed in a previous section, Pocahontas’ character is not only historically inaccurate, but stereotypical. John Smith’s image is also stereotypical. He is shown as tall, blonde, handsome and muscular. Is there any reason why our heroes are portrayed this way? This was another question we discussed after the students completed their research. Again, the students decided that the

Disney animators drew the hero to fit the image of American beauty.

In *Pocahontas*, the Native people are shown as mystical and magical. The healer in the movie is seen shaking rattles over a hurt man. In reality, Native people are credited with deriving medicine, including a form of early aspirin, from natural sources such as the willow tree.<sup>23</sup> Many medical practices of the Native people were based on trial, error and discovery, not magic as shown in the movie. Many children believe this stereotypical image that Native people believed in and practiced magic, rather than the science that they had discovered by this time in history.

Another disturbing stereotype in *Pocahontas* is that of Ratcliffe, the governor of the colony. He is shown as greedy and single minded. Ratcliffe wants the gold that he believes is in the area. His character could be described as unintelligent and mean. Instead of tending to necessities, he has his colonists immediately digging for gold. In the context of the movie’s plot, digging for gold makes no sense. This greedy, dim character is portrayed as overweight, with black hair and a hook-nose. His look is “clearly taken from the consistent and repeated portrayal of Jews by the official artists of the Nazi party.”<sup>24</sup> Is this an appropriate image for any movie? Today we are sympathetic to the way Native people were treated and mistreated in the past. But there is danger if people simplify the relationships between the settlers and the Native people. Children should learn that the riches of the Americas motivated English explorers and settlers. They had technological advantages that allowed them to travel, and guns that allowed them to over-power the people they met.<sup>25</sup> They may have been greedy, but they were not unintelligent.

Ratcliffe’s assistant, Wiggins, is also stereotyped. Wiggins is drawn with characteristics that are very effeminate, suggesting homosexuality. While the other colonists are digging for gold, Wiggins is pruning the trees into animal shapes.

He prepares the meals with certain flair, and takes care of Ratcliffe's well-groomed dog. His character is dim-witted, and has funny lines. This character is the jester; the one that the writers make ridiculous. This is another stereotypical image making its way into a movie for children. This movie perpetuates stereotypes that are counter-productive to teaching students to be accepting of all types of people.

A final point expressing why these movies are not helpful is the use of the word "savage." Many Native Americans react to this word in the same way most African Americans react to the "n-word." This reference is repeated often in both films and in the lyrics of the songs. Many Native Americans criticize the films and the songs. Chief Roy Crazy Horse wrote, "It is unfortunate that in this sad story, which Euro-Americans should find embarrassing, Disney makes 'entertainment' and perpetuates a dishonest and self-serving myth at the expense of the Powhatan nation"<sup>26</sup>


## Conclusion

Unfortunately, for many people, the movies *Pocahontas* and *Pocahontas II* are a "history lesson" and a reflection of "real people." For many of our children, the story they see and hear is accepted as fact. My concern is that children need to understand the difference between what they see, hear and read in the media and what is generally accepted as historical truth.

Most children have an acute sense of fairness. Children can understand many of the issues that affected Native people, and they will be able to relate to the story of Pocahontas and her tribe. Students in my class were able to watch these movies and separate fact from fiction. They do not accept the Disney movies as a history lesson.

The lesson can go much further. The concept of "historical truth" is evasive. Children need to understand

that authors, and filmmakers, bring a perspective to their work that may not be accepted by all readers and viewers as "truth." It would be an interesting follow-up activity to have students research a historical Native leader or event where Native people were included. Students could read various accounts to see how different authors can have different perspectives. The readings should include accounts by Native people. The interesting analysis would be to question why different authors, or different texts, might see the same people or events in very different ways.

There is a real need for a "truth in media" aspect to our curriculum in both primary and secondary schools. We can educate our children to understand that the media works best as the starting point for our public discussions and not as settled doctrine. If everything we see on television, read in the newspapers, hear on the radio and read on the web is not to be accepted as fact, then we need to teach our students how to critically evaluate what they hear, see, and read in all forms of media.<sup>27</sup> We need to teach children to ask, "Who said this is true?" Understanding the inaccuracies of *Pocahontas* and *Pocahontas II* can help students think more critically about the information to which they are exposed from all forms of media. 

## Notes

1. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, directors. *Pocahontas, The Colors of the World* (Film, Hollywood, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment/Disney 1995); Tom Ellery and Bradley Raymond, directors, *Pocahontas II, A New World* (Film, Hollywood, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment/Disney 1995).
2. NYS Social Studies Standards ([www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/)).
3. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).
4. NYS Language Arts Standards ([www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/)).
5. I had the luxury of time to be able to show the whole movie, but this commitment of time is not necessary. Using clips from pre-selected passages in the movie can work as well.

6. John F. Ross, "Picturing Pocahontas," *Smithsonian Magazine* 29 (1999): 34.
7. Laura Redish and Orrin Lewis, "Native Languages of the Americas: Algonquin Indian Fact Sheet" (2005), [www.geocities.com/bigor-rin/algonquin\\_kids.htm](http://www.geocities.com/bigor-rin/algonquin_kids.htm).
8. Gary Edgerton and Kathy Merlock Jackson, "Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, The 'White Man's Indian,' and the Marketing of Dreams," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24, no. 2 (Summer, 1996): 90-98.
9. John F. Ross.
10. John F. Ross.
11. Dennis Montgomery, "Captain John Smith," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* 16 (Spring, 1994): 14.
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13. Dennis Montgomery.
14. Crandall Shifflett, Virtual Jamestown, "Edward Maria Wingfield" (2000), [www.virtualjamestown.org/reference.htm](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/reference.htm)
15. The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, "Jamestown Island: Visiting" (2000), [www.apva.org/apva/about\\_us.php](http://www.apva.org/apva/about_us.php).
16. Theda Perdue, "Slavery," *Encyclopedia of North American Indians* (1996), Frederick E. Hoxie, ed. Houghton Mifflin Online Study Center [college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/naind/html/na\\_036400\\_slavery.htm](http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/naind/html/na_036400_slavery.htm)
17. Chief Roy Crazy Horse, Powhatan Renape Nation, "The Pocahontas Myth" (Rankokus Indian Reservation, NJ), [www.powhatan.org/poc.html](http://www.powhatan.org/poc.html).
18. John F. Ross.
19. John F. Ross.
20. Mayflower Families; Chief Crazy Horse.
21. Jean Fritz, *The Double Life of Pocahontas* (New York: Puffin, 1983); Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, "Disney's 'Politically Correct' Pocahontas: Race in Contemporary American Cinema: Part 5," *Cineaste* 21 (Fall, 1995): 36.
22. Chief Roy Crazy Horse.
23. Karyn Siegel-Maier, "Native Spirit: Native American Herbal Medicine" (date unknown), [herbalmusings.com](http://herbalmusings.com). Click on "Articles."
24. Mark Van Proyen, "Media and Media-ocracy." *The Coastal Post* (1995), [www.coastalpost.com/95/9/media-m.htm](http://www.coastalpost.com/95/9/media-m.htm).
25. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).
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27. Sandy Muspratt, A. Luke, and P. Freebody, eds., *Constructing Critical Literacies: Teaching and Learning Textual Practice* (Hampton, NJ: Hampton Press, 1997).

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