

THE COMMISSION
FOR HISTORICAL
STATUES
IN THE UNITED
STATES CAPITOL

CANDIDATE UNDER CONSIDERATION

POCAHONTAS

(d. 1617)

POWHATAN CONFEDERATION, Werowocomoco, Gloucester County

Contribution to Virginia: *Daughter of Powhatan. Iconic figure in American history. Mythic personification of the foundation narrative of Virginia.*

CRITERIA

Suggestions for a historical figure to represent Virginia in the U.S. Capitol, where each state is entitled to two statues, must conform to criteria established by the office of the Architect of the U.S. Capitol. That criteria requires that the person honored—

- be deceased,
- be illustrious for historic renown or for distinguished civic or military service, and
- represent only one individual.

While the criteria also requires that the person must have been a U.S. citizen, it does make exceptions for an indigenous person who resided in the present-day U.S., such as Pocahontas, one name already submitted to the commission.

To those criteria, the commission has added additional values and attributes. The historical person must be—

- associated with significant events that changed the course of history
- or associated with significant ideals, writings or concepts
- or renowned for exemplary valor, patriotism, and bravery.

The person also must be one whose primary historical significance ties her or him directly to Virginia — or who spent the majority of his or her life residing in the commonwealth. And the historical figure should represent current prevailing values, according the commission's criteria.

Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography
Contribution by Helen C. Rountree (edited for length)

SUMMARY

Pocahontas was the daughter of Powhatan, paramount chief of an alliance of Virginia Indians in Tidewater Virginia. An iconic figure in American history, Pocahontas is largely known for saving the life of the Jamestown colonist John Smith and then romancing him—although both events are unlikely to be true. In 1613 she was captured by the English and confined at Jamestown, where she converted to Christianity and married the colonist John Rolfe. In the centuries since her death in England in 1617, Pocahontas's life has slipped into myth, serving to represent Virginia's early claim to be the foundation-place of America.

DETAIL

Pocahontas was one of dozens of children born to Powhatan, the paramount chief of Tsenacomoco, a political alliance of Algonquian-speaking Indians in Tidewater Virginia. Her mother's name and tribal origin were never recorded. Pocahontas's first opportunity to see an Englishman came late in December 1607, when John Smith was brought to Powhatan's capital at Werowocomoco. Smith had initially been a captive, but after being vetted by the high priests, he arrived as an honored guest. In *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), he famously wrote that he was threatened with death only to be rescued by Pocahontas, a story that subsequently became legend. However, in a more reliable account—a letter written a few months after his visit—Smith said only that he was feasted and then interviewed by Powhatan.

In the spring of 1608, Pocahontas traveled to Jamestown as part of a delegation charged with negotiating the release of several Indian captives. From the autumn of 1608 onward, relations between the Jamestown colony and Powhatan became more strained, culminating in the First Anglo-Powhatan War. In April 1613, Captain Samuel Argall heard that Pocahontas was visiting Passapatanzy, a satellite town of the Patawomecks, one of his trading partners. Argall pressured the subchief, Iopassus (Japazaws), to assist him in taking her prisoner, promising an alliance against Powhatan. After conferring with his superior, Iopas-



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian

sus agreed, and with his wives' help, lured Pocahontas aboard Argall's ship. Argall promptly transported her to Jamestown and sent a ransom demand to her father.

At Jamestown, she was baptized and given the Christian name Rebecca, at which time she also revealed her secret name, Matoaka. By the time the English forced the issue of ransom payment in March 1614, she and John Rolfe apparently had fallen in love. The English and Powhatan assented to their marriage on or about April 5, 1614. There is no record of where Pocahontas and Rolfe were married or where they lived after the wedding, although Rolfe owned land around Smith Fort, across the river from Jamestown. A son, Thomas, was born sometime later.

Powhatan, meanwhile, called a halt to his ongoing war with the English. It is unlikely that Pocahontas negotiated the peace, as some writers have claimed, nor would she have been needed as an interpreter by then. Instead, she served as a figurehead—a symbol of peaceful relations and a Christianized “savage”—and in 1616 the Virginia Company of London paid her passage to England.

After landing in Plymouth in September 1616, the party traveled overland to London. She had an audience with the bishop of London, John King, and also met King James I at Whitehall Palace. After relocating outside London, the Rolfes were awarded a large grant by the Virginia Company to start a mission and they decided to return to Virginia. After a two-month delay because of bad weather, the Rolfes embarked in March 1617, however Pocahontas shortly thereafter took ill. She died at Gravesend, down the Thames River from London, where on March 21, she was interred under the chancel of St. George's Church.

Pocahontas is one of the iconic figures in American history. Since her death, her life story—buttressed by few and not always reliable historical sources—largely has been

supplanted by myth. Except for her time in London, her contemporaries paid little attention to her, and they wrote next to nothing about her. In fact, she did not become a celebrity until the 1820s, when southerners sought a colonial heroine to compete with the story of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts and so establish Virginia (more accurately) as the earlier of the two English colonies.

Because of her celebrity, Virginians have long sought to connect themselves with Pocahontas. After St. George's Church burned in 1727, her bones and those of all the other people buried under the church floor were reinterred in a mass grave in the churchyard. Attempts made in the 1920s to identify her bones were unsuccessful. However, many Virginians have claimed descent from Pocahontas. The Racial Integrity Act, passed by the General Assembly in 1924, allowed the state to assign all newborns to racial categories and disallowed the mixing of those categories, especially in marriage. But one exception was made: “persons who have one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian and have no other non-Caucasic blood shall be deemed to be white persons.” Referred to as the “Pocahontas clause,” this language was added in direct response to an outcry by elite Virginians who claimed Pocahontas and John Rolfe as distant relatives and who worried that, according to the proposed law, they were not considered to be white.

Such connections, though, have always been tenuous at best. Pocahontas's son, Thomas Rolfe, never joined the Virginia colony's elite upon his return in 1635. He died in 1681, place unknown, and left behind an unknown number of children, if any. Virginia kept no consistent records of births, marriages, and deaths before 1853, and no part of a Thomas Rolfe–descended genealogy was written down until the 1820s—in other words, exactly when the Pocahontas myth was beginning to be constructed. Who is and is not actually descended from Pocahontas thus remains both cloudy and controversial.

EXISTING STATUES OF THIS CANDIDATE:

Statue, Historic Jamestowne, Virginia
Statue, (young girl), Gloucester Co., Virginia
Statue, Gravehead, England
Statue, Overland Park, Randolph Co., Arkansas
Statue (folkart), Pocahontas, Iowa