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# Pocahontas: The unknown and underestimated hero of central Virginia

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## POCAHONTAS: THE UNKNOWN AND UNDERESTIMATED HERO OF CENTRAL VIRGINIA

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In the midst of all the rumors, false perceptions, and fables of an iconic Indian princess, there is the legend of a man. His name was John Smith, an English adventurer who was sent on a charter by the Virginia Company to colonize Virginia. After spending two months in captivity, captured by Indians, Smith is about to be clubbed to death by Powhatan, a famed Native American leader. With Smith's head on the clubbing board, Pocahontas, Powhatan's daughter, swoops in and throws her head on the board, bringing to a halt her father's efforts to kill Smith. At the time, Pocahontas is young and impressionable, only about eleven or twelve years old (Bridenbaugh, 2003). She understands that Smith's situation is indeed a matter of life and death, so much so that she flings herself in harm's way to save Smith's life. As a result of Pocahontas' interactions with Smith, she forms a companionship with the Englishman and the other colonists, assisting them in their early years of settlement in Tidewater, Virginia, and guiding them to survival and prosperity. While there is some debate about the veracity of Pocahontas' daring feat among historians, there is no doubt that the tale captures the courageous essence of the young woman's heroism.

Some scholars make the claim that Pocahontas' rescue of Smith is entirely fictional, arguing that the "earliest surviving story of the incident" is extremely different than the one told by Smith himself, as he only told "the version of being saved by an 'Indian Princess' after she became famous" (Johnson Lewis, 2016). It was not until 1624 in his *Generall Historie* after Pocahontas died in 1617, that he told of the alleged execution, and of Pocahontas' key role in saving his life. However, some historians have argued for the truth of this account as Smith reported it, writing of Pocahontas' heroism in a letter to Queen Anne, the wife of King James I, in 1616 (Johnson Lewis, 2016). Despite the two conflicting beliefs of the accuracy surrounding Pocahontas' saving of John Smith's life, she was undoubtedly an important historical figure who saved the colonists from starvation during their first years in Virginia.

The purpose of this chapter is to dispel some of the false perceptions of Pocahontas and elaborate on her many acts of selflessness during the early colonization of Virginia. These actions added up to a meaningful life of heroism. Through the use of various scholarly articles and sources, we can attempt to understand her heroism as it pertains to her relationship with the English colonizers sent by the Virginia Company. Pocahontas' contributions to the heroic history of Richmond largely go unnoticed, but it is this chapter's aim to bring her and all of her varied accomplishments into the light. Without her guidance and knowledge, the state of Virginia would not exist as it does today.

#### THE HEROIC JOURNEY OF POCAHONTAS

In attempting to understand Pocahontas' life and all it means to the formative history of Richmond, Virginia, it is important to consider her life in a biographical context, not simply a heroic context. Without Pocahontas, the colonization of Virginia would not have enjoyed the successful foundation that it did, as the colonizers sent by the Virginia Company would not have been able to navigate the area without her guidance. Therefore, Pocahontas' life and contributions to the foundation of the colonization of Virginia can be analyzed through the lens of Joseph Campbell's (1949) journey of the hero. We

can understand and appreciate the life of Pocahontas by examining the three phases of her journey: *departure*, *initiation*, and *return*.

### The Familiar World: A Paramount Chief's Daughter

Pocahontas began her life simply as the daughter of Powhatan, paramount chief of a group of Indians in Tidewater, Virginia. Later in her childhood, one of handfuls of children born of Powhatan's many wives, Pocahontas joined his large household to work, participating in what was typical women's work of the time (Rountree, 2011). It is likely, based on old folklore and letters from John Smith, that Pocahontas was her father's favorite daughter. Although her birth-name was not Pocahontas, her assignment to this name by her father may be a possible explanation for his favoritism. William Strachey, a Jamestown native who was alive during Powhatan's dominance, translated Pocahontas' name to "little wanton" (Rountree, 2011). This demonstrates the comfortability Pocahontas was able to find in her surroundings as a child, particularly as it pertains to her familial involvement and ties with her community. She began her life in the mundane, predictable world of her village before entering the departure phase of the hero's journey.

### Departure: Captivity in War and Involvement with the English

We first turn to our hero's departure, the stage of the hero monomyth during which the hero is separated from the normal world and her comfortable surroundings. Pocahontas' departure commenced with her captivity during the First Anglo-Powhatan War in 1613 and her increased involvement with the English settlers in her village. Initially, the settlers had been welcomed and embraced by Powhatan's people, but as time went on, the relationship deteriorated. The colonists began making demands of the villagers who had been so generous to them in the past. Due to adverse weather conditions, the Indians could no longer provide the colonists with foods in the same abundance as before.

Over time, as the relations continued to decline between the two peoples, Pocahontas' visits to the settlers became less frequent. John Smith's people, however, did not forget her (Stebbins, 2010). In 1613, the English carried out

their plan to capture Pocahontas, transporting her to Jamestown, Virginia, and promptly killing Pocahontas' husband, Kocoum. Despite Powhatan's ability to sway the Englishmen to return some prisoners and weapons, the settlers refused to return his daughter. During her captivity, Pocahontas became extremely depressed, submitting to the demands and desires of her captors, and eventually suffering a nervous breakdown (Stebbins, 2010). During our hero's departure, she was thrown into unfamiliar surroundings as a direct result of a threat to the peace of her community. Pocahontas' comfort in her ordinary world was disrupted, and she was forced to adapt to this unfamiliar and perilous situation.

### Initiation

During the initiation phase of the monomyth, Pocahontas underwent trials and tribulations in the process of developing her true heroic character. In her captivity, Pocahontas delved into her spiritual self, receiving help and guidance from others, all while enduring the various difficulties associated with her captivity. Moreover, a minister, Alex Whitaker, helped Pocahontas cope with her captivity through Bible readings, and she would eventually convert to Christianity. Pocahontas then met John Rolfe, who believed that marrying her would "save her soul" by way of Christian marriage. He had recently lost his own wife and child, suggesting that a marriage to Pocahontas was likely a salve for his own soul. Pocahontas then voyaged to England after years of fostering peace between the settlers and the Indians, a voyage symbolizing Pocahontas' transformation from a morally conflicted, unsure daughter of a renowned chief to the desired image of the Virginia Company, more spiritually grounded with the English settlers.

### The Challenge of Cultural Abandonment

In her captivity, Pocahontas was forced to assimilate and adopt her lifestyle to the English, European ways. She was "cooperative, for the good of her people, as a means of survival" and "she knew how to handle such a situation" (Stebbins, 2010). She was taught the English ways of life and values by Reverend Alexander Whitaker, being baptized under the Christian faith and confessing her belief in Jesus Christ (Pinnix, 2016). Living in captivity forced

her to do what she had to do to stay alive, and also to please her captors. If this meant converting to Christian faith and adopting the ways of the English settlers, she was willing to sacrifice her own cultural identity as a result.

Her captors made a point of separating her from her family and all thoughts of them in order to assimilate her fully into their European culture. The Englishmen “insisted her father did not love her and told her so continuously,” and as a result, Pocahontas had a nervous breakdown (Stebbins, 2010). She did not know it then, but this breakdown would be the first of many arduous tests she would face during her captivity, and in the spring of 1614, the English would continue their forced assimilation of our hero. The settlers staged an exchange during which they contacted Powhatan, trading Pocahontas for a ransom payment. During the trade, a fight broke out that terminated the exchange with Powhatan. As a result, the English told Pocahontas that this refusal to follow through with the exchange proved that he did not love her, and that he loved his weaponry and his tribe more than she (Stebbins, 2010). In the first stage of her initiation, Pocahontas was faced with many challenges pertaining to cultural abandonment, as she was compelled to do whatever it took to survive. However, this was only one of the few tribulations she faced during her journey.

### Her Two Marriages

In her early years of adulthood, prior to her captivity, Pocahontas would encounter a challenge that, although it may not have seemed severe at the time, would present her with significant hurdles later in her heroic journey. In 1610, Pocahontas married Kocoum, who was not, to her father’s dismay, a chief or a councilor. Although it is told that Pocahontas loved Kocoum, Pocahontas would meet widower John Rolfe during her captivity. Famous for bringing the cash crop of tobacco into the colony of Virginia, Rolfe and Pocahontas would fall in love, according to English letters, accounts, and documents (Stebbins, 2010). Allegedly, once she was kidnapped and fully assimilated, Kocoum realized divorce was unavoidable. Pocahontas faced the challenge of accepting her English future and all its implications, including marriage, or fighting for her comfortable past with Kocoum. However, it was not entirely a choice Pocahontas could make herself, as she had the pressures

of the Englishmen to become entirely European in her way of living. Her marriage to John Rolfe resulted in a period of peace between the English and Powhatan peoples.

The “Peace of Pocahontas” symbolized at least one of the first periods of tranquility and rest during Pocahontas’ initiation phase. During this time, The Virginia Company of London thought they could encourage Pocahontas, a new convert to Christianity and wife of an Englishman, to push investors to seek interest in the Virginia Company. With the challenge of arranged marriage came the fallout of her “captivity” marriage to an Englishman, John Rolfe. She was forced to assimilate to European customs during her captivity, and with her marriage to Rolfe this assimilation became cemented. This marital union and subsequent transformation marked a pivotal point in Pocahontas’ heroic journey.

#### Mentors and Spiritual Guidance

While Pocahontas possessed a strong moral compass, her story is incomplete without mention of her many mentors and spiritual guides. Joseph Campbell’s (1949) hero’s journey emphasized that mentors have a significant transformative effect on the hero, and the story of Pocahontas is no exception. Throughout her traumatic captivity, Pocahontas was in constant contact with Alexander Whitaker, “being carefully instructed and fashioned to piety and civility,” eventually confessing her faith in Jesus Christ (Pinnix, 2016). In this unfamiliar world of the Englishmen, she learned the English language, religion, and various cultural expectations surrounding European ways. In 1614, Pocahontas converted entirely from her previous beliefs to Christianity, baptized as “Rebecca,” and was married by Whitaker to John Rolfe later that year (Stebbins, 2010). Remembered as “the Apostle of Virginia,” Whitaker became extremely close to Pocahontas, serving as her religious guide and stepping stone to the next phase of her transformation. Whitaker and Pocahontas’ relationship supports Campbell’s (1949) contention that mentorship plays a key role in a hero’s transformation.

## Villains and Impediments

While the hero's journey focuses largely on the actions and transformation of the hero, our legend Pocahontas encountered many villains and obstacles to finding her true self. Particularly during the early phases of her captivity, Pocahontas met various Englishmen whose main goal was to hold her hostage, force her assimilation, and deceive her into becoming a pawn of the Virginia Company. Among the first villains Pocahontas encountered were Iopassus and Captain Argall, whose English ship she entered at the beginning of her captivity. Iopassus' wife deceived Pocahontas into boarding the ship by feigning sadness and crying. Despite Pocahontas' intuition that something was not right, she boarded the ship anyway (Stebbins, 2010).

Argall promised to allow Pocahontas to exit the ship the morning after her initial capture, but when morning came he refused to let her go. Argall held her for ransom until her father returned various weapons and English captives held by Powhatan's people. Thus Pocahontas was harmed by two villains, Argall and Iopassus, deceived by their promise to release her. However, not long after her marriage to John Rolfe and soon after overcoming these villainous impediments, Pocahontas was able to return to her village for the final phase of her heroic journey.

## Return to the Familiar World

At the conclusion of Campbell's hero's journey (1949), the hero returns to her original familiar world to "bestow a boon" to her people. After traveling to England in 1616 with the Rolfe family and raising money for her village back home, Pocahontas boarded a ship to voyage back to Jamestown, Virginia. However, before her return, she crossed paths again with John Smith, the man whose life she saved when she was a mere child. After months spent in England, Pocahontas was visited by Smith and, overcome with emotion, she turned away from Smith, unable to speak (Stebbins, 2010). Her heroic journey was ripe for completion, requiring her return back to her village in 1617.

Pocahontas was now ready to bestow her knowledge and gifts to her fellow Powhatan people.

Despite her never reaching her hometown and never directly being able to give back to the Powhatan people in Jamestown, Pocahontas was conscientious about sending gifts to them while abroad in London with the Rolfes. In her captivity, she did what she had to do to survive, knowing that at the end of the day, she was on a journey to give back to her people. Pocahontas had the will to survive and acquired the mission to become an entirely new person, all in hopes of returning to her people and bestowing her knowledge and gifts once she made her voyage back to Jamestown.

#### The Gift to Her Home and to the World

As mentioned earlier, Pocahontas left her village with John Rolfe to voyage to England, where she raised money for Virginia. Her intention was return to her village to bestow her peace, knowledge, and gifts from the outside world to her people. Lacking the strong immune system to survive her exposure to European germs, she lost her life heroically raising money and resources for her people. At the conclusion of her heroic journey, Pocahontas can be seen, in Campbell's (1949) terms, as "the master of both worlds." She fostered a peace between her tribe and the Englishmen in Jamestown, Virginia, and was able to live comfortably between both cultures. Moreover, Pocahontas was known to be responsible for keeping the peace in Virginia. According to historic documents, after her death the so called 'Peace of Pocahontas' "began to slowly unravel" and "life for her people would never be the same" (Stibbens, 2010).

#### Pocahontas' Final Voyage and Sacrifice

According to historical texts, in March of 1617, the Rolfe family returned to Virginia, first making their voyage down the Thames River. Pocahontas became gravely ill during the early stages of the journey and died from a respiratory ailment (Stibbens, 2010). Sadly, Pocahontas had the intention of completing the final phase of the hero's journey but was unable to directly carry out her mission. Fortunately, the money she raised and knowledge she

gathered during her time in England and in captivity was transferred to her people directly by the Rolfe family, thereby cementing her heroic legacy.

Pocahontas was buried in St. George's Church in Gravesend, England, and since that time there has been speculation surrounding the accuracy and truth of her story and the extent of her heroism. Historically, there is no question that she traveled to England to raise money for the Virginia Company, intending to further the lives of her people in Jamestown. It is also widely agreed that Pocahontas short life was brimming with heroic acts, starting at the age of eleven when she saved John Smith's life at the clubbing board in her village, and ending with her paying the ultimate price, sacrificing her life on a journey to give back to her people.

#### EVIDENCE OF POCAHONTAS' HEROIC TRAITS

After analyzing Pocahontas' heroic journey through the lens of Joseph Campbell's monomyth (1949), it is clear Pocahontas underwent the heroic journey and transformation, bestowing a boon to her people despite her unexpected death on her return voyage to Jamestown. Drawing from various scholarly articles on heroism and heroic traits, Pocahontas' qualities and virtues can be examined for their heroic characteristics. Two heroism science researchers, Allison and Goethals (2011), proposed that all heroes possess most or all of eight categories of traits that they called the *great eight traits* of heroes. These eight heroic traits are: smart, strong, resilient, reliable, selfless, caring, charismatic, and inspiring. Similarly, drawing from Kafashan et al's (2017) evolutionary analysis of heroism, we can place Pocahontas' heroism and biography into a heroic lineage, making sense of why she acted the way she did, how perceptions of her have changed over time, and why her fame has increased over the centuries.

Pocahontas' great eight heroic traits manifested themselves throughout her life, whether in the safe, familiar world of her village, or during the three stages of the monomyth. With regard to the trait of intelligence, Pocahontas undoubtedly showed savvy and prudence. She was able to guide the colonists around the Jamestown settlement, providing the settlers with direction

and knowledge of their surroundings they otherwise would not have had. Pocahontas was also strong, withstanding her captivity by the colonizers, despite suffering several breakdowns and assimilating to their culture in order to stay alive. She also showed resilience during disputes with her father surrounding her involvement with the settlers, and during her forced assimilation by the Europeans.

Pocahontas also displayed selflessness, placing her head on the chopping board just moments before her father's planned execution of John Smith, and eventually sacrificing her own life to become a symbol of peace and mediation between the native peoples and Europeans. She was also caring, ensuring that all the funds she collected in Europe would make it to her hometown in Virginia. Despite much debate regarding her dispositions and mannerisms, there is evidence that Pocahontas' charisma "won her freedoms often denied other women, Indian or English," and that "it was not her physical beauty so much as her charisma and personality that attracted people to Pocahontas" (Snyder, 2015). Moreover, her steadfast commitment to assisting the colonists in their efforts to navigate the area and settle on the land prove her reliability, in that she never wavered in her allegiance to them.

Finally, Pocahontas' most telltale trait is her inspirational quality. Her ability to inspire is perhaps Pocahontas' most notable, discussed, and debated trait among historians and throughout history. While some scholars have questioned her ability to have inspired those around her, it is clear that her charisma moved people, with her personality attracting many of her friends and companions whom she kept close. Apparently, to the English, Pocahontas was "an exotic, inspiring source" to all around her, but some historians argue the opposite solely based on her silent demeanor and dispositions (Snyder, 2015). After examining all eight characteristics that compose the great eight, it is clear that Pocahontas is a member of an elite club of heroes who possess all eight qualities, not simply a majority of them. However, despite her obvious heroism exemplified in these eight traits, the public's view and opinion on her has changed over time, primarily due to the evolution of heroism as a concept.

According to Kafashan et al.'s (2017) evolutionary analysis, heroism can be defined as "going beyond the expected benefits," that "kin are expected to help kin," and that "extreme helping directed toward kin are often not viewed as heroic." Therefore, based on the evolutionary concept of kin selection, Pocahontas' initial act of heroism that catapulted her into history books, placing her head on the chopping board to save John Smith, can be seen as especially heroic. Pocahontas saved John Smith, a mere settler, someone of a different race, with full knowledge that the fitness benefits would be far less for her than those resulting from rescuing a biological relative.

Pocahontas' heroism can also be understood by examining the evolutionary concept of costly signaling theory. Kafashan et al. (2017) describe costly signaling theory as "the notion that observable displays are associated with unobservable qualities" and that "people can use cooperative behavior as signals to communicate their underlying qualities to others." With regard to Pocahontas, her relationship with the English settlers in Jamestown resulted from her (the signaler) and the settlers (the responders) gaining from "being on opposite, but complementary, ends of the signal" (Kafashan et al., 2017). In applying this theory to heroism, some people "...are essentially costly signalers -- high quality individuals who incur fewer costs (or reap greater gains) for advertising desirable traits to observers by providing higher-than-expected benefits to others" (Kafashan et al., 2017). Pocahontas risked her life all along her heroic journey, providing extremely high benefits to those she helped in her acts of great heroism. For example, Pocahontas underwent a long, hard journey to England in order to raise money and give back to her village people in Jamestown, reaping high rewards to those on the receiving end of her signals. It is clear from both an evolutionary analysis of heroism and a great eight trait analysis of heroism that Pocahontas was, in fact, among a rare and elite class of heroes.

#### POCAHONTAS' TRANSFORMATION

As defined by Joseph Campbell (1949), the monomyth of heroism portrays a hero who "ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive

victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” Moreover, the monomyth implies three different kinds of transformations during the hero’s journey: “a transformation of setting, a transformation of self, and a transformation of society” (Allison & Goethals, 2017). In this section, we will first focus on and highlight Pocahontas’ individual transformation, or transformation of self. We will then examine Pocahontas’ transformative effect on the colony of Jamestown and on the state of Virginia as a whole.

According to the monomyth of the hero, the hero’s personal transformation precedes her transformation of society. Although she was not able to live past her return phase of Joseph Campbell’s monolith (1949), her self-transformation occurred long before that, primarily during her departure from the familiar world of her village. As described by Campbell (1949), the hero “must be cast out of her familiar world and into a different world” because “without a change in setting, the hero cannot change herself, and without a change in herself, the hero cannot change the world” (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Our hero, Pocahontas, is immediately cast from her familiar world, and is thrown into a frightening unfamiliar setting, surrounded by people she does not know who hail from a culture she does not know, to a place she does not know. She is forced to adapt.

In undergoing these drastic adaptations, our hero learns new things about herself and acquires a mature, fresh world of realizations she had not recognized before. She undergoes a healing process through her transformation after being held in captivity, an idea consistent with Allison and Goethals’ (2017) suggestion that “transformations promote healing” and that “sharing stories about one’s transformations can deliver many of the same benefits as group therapy.” During and after her captivity, her mentor Alex Whitaker urged her to journal and focus deeply on her spirituality via scripture. Through these avenues, Pocahontas was able to transform herself from a spiritually wobbly and frightened daughter of a paramount chief to a sound, sure Indian princess. As a result of her reliance on spiritual guidance from Whitaker and her bonding with settlers and Europeans in London, she was able to focus on her heroic mission, namely, raising money for her village in Jamestown. Pocahontas’ transformation of the self comes as a result of

her leaning on spirituality and guidance from others around her, such as Whitaker and husband John Rolfe. In all these ways, she was able to come into her own as an Indian princess. As a result of this personal transformation, Pocahontas was able to transform her people.

After her arrival in Europe and consequent death on the ship back to Jamestown, Pocahontas' life continued to transform society beyond the Virginia colony, and continued to do so indirectly for centuries. Although the monomyth specifies that the hero should make a return to her hometown to "bestow a boon" to her people, Pocahontas never made it home after her journey from England. Yet with help from others, she was still able to transmit her "boon" and transform society as a result, becoming a cultural icon of inspiration (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Because "the culmination of the hero's journey is the hero's boon, or gift, to society" and because the boon is "what separates the hero's journey from simply being a test of survival,"

Pocahontas' transformative effect on her people is evident through the fact that society essentially fell apart in Virginia after her death. This unraveling of peace and stability between the English and the Powhatan people provides strong evidence of Pocahontas' heroic impact on both sides. Both her life and her death contributed to the transformation of society. The purpose of her voyage to England with John Rolfe was not only to begin her life with him, but to raise funds and spread awareness of life back in the Americas, specifically as it pertained to her village people in Jamestown. She was able to transform society through her own personal transformation, undergone in her voyage and time spent in England, as well as her time spent in captivity. In short, Pocahontas was able to transform herself and transform her people, even in death.

In light of her transformative effect on society in the colonies, we would be remiss in our effort to offer an analysis of Pocahontas' heroic journey if we did not discuss her inspiring effect on the general public today. We next turn to the role of purpose in shaping Pocahontas' heroic life.

## HOW POCAHONTAS INSPIRES US TO LIVE WITH PURPOSE

Let us now examine Pocahontas' legacy and impact on society today. Although she died about 400 years ago, she left us gifts that have been transmitted to us in meaningful ways. Heroes are seen as "impelled by other-oriented rather than selfish motives, usually in order to protect others" (Green et. al., 2017). Pocahontas demonstrated the exact "other-oriented" motives that heroes are compelled by internally, with her desire to "protect others" which, in this instance, was John Smith. Her initial heroic act, placing her head on the chopping board to save John Smith, was a catalyst to her hero's journey that was studded with various acts of heroism along the way. However, the meaning and significance of Pocahontas' heroic acts are rarely questioned or discussed, particularly with regard to how her actions can help us live a life of meaning and purpose. While some have defined meaning as "a combination of coherence and purpose," others have defined a third component of meaning: "significance... or one's life making an important contribution to humanity" (Green et. al., 2017).

Pocahontas' life contributed largely to humanity's perception of heroism, and it continues to inspire that definition when one considers her steadfast commitment to the villagers of Jamestown. Her life's work has encouraged countless people to develop "other-oriented" motivations in their daily lives. As Green et al. (2017) have noted, humans are "focused on transcending the self and connecting with a larger group or bigger goal through purpose, which involves making productive, enduring contributions to the world and leave us feeling significant." Throughout her lifetime, Pocahontas not only engaged in bold acts of heroism, but also steady "other-oriented" heroism, slowly chipping away at what was a solid, difficult block, motivated by a desire to help her colony flourish. If doing so meant risking her life, Pocahontas was willing to do exactly that in order to "bestow a boon" to her people. Her life has inspired much of the western world to live with a driven sense of purpose.

Purpose, in the context of heroism, is defined as "a commitment to act in ways that benefit the world beyond the self." Historically, while definitions have varied, the consensus is that "a purpose in life represents a stable and

generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once personally meaningful and at the same time leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self” (Bronk & Riches, 2017). Pocahontas’ entire life was dedicated to contributing to the greater good of her village and advancement of its colonization and people, which can be seen in her cross-oceanic efforts to raise funds for the colonization of Virginia, and her assisting the settlers in their colonization efforts. This purpose-guided heroism motivates us, as a society, to act with a purpose, to be good to others, and to ensure our heroic acts are directed toward furthering the collective best interest.

#### LEGEND, MYTH, DISNEY PRODUCTION, AND LEGACY

Throughout history, the perception of and story behind Pocahontas’ life has been skewed by many factors, one of the most prominent being the Walt Disney film production *Pocahontas* (1995). Despite Walt Disney boasting the film to be “responsible, accurate, and respectful,” many Powhatan peoples and descendants of Pocahontas vehemently disagreed with this claim and were offended by the inaccuracy and false portrayal of Pocahontas and her people (Stebbins, 2010). Although the impact of a Disney movie should have little to no impact on a historical legend so widely known, the film no doubt heightened her popularity. For most people, the Disney version of Pocahontas is the only version they will ever know, as there are scant resources on the Powhatan princess accessible to the public beyond the film. Therefore, due to the Disneyfication of her story, misconceptions surrounding Powhatan peoples and Pocahontas’ heroic contributions have blossomed.

The placing of Pocahontas on a pedestal above her other Powhatan siblings in society is largely, if not entirely, due to the Walt Disney production. The film raises the issue about the extent to which there has been exaggeration surrounding her heroism, as well as debate surrounding the historical accuracy and fair portrayal of the Powhatan peoples. There has been much speculation about the accuracy of John Smith’s account of Pocahontas’ rescuing him from Powhatan’s clapping, as it is the only account that exists of the incident that catapulted our princess into the heroism discussion. Smith first described the

incident 17 years after it happened, after Pocahontas' death, and after she was already a world-renowned princess. Therefore, the question is raised: What does this mean for Pocahontas' heroism? And what does it change about her heroic status? Regardless of the extent to which Pocahontas saved and contributed to John Smith's life, historians have "confirmed the incident" with artifacts from the 17th century (Stebbins, 2010). However, most Powhatan people today remain skeptical, explaining that "it is part of a longer account used as justification to wage war on Powhatan's nation" (Stebbins, 2010).

Although there is much debate surrounding the truth of Pocahontas' heroism, primarily as it relates to the saving of John Smith and portrayal of the princess in the Disney production, these external factors are merely outside influences aimed to sway our perception of Native American people, pinning the concept of "good Indians" and "bad Indians" in our minds. Our views of Native Americans resulting from Pocahontas (1995) may be negatively skewed, thus contributing to distortions of the truth about the Powhatan princess. However, the Disney film will never alter the central fact that she, indeed, was a hero in ways that go well beyond the hotly debated John Smith incident.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As the Disney character, Pocahontas is quoted as saying that her love for rivers derives from the fact that "you cannot step in the same river twice. The water is always changing, always flowing." Just as rivers are always changing, never the same, our perception of heroism is dynamic as well. A heroic act performed three centuries ago cannot possibly be interpreted the same today as it was then, nor will our perception of the significance of the word "heroism" remain the same. The definitions, perceptions, and significance attributed to heroic acts have changed. However, despite these changes and shifts in view over the years, along with shifting historical analyses of Pocahontas' life and achievements, her heroism has remained unquestioned.

I conclude this chapter with the proposal that without Pocahontas' heroic wisdom, strength, and mentorship, the state of Virginia would not exist as

the thriving economic and cultural force that it is today. Her acts of heroism, occurring as they did during a key formative time in Virginia's history, forever changed the social, political, and economic destiny of the state. Pocahontas departed from her familiar world, encountered trials, obstacles, and villains, and yet was able to bestow a boon to her people at the conclusion of her life. Pocahontas encompassed all aspects of heroism. The classic hero, according to Campbell (1949), "ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Pocahontas triumphant, heroic status is ensured, despite objections by some historians and even some of her own Powhatan people. In applying the various theories and taxonomies of heroism science, I have demonstrated how and why Pocahontas has earned the status of hero and in fact ranks among the greatest heroes in Richmond's history. After all, she is the very reason the Commonwealth of Virginia exists today.

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