



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume III: Race and Representation in American Cinema

Pocahontas, From Fiction to Fact: Using Disney's Film to Teach the True Story

Curriculum Unit 96.03.06
by Christine Y. House

In recent years there have been numerous movies which have shown American Indians in a positive light. Kevin Costner, in *Dances with Wolves* (1990), attempted to show the innocence, foresight and acquiescence of the Sioux in the face of the white man's encroachment upon their land and their way of life. His is one of the few modern "Indian" movies which has found wide acceptance. Films such as *Black Robe* (1991), *Thunderheart* (1992), and *Pow Wow Highway* (1989) are considered cult films and are not widely known. All of these films present an accurate portrayal of Indian life whether it be from a modern or historical perspective, but are rarely seen on television or enjoy significant financial success. Their audience seems to be limited to people with a strong interest in Indian culture or to American Indians themselves.

Children from the inner city have even less of a chance to see these films. Many are too sophisticated to hold a child's interest. Further, they are not available through the traditional avenues. As a result, the image that most children get of the American Indian is one of a primitive, war-like or simple people. It comes from old movies and cartoons which run constantly on the myriad cable television channels. As educators, it is our responsibility to try to correct this misinformation by whatever means will accomplish the task.

Walt Disney Studios has recently offered another source of misinformation in the form of the animated film *Pocahontas*. Disney has used its "Hollywood" license to convey a collection of misinformation to the American public. In addition to exaggerating parts of the tale and embellishing the legend of a romance between Pocahontas and John Smith, the setting of this movie is very much unlike the coastal plain of Virginia which the Powhatan people called home. In my unit of study, I will use this popular movie as well as two other versions as tools for extracting the truth about Pocahontas, the Powhatans and their encounters with the English in 1607. It will be an interdisciplinary unit encompassing all areas of the curriculum.

This unit will be used with fifth grade students as part of their study of American history. The basic plan will be to pique the children's interest with the showing of the Disney film and then begin the process of correcting the inaccuracies. For instance, in this version Pocahontas is portrayed as a young adult woman when she met a young John Smith. In fact, the Powhatan princess was a mere child, about eleven or twelve years old, when she met Smith who was 27, more than twice her age. Whether or not there was more than a friendship is pure speculation. Women, even young ones, were in control of their own bodies among the Powhatans according to Helen C. Rountree, author of two recent scholarly volumes about this tribe. It is, therefore, entirely conceivable that there was some attraction between them. It is supposed that it was during this time that John

Smith and Pocahontas learned enough of each other's language to be able to communicate with each other. In his memoirs which were published in 1624, he included a brief dictionary of Powhatan words. Their fascination with each other may have been as innocent as learning each other's languages. Whatever their relationship, it suffered when Smith left Virginia. It was further damaged when he failed to visit her until she had been in England for some time.

The actual events of Smith's rescue by Pocahontas are questionable, at best, as they have never been corroborated by any other source. Many of the English who came to Virginia in 1607 recorded their adventures either in journals or in letters sent back to their homelands. Several were artists and left drawings of the Indians they encountered or of their villages. The only mention of this famous rescue came in a letter from Smith himself to England's Queen Anne in 1624, more than ten years after the alleged event. Since then, historians have picked apart his account as inconsistent with the behaviors and traditions of the Powhatan Indians. Some historians have suggested that the "rescue" was part of a Powhatan ceremony or ritual in which a stranger is adopted into the tribe. In John Smith's account of this event, he reported that it was preceded by a great feast. While it was common practice among the Powhatans to torture their male captives before killing them, it was not their custom to celebrate such acts of cruelty by feasting beforehand. Both the A&E documentary about Pocahontas and the live action movie support this point of view. After some discussion of the Disney version, the children will be shown the live action movie, *Pocahontas: the legend* and then asked to compare and contrast various elements of these two fictionalized versions.

While the focus of this unit is to correct the misinformation about Indians, the movie *Pocahontas: the legend* provides an opportunity for a study of the geography and climate of the state of Virginia. This live action film takes a number of liberties with the actual events but it does incorporate many historically accurate scenes which lend credibility to it. For instance, it makes a concerted effort to make the point that John Smith's rescue is part of a ritual and not a real threat on his life. One drawback is that this particular event takes up a great deal of this movie, along with the building of the friendship between Smith and the young Pocahontas.

The Powhatan people lived in eastern Virginia, and occupied a region that corresponds roughly to the coastal plain of modern Virginia, extending about one hundred miles from east to west (including both shores of the Chesapeake Bay) and one hundred miles from north to south. While the area is indeed lush and beautiful, it does not have the high waterfalls from which Disney's Pocahontas dove. They were put in for visual and dramatic effect. Travelogues of Virginia as well as the A & E Biography *Pocahontas* will provide an accurate portrait of this tidewater area.

The climate of eastern Virginia is considerably milder than that of coastal Connecticut although there are some similarities in that the tidal waters tend to moderate the effects of winter. Virginia's really cold season lasts only three months and there are fresh fruits and berries available for better than half of the year. We will discover what kinds of trees and bushes are native to this area, compare them to that of our area and discuss their value as food. We can also bring in a discussion of food and nutrition in general and food preparation and preservation in particular.

Clothing as shown in the Disney animation and live action version will also be examined. The clothing worn by the English was somewhat true to period but that which was worn by Pocahontas and her family and friends is a concession to American dress codes. Especially in a movie made for children, nudity is unacceptable. Sketches made by early English explorers show the Powhatan and other Virginia Indians wearing very little clothing except in colder weather. Men wore a fringed, buckskin breechcloth and women, a fringed buckskin apron and strings of shell beads or fresh water pearls. Both sexes wore leggings and moccasins when they

went into the woods and buckskin mantles or matchcoats for warmth in winter. The live action film *Pocahontas: the legend* makes a serious attempt to recreate the clothing worn by the Powhatan men. They also recreated the mantle or match coat which is supposed to have belonged to the Chief Powhatan. It is made of buckskin and decorated with shell beads. The designs are of a man and two animals surrounded by many circles of shells. This will provide an opportunity to discuss and understand the purpose of clothing and to examine our own attitudes toward nudity. We can also bring in an examination of the way Indians in general conserved their resources. We can look at how the deer, for instance, was used in its entirety, for clothing, tools, weapons and storage.

There is a brief glimpse of the daily lives of the Powhatan in each of the three films. Clearly, the Disney offering is the most fanciful, but all offer views of their homes which were like traditional Woodland Indian longhouses. They were well adapted to the climate, providing an airiness in the summers and with extra mat coverings, warmth in winter. They were a settled people, that is, their villages remained in the same basic area and their gardens were nearby. Because of overplanting, sometimes gardens were abandoned for richer soil. The food they grew was the traditional corn, squash and beans. No one owned the land as we own land today. Instead, land belonged to the tribe and was available to those who would work it or use it for hunting. Sometimes there was an overlap of hunting grounds, but demarcation lines were understood between tribes.

Disney doesn't tell all of the Pocahontas story. The animated version doesn't show how Pocahontas helped the English settlement at Jamestown. Were it not for her compassion and support, many more of the residents of that community would have died. The live action version does show the young princess bringing food to the English fort, but ends with her waving goodbye to Smith's ship as it leaves for his homeland. In fact, as we learn in A & E Biography, Pocahontas is told that Smith has died on his return to England from a serious burn he received at the fort. This unit provides an opportunity for the students to learn about what happened to Pocahontas after John Smith left Virginia. It also offers an occasion to examine the reasons for the conflicts between the Powhatan and the Jamestown colonists. Her life did continue. She remained friendly with the English settlers, continuing to befriend them and intervene in an effort to keep the peace. Eventually she was taken prisoner by the English as they attempted to stem some of Powhatan's power. This was done while she was away from home visiting friends. During this time, she learned about English customs and further studied the language. She became Christianized and changed her name to Rebecca. She later, with her father's approval, married an English widower, John Rolfe in April of 1614. A year later she bore a son, Thomas. Rolfe was experimenting with the use and growing of tobacco. In the spring of 1616, the Rolfe family went to London where Pocahontas was widely and popularly received. An artist of the period did an etching of her which has survived, so we have an idea of what she actually looked like. She wanted to return to her land and people, but contracted typhus, tuberculosis or small pox before she could make the journey. She died in March of 1617 at the age of 21 or 22. John Rolfe left his infant son in the care of relatives in England and returned to Virginia where he expanded his land holdings which were ultimately passed on to his son. Thomas Rolfe returned to Virginia in 1635, when he was twenty years old. He claimed his inheritance of land from his father as well a large parcel of land from his grandfather, Powhatan.

In 1625, John Smith published his memoirs of his life and times in Virginia. He never married and died in England at the age of 51 in 1631.

In the course of separating fiction from fact in the study of Pocahontas with the students, I hope to establish some guidelines by which anyone, especially children, can judge the inaccuracies found in the movies and cartoons they view. If the children learn techniques for critically viewing the portrayal of Indians in movies and cartoons, they should be able to transfer that skill to other types of movies and make them into more

discriminating viewers.

This unit will be used with fifth grade students. It is hoped that they will be sophisticated enough to comprehend the ideas of scant clothing and conservation of resources. Students will first view the Disney version of *Pocahontas*. They will be asked to record their impressions of the movie as well as speculations as to what may have happened during the rest of her life. After some discussion of our impressions from the Disney version, we will then view the live action movie *Pocahontas: the legend*. Again students will be asked to record their impressions. We will compare and contrast these impressions and then leave room to correct or adjust them after viewing the A & E Biography of Pocahontas. This video is quite a bit more sophisticated than the other two films and somewhat dry, but I think it can be used successfully when presented as a follow up to the other two. Ironically, it uses some footage from the live action film *Pocahontas: the legend* showing the arrival of the ships from England as well as a few other scenes.

Fifth grade social studies focuses on American history. The earliest continuous English settlement was founded at Jamestown in 1607 by Sir Edward Wingfield, Captain Christopher Newport and Captain John Smith. This unit sets the stage for studying that which followed and establishes early in the school year that the Indians of North America were here first, there are other Indians than those who on the Great Plains and that there are many ways any one subject can be interpreted.

LESSON ONE

When beginning any unit of study, it is necessary to lay a foundation from which to build. In this particular case, it will be important to understand where the Virginia Colony was located particularly in relation to modern day Virginia. It will also be important to identify the vocabulary which supports this unit. The children will be encouraged to keep a journal in which to record their impressions, findings and research. They will be encouraged to include drawings of whatever seems appropriate to the subject.

ACTIVITIES

1. Provide maps of United States and Virginia.

Locate Virginia on a U.S. map, particularly in relation to Connecticut.

Look at a map of Virginia.

Locate major cities in modern Virginia.

Locate Roanoke and Jamestown.

Provide second map of Virginia which shows where the Indian tribes were located.

2. Develop a list of words which enhance the understanding of the topic:

Powhatan (POW-
a-tan)

King James

Matoake (Pocahontas' real name)

Virgin
Queen

Roanoke Island

primary source

breechclout

secondary source

roach (hairstyle)

White

matrilineal	Sir Walter Raleigh	
matchcoat	John Rolfe	
mantle		adventurer
ambassador	prehistoric	
Europe		small pox
tuberculosis	massacre	

3. Why did Pocahontas use this name instead of her given name? What is the meaning of the name Pocahontas? Find several sources to support your responses.

4. What kinds of animals lived in the woods around the Powhatan nation? Are they the same as the animals as live there today? Contact places such as the Virginia Historical Society or the Jamestown Settlement Foundation for answers. Also look for sources on the internet or World Wide Web.

LESSON TWO

History is a mystery to many children, a jumble of names and dates which don't seem to have any relation to the reality of here and now. Where does all this information come from and how do we know it's true? Most children are not exposed to primary sources because of the difficulty in interpreting them, their inaccessibility or their fragility. In the case of the Indians of Virginia, we are fortunate to have the watercolor paintings of John White who participated in the English settlement of Roanoke Island in 1585. They have been reproduced and are easily accessible for interpretation and discussion. They are among the most primary of sources in American history as they are among the earliest visual documents to have survived to this day. While they depict the Roanoke Indians, it is believed that their lifestyle was similar to that of the Powhatan Indians. Descriptions of the daily lives of the Powhatans seem to be very much like that of the Roanokes and John Smith included some drawings in his memoirs which support this.

ACTIVITIES

1. Collect copies of the John White illustrations. Make enough copies so that gr 4oups will each a have a set.
2. Ask students to examine the pictures and to describe what is going on. There is planting, dancing, eating, hunting, smoking fish, burning and carving a dugout canoe. They can record

their impressions in the journal they started when viewing the films.

3. Have students research a variety of sources in the school or public library to see what history books and other reference sources say about the topics the children have identified from the pictures. Do their impressions agree with the printed materials? Students can choose to defend their positions or change them.

4. Students will be asked to recreate a Powhatan village, using as much natural materials as possible. They will use images from the two live action movies as well as the painting by John White and the illustrations John Smith's memoirs. Have this be a joint effort with different groups creating different parts of the village.

LESSON THREE

The English explorers who came to North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were indeed a courageous lot of folk. They set out on precarious sailing vessels to cross a treacherous ocean to arrive in unknown territory and meet a strange breed of people who neither spoke their language nor had any knowledge of their culture. One wonders what compels an individual to undertake such a journey and what comparable adventures are available to today's voyagers. Is it space flight for which one needs an advanced degree in engineering or another specialty field.

And what of the natives who lived on these shores? What must they have thought of these strange men? Where were their women and children? Everything about them must have seemed amazing. Where did they come from and what did they want? Didn't they know that this was Powhatan territory?

1. Conduct a discussion with the students posing such questions as are suggested above. Encourage them to put themselves in the place of both the English and Indians and consider how they might have felt under these circumstances and how they might have reacted when meeting the strangers..
2. Divide the students into groups representing the major characters in this drama, such as Pocahontas, Powhatan, John Smith, Captain Christopher Newport, Sir Edward Wingfield. Add lesser players, such as the cabin boy and a sailor from the ship the Susan Constant as well as one of Powhatan's wives and a medicine man or a brother of Powhatan. Ask the students create a dialogue about the events of the journey or the encounter between this character and a "television" interviewer. Prepare an interview which can be videotaped or just presented to another class. This activity can include creating period costumes for the "talent."

Consider such questions as :

How did Pocahontas feel in English clothing?

(to the cabin boy) What did you eat during your voyage to Virginia?

(to one of the Indians) Why don't you wear more clothing?

(to one of the sailors) Why do you wear so much clothing?

(to John Smith) Why did you wait so long to contact your friend Pocahontas after she arrived in London?

3. Equipment for videotaping can be borrowed from a public access cable broadcast studio or from other sources. If it is borrowed from a public access studio, the finished tape will be broadcast on that station which is always fun for the students. There might even be students from one of the high schools or colleges who might be willing to assist with the videotaping, editing and other technical aspects of this project.

CONCLUSION

As a wrap-up to this unit, ask the students to consider the three films that they have seen and to decide the true facts of Pocahontas' life. Have them rate the three movies and weigh the good and bad points of each. Have them decide which has the greatest entertainment value and which has the greatest factual value. Determine whether this study has changed their opinions of Indians in general and Pocahontas in particular. It is at this point that the children will be asked to extend the conclusions reached here to other films and videos that they view. It is hoped that they will be able to begin to make such leaps after comparing the three versions of the story.

Teacher Bibliography

Barbour, Philip L., *Pocahontas and her world: a chronicle of America's first settlement in which the story of the Indians and the Englishmen particularly Captain John Smith, Captain Samuel Argell and Master John Rolfe* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970.

———, *The three worlds of Captain John Smith* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. , 1964.

Bataille, Gretchen, editor. *The pretend Indians: images of Native Americans in the movies* . Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980.

Carson, Dale. *Native New England Cooking: Indian recipes for the modern kitchen* . Old Saybrook, CT: Peregrine Press, 1980.

Friar, Ralph E. *The only good Indian; the Hollywood gospel* . New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972.

- Harvey, Karen et al. *How to teach about American Indians: a guide for the School Library Media Specialist* . Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995.
- Hilger, Michael. *From savage to nobleman: images of Native Americans in film* . Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995.
- Kimball, Yeffe and Jean Anderson. *The art of American Indian cooking* . New York: Avon Books, 1965.
- Kuipers, Barbara J. *American Indian reference books for children and young adults* . Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1991.
- Mossiker, Frances. *Pocahontas: the life and legend* . New York: De Capo Press (Alfred A. Knopf), 1996 (1976).
- Native American on film and video* . edited by Elizabeth Weatherford. New York: Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation, 1981.
- O'Connor, John E. *The Hollywood Indian: stereotypes of native Americans in films* . Trenton, N.J.: New Jersey State Museum, 1980.
- O'Reilly, Kevin and John Splaine. *Critical viewing: stimulant to critical thinking* . Pacific Grove, CA: Midwest Publications, 1987.
- Rasmussen, William M.S., and Robert S. Tilton. *Pocahontas: her life and legend* . published for an exhibition at the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, 1994.
- Rountree, Helen C. *Pocahontas' People: the Powhatan Indians of Virginia through four centuries* . Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.
- . *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: their traditional culture* . Norman: c University of Oklahoma Press, 1989.
- Sexton, Christine. *Images of American Indians on film: an annotated bibliography* .
- Weatherford, Elizabeth, editor. *Native American on film and video* . New York: Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation, 1981.
- and Emelia Seubert. *Native Americans on film and video: volume II* . Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation, 1988.
- Woodward, Grace Steele. *Pocahontas* . Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1969

Student Bibliography

Bulla, Clyde Robert. *Pocahontas and the strangers* . New York: Harper & Row, 1971. This is a fictionalized version written for children 25 years ago.

D'Aulaire, Ingri & Edgar. *Pocahontas* . Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc.,1946. Beautifully

illustrated although native clothing may be stereotype. Biography is partly a fictionalized version of z the familiar story but it is well written.

Feest, Christian F. *The Powhatan Tribes* . New York: Chelsea House, 1990. Nonfiction account of the history of the Powhatan people. Written for 5th to 8th graders.

Fritz, Jean. *The double life of Pocahontas* . New York: G.P.Putnam's sons. 1983. This is a well researched biography was written for upper elementary students. It is short and easy to read but includes most of the important milestones of her life.

Gleiter, Jan and Kathleen Thompson. *Pocahontas* . Austin, TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1995. Another easy to read biography which includes mention of her life in England and the existence of her son.

Greene, Carol. *Pocahontas: daughter of a chief* . Chicago: Children's Press, 1988. Well done biography using some original illustrations. It is easy to read and includes most of the pertinent facts.

Heiderstadt, Dorothy. *Indian friends and foes: a baker's dozen portraits frpm Pocahontas to Geronimo* . (pp. 3 17). New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1958.

Holler, Anne. *Pocahontas: Powhatan peacemaker* . New York: Chelsea House, 1993. A substantial volume written for upper primary and middle school using many historical paintings and drawings.

Jassem, Kate. *Pocahontas: girl of Jamestown* . Mahwah, N.J.: Troll Associates, 1978. This is a very simplistic version of the famous story but includes her days in England as well as her son's subsequent return to Virginia.

Korman, Justine. *Disney's Pocahontas* . Racine, Wisconsin: Western Publishing Co., Inc., 1995.

Lawson, Marie. *Pocahontas and Captain John Smith: the story of the Virginia Colony* . New York: Random House, 1950.

Martin, Patricia Miles. *Pocahontas* . illustrated by Portia Takakjian. New York: G.P. Put nam's Sons, 1964. This is an easy to read story biography which sticks quite close to the true story and doesn't glorify the questionable story of Pocahontas saving John Smith's life.

Stevens, William Oliver. *Famous Women of America* . New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963. (pp 2 6). Pocahontas' story is one of a collection of brief biographies about women who have an impact on the history of our country since the arrival of Europeans. (Also contains one about Sacajawea on pp. 60 64.) These stories have somewhat of a negative attitude toward Indians.

Videos

Pocahontas . Walt Disney Company, 1994. color, animated, 81 minutes.

Pocahontas: the legend . Diversified Media Ventures & Company, 1995. color. live action, 102 minutes.

Pocahontas . A & E Biography, A & E Television Network, 1995. documentary (photos, maps, commentary by

historians) 50 minutes.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>