BRIEF

BETWEEN FACT AND DISNEY

Jamestown at 400 Years

In 2007, Virginia celebrates the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America. History professor Daniel Richter, the Richard S. Dunn Director of the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, has worked extensively on the history of Jamestown and early European colonization. His book *Facing East from Indian Country* offers a unique look into the budding American world during the 16th through 18th centuries, often from the untold perspective of Native Americans. The book features a section on the Powhatan chiefdom of the Virginia tidewater region around Jamestown and provides insight into the authenticity of stories and pop legends surrounding Pocahontas.

There are plenty of misconceptions associated with the story of Jamestown. Foremost among them, Richter asserts, is the notion that Native Americans were passive or submissive in dealing with the English colonists. Wahunsunacock, the leader of the Powhatan chiefdom, was an opportunist. He presided over more than 20 local chiefdoms in the Chesapeake region. With the landing of the English, Wahunsunacock saw his chance to expand control even further. Although he viewed the band of settlers as dangerous intruders and a potential threat to his people’s way of life, he also saw a great opportunity to obtain “prestige goods” that would further aid in maintaining control in the region.

Chief Wahunsunacock used ritual, military force and diplomatic strategy to incorporate the English into his political domain. In December of 1607, Captain John Smith was captured by the Powhatan and taken to Werowocomoco to meet the Native American leader. His life was “spared” in what was likely a ceremony to induct him into the chiefdom, rather than as a result of a display of compassion or love by Pocahontas. Richter suggests, “Whether [Smith’s] life was actually in danger on that occasion, whether Pocahontas acted on her own or on other’s instructions or even whether the girl intervened at all are matters of debate.” Later, in the Indian Massacre of 1622, led by Wahunsunacock’s brother Opechancanough, nearly 400 colonists were killed in one day, demonstrating the strength of the Native Americans.

The tales surrounding Pocahontas, one of the most notable figures of this period, are more the stuff of melodrama and creative marketing than history. She is not the rebellious, British-sympathizing young woman of popular fancy (or of Disney fantasy). In fact, Richter notes, she would have been about 12 years old when the colonists landed. Nor did she have a love affair with John Smith but probably saw him as a father figure. Despite her age, Pocahontas played an important role as a “diplomatic and political liaison” for Native Americans. She shows up in historical accounts at times of crisis, times when she is being sent to broker a deal, patch things together or open channels of communication between the settlers and the Powhatan chiefdom. There are at least four 17th-century English chroniclers who reference someone named Pocahontas, and their writings reveal that the name itself was a nickname or a descriptive term meaning “playful one” or “mischievous girl.” It is possible that the Pocahontas referenced in these writings is more than one person and not the woman who lives in historical adulation and on Disney lunchboxes.

—ERIC ZRINSKY