



One Person, Several Names

Most modern people have several names—those on the birth certificate, a childhood name within the family, a nickname in the schoolroom, perhaps another (and less palatable) nickname on the playground, a more grown-up name in adolescence, and (for many people) a switch to a middle name or a legal name-change altogether in adulthood. The Powhatan and probably the other peoples in the Chesapeake region also had multiple names, but they came by them in somewhat different ways.

No one had a surname, partly because the population was small enough that surnames were not needed to avoid confusion and partly because Indian names were not stereotyped (for example “John,” of whose old Hebrew meaning many people are unaware today). Every child started out life with two names. One was a secret, profoundly personal name that parents bestowed; one daughter of Powhatan received the name “Matoaka,” the meaning of which is unknown. The other name was the one used in daily life while the child was small; Matoaka’s public name was “Amonute,” also untranslatable today.

As they grew older, boys and girls earned other names. Those of boys reflected how well they were doing at becoming hunters of animals and people; they may have had nicknames as well (the record is silent on the matter). Girls could definitely earn nicknames: the daughter of Powhatan teased her powerful father, who jokingly dubbed her “Pocahontas,” meaning a combination of undisciplined, lewd, and cruel (to her poor, harassed father). In adulthood, males went on to earn numerous other names to reflect their exploits, and the names would be formally bestowed by a chief grateful for their services.

The chiefs themselves are known to have taken new names. When Powhatan died in 1618, Opitchapam, the brother who succeeded him, took the “throne” name Otiotan (or Itoyatin; meaning unknown). “Powhatan” was an early throne name for Pocahontas’s father, used by the leaders of neighboring peoples like the Monacan. His public personal name in 1607-09 was Wahunsonacawh (meaning unknown); we do not know how long he had carried this appellation, and his secret personal name was never recorded.