

The 5 W's of Edith Wilson & Pocahontas



The Who, What, When, Where, and Why of
Edith Wilson's ancestral link to Pocahontas

Research Project by
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Who?

Who is involved?

Edith Wilson and Pocahontas. It is important to note that Pocahontas's history before her interactions with colonizers is relatively unknown. In England, she was stripped of her Native American roots; married Jamestown settler John Rolfe; and gave birth to Thomas Rolfe, who later moved back to America.

What?

What is this story about?

On the surface, it is very simple. Edith Wilson was a direct descendant of Pocahontas. Through the Bolling family lineage, she was a tenth-generation descendant and therefore less than one percent Native American. I will discuss the importance of that percentage later, but for now the key point to note is that Edith Wilson was not claimed by a Native American tribe. In order for a claim to take place, a person must be one-fourth Native American.

Traditional descent line from Pocahontas to Edith Wilson indicating percentage of Native ancestry:

-Pocahontas married John Rolfe. They had a one-half-native son, Thomas Rolfe (1615 - 1680).

-Thomas Rolfe married Jane Poythress Rolfe (1620 - 1676). They had a one-quarter-native daughter, Jane Rolfe.

-Jane Rolfe married Robert Bolling (1646 - 1709). They had a one-eighth-native son, John Fairfax Bolling (1676 - 1729).

-John Fairfax Bolling married Mary Kennon. They had a one-sixteenth-native son, John Bolling, Jr. (1700 - 1757).

-John Bolling, Jr., married Elizabeth Blair. They had a one-thirty-second-native son, John William Bolling (1737 - 1800).

-John William Bolling married Mary Jefferson. They had a one-sixty-fourth-native son, Archibald Bolling (1770 - ?).

-Archibald Bolling married Catherine Payne. They had a one-one-hundred-twentieth-native son, Archibald Bolling, Jr. (1791 - 1860).

-Archibald Bolling, Jr., married Anne Wiggington. They had a one-two-hundred-fortieth-native son, William Holcombe Bolling (1837-1899).

-William Holcombe Bolling married Sallie White Logwood. They had a one-four-hundred-eightieth-native daughter, Edith Bolling Wilson.

When?

When did this connection start showing up in Edith's life?

It became more prominent when she entered the public eye as first lady. Newspapers announced the marriage between Edith and Woodrow, emphasizing Edith's connection to Pocahontas, the "Good Indian Princess," as the Richmond Times-Dispatch put it in its article. She started to receive gifts from Native American tribes and organizations, such as the Pocahontas statue now displayed on the mantle in her bedroom at the Woodrow Wilson House. She also received a beaded belt, which was assumed to be from a Native American tribe. But a later investigation from the Department of the Interior found that the person who gave the gift as well as the belt itself had no connections to any Native American tribes.

When?

a moon before Congress convenes.

A thrill of romantic interest ran through Washington society when it was learned that the future "first lady of the land" is a direct descendant of Indian royalty, and traces her ancestry back through nine generations to Pocahontas, the good Indian princess of Colonial days, whose saving of Captain John Smith's life is one of the classic tales of American history. So far as is known, she will be the first mistress of the White House in whose veins runs the blood of the royal race which originally ruled the land.

E Mrs. Galt's relationship with the Indian princess comes in through Pocahontas's English husband, John Rolfe, who took the wood's maiden to London, where she was presented to Queen Anne, and where, pining for the freedom of her native hills, she soon died.

Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 8, 1915



Where?

Where does the connection in Edith's life become apparent?

Edith's entrance into the White House made her Native American ancestry seem grander than it actually was. In her home state of Virginia, the small connection became large. In 1924, the Virginia General Assembly passed the Racial Integrity Act, designed to target Native Americans and African Americans. However, the act contained a clause, later known as the "Pocahontas Clause," stating that if a Caucasian person had one-sixteenth or less Native American ancestry and "no other non-Caucasic blood," that person would be considered Caucasian. By that standard, Edith Wilson, a native Virginian, was considered Caucasian.

During Wilson's presidency, the presentation of Edith Wilson as a Native American provoked criticism among some observers. The Wilson administration took no action to better the lives of Native Americans. May Gonzalez, a Native American woman, wrote to Franklin Lane, Wilson's Secretary of the Interior. She expressed frustration with Woodrow Wilson for serving alcohol to Edith, since it was illegal at the time to serve alcohol to Native Americans. She stated in the letter her wish that President Wilson be arrested for his actions. While her request seems slightly outlandish, it should still be looked at seriously. In exchanges between Secretary Lane and Edith, we can see that Edith did not consider herself to be a Native American.

Where?

that both applicants are colored, when that fact is claimed.

5. It shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person in this State to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other admixture of blood than white and American Indian. For the purpose of this act, the term "white person" shall apply only to the person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian; but 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. All laws heretofore passed and now in effect regarding the intermarriage of white and colored persons shall apply to marriages prohibited by this act.

"Pocahontas Clause," Racial Integrity Act of 1924, Virginia

Correspondence
between Edith Wilson
and Secretary Lane,
regarding the letter
from May Gonzalez

Sec. of Interior,
Washington, D. C.

Hon. Sir:

I am a descendant of Pocahontas and Powhatan Indians. President Wilson married Mrs. Galt, nee Miss Bolling. She is an Indian descendant of Pocahontas and Powhatan, also, according to her own statement of her family history, notwithstanding the fact that President Wilson asked a Poet not to publish a poem about their marriage. Now Sec. of Interior (I do not know your name, but Judge Bell of this City referred me to you) President Wilson has broken the greatest law in the United States. He has served wine and liquors to Mrs. Wilson, and she is an Indian, and the law says no one shall give, or treat or bootleg or sell, or blind tiger liquor to an Indian, and ect. You can read it yourself.

Now Sec. of Interior, I wish you to get out a warrant for President Woodrow Wilson's arrest immediately according to the laws of those United States of America at once. I shall send Mr. Bielaski the same letter as this as I was given you two as the proper ones to have this pushed to the proper prosecution at once. Please confer with Mr. Bielaski at once and issue warrant and have it put into effect at once. I am an educated Indian. My cousin Judge Price Williams of Mobile Probate Court (now deceased). He is said to have sat on Bench so long he wore it out. I will have the proper attorneys to represent my side at the hearing. Thanking you to act at once.

Respt.
Mrs. May H. Gonzalez.

"He insists that he thinks the law she speaks of applies only to those of my tribe living on a Reservation & is not applicable to us when we are at large."

Why?

Why does this matter?

It matters because Edith Wilson's connection to Pocahontas is one piece of a larger story of how Caucasian American history chooses to include or not include Native American stories. During the 19th and 20th centuries, many influential Virginians protected family lines and were proud of being direct descendants of Jamestown settlers. Like Edith's family, many Virginian families claimed (truthfully or not) that they were descendants of Thomas Rolfe, and in turn were descendants of Pocahontas. A secret invitation-only society called the First Families of Virginia was formed to document these select families.

Outside of wealthy Virginians, many Americans in the early 20th century had little knowledge of Native American history. A year after the Wilson wedding, author Virginia Watson published a fictional "biography" of Pocahontas that portrayed her as being grateful for her encounter with the white colonizers: "When she gave him her word she felt much as if she were the very heroine of one of the tales she had listened to so often about the lodge fire, a deer perhaps that was to be magically transformed into human shape, or a bird on whom the spirits had bestowed speech—so immeasurably superior did the English still appear to her."

Watson's book is representative of how Native American history was viewed when Edith Wilson was being showcased as a "descendant of Indian Royalty" as first lady. Her Native American lineage was blown out of proportion. Personally, Edith had a "have your cake and eat it too attitude" about Native American life and culture. She was highlighted in the media and received gifts, but did nothing to better the life of Native people, nor did she see herself as Native American but rather as a distant relative of the famous Pocahontas.

Why?

JULY 23, 1913.

FIRST FAMILIES ARE CHARTERED

Lyon G. Tyler, of Williamsburg, to be Regent in State.

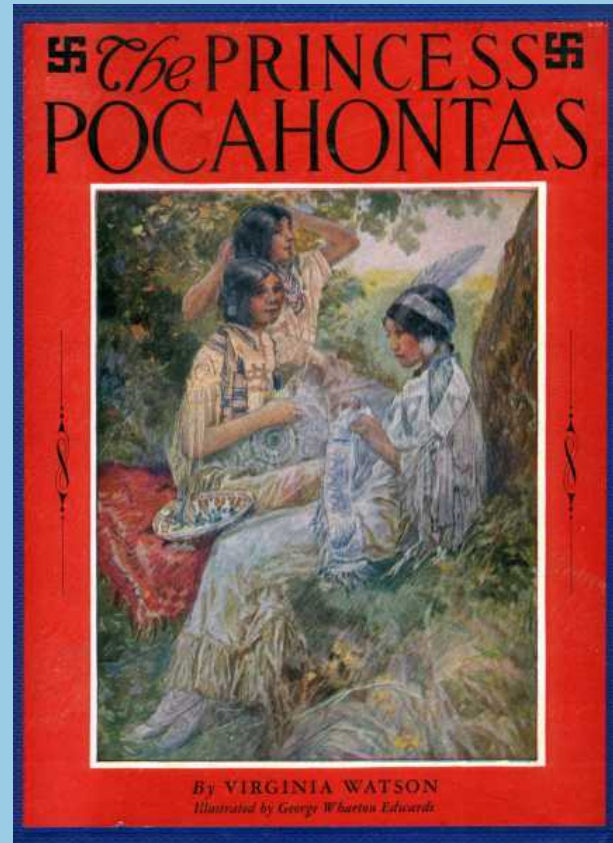
ANCESTRAL T R E E S.

Organization Will be Known as "The Order of the First Families of Virginia."

Richmond, Va., July 23.—Descendants of the Jamestown Indian fighters who have strayed from the ancestral halls are now pining for Virginia hockeys and bacon under the Wisconsin sun, and desire some visual reminder of their proud lineage for themselves and their children. The State Corporation Commission yesterday granted a charter to the social organization with the title of "The Order of the First Families of Virginia."

In order to comply with the legal requirements, the F. F. V.'s must have a resident agent in Virginia, and to Lyon G. Tyler, at Williamsburg, who delegated that honor. Williamsburg is not more than a stone's throw from Jamestown, so that Pocahontas flavor will be still strongly perceptible on the order. The organization has no capital stock, and assets are represented by mutual family trees of proud proportions. To become an F. F. V. in something besides

LOC Sunday Methodist picnic to distance r terday. T bathing a Tomorrow Automobile business r Chamber are request A deleg andria Lo Protective the dedica at Norfolk Annie C home on s FORFEIT Two yo Charles G terday ev charged freight tr left collat the Police could not called. L. H William the larcen ed. R. E. D charged w of the Sc their colla Edward charged w with assa case conti William sault, had



Alexandria-Gazette, July 1913

"When she gave him her word she felt much as if she were the very heroine of one of the tales she had listened to so often about the lodge fire, a deer perhaps that was to be magically transformed into human shape, or a bird on whom the spirits had bestowed speech—so immeasurably superior did the English still appear to her."

Conclusion

What should the Woodrow Wilson House do about this?

As a start, the Woodrow Wilson House should add more specific language on the tours, by saying, for example, "Edith Wilson was a descendant of Pocahontas, and while she was proud of this lineage, she was not claimed by any Native American tribe, because she was less than one percent Native American." The Woodrow Wilson House could develop a specialized tour about Edith's life, discussing both her Native American connection and her life outside of her marriage. The Woodrow Wilson House could also establish a connection with the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, since it has an online exhibition on this topic, entitled, "Queen of America: Why did Pocahontas captivate people in her own time and every generation that followed?"

<https://americanindian.si.edu/americans/#stories/queen-of-america>

In conclusion, the Woodrow Wilson House should make an effort to make this topic more well known to visitors, thus providing historic perspectives through modern initiatives. Thank you!

References

National Portrait Gallery

Pocahontas served as an intermediary after John Smith and others established the Virginia Company of London.

- Kidnapped in 1613
- Converted to Christianity while in captivity
- Took the baptismal name Rebecca
- Married the tobacco farmer John Rolfe
- Son Thomas was born in 1615
- Engraving was made for the *Bazilioologia: A Booke of Kings* (1618)
- Description underneath the portrait confuses her son's name with her husband's.
- Died 9 months after arriving in England

Washington Post: Laying Claim to Pocahontas

- "The only descendant of Pocahontas to occupy the White House was Edith Bolling Gait Wilson, the second wife of Woodrow Wilson. She descended from the marriage of John Bolling III and Mary Jefferson, the sister of President Thomas Jefferson."

Firstladies.org A First Lady's Princess Complex

- Ancestry became as important a factor as wealth and power in choosing a potential spouse
- "The Order of the First Families of Virginia," 1912
- Certification of descent
- Membership is strictly by invitation only
- "Among many such Virginians was the belief of English Supremacy among Europeans and that by their inter-marriages, their families retained the highest concentration of the most 'civilized' race."

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<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014682/1915-10-23/ed-2/seq-9/#date1=1777&sort=relevance&date2=1963&searchType=advanced&language=&sequence=0&index=3&words=good+Indian+Pocahontas&proxdistance=5&state=&rows=20&ortext=Pocahontas&proxtext=Good+Indian+&phrasertext=Good+Indian+&andtext=&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=2>

Richmond times-dispatch. [volume], October 08, 1915, Page THREE, Image 3 Wedding Announcement

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045389/1915-10-08/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=1910&index=0&rows=20&words=Boiling+family+Pocahontas&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=Boiling+Family+Pocahontas&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>

Alexandria Gazette FFV

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85025007/1913-07-23/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=1777&index=2&rows=20&words=Families+First+Order+order+Virginia&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=Order+of+the+First+Families+of+Virginia&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>

Evening Star FFV Banner given to Washington Cathedral

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1934-06-11/ed-1/seq-6/#date1=1777&index=3&rows=20&words=Families+First+Order+Virginia&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=Order+of+the+First+Families+of+Virginia&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>