

The Founding Mothers of America

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Sarah Winnemucca

Many Native American women assisted in the development of this country. In this article I would like to highlight three Indigenous women who sacrificed their lives—with minimal recognition—to bring peace during the birth of the United States of America. These women represent the lives of the Native people who had lived on the American continent for thousands of years and assisted the new settlers who arrived in their homeland.

These women's initiatives demanded reaching outside their tradition, language, family, comfort zone, and culture. The women I am highlighting were three distinct and different tribal women whose lives went beyond their own religious and social norms. They accomplished reconciliation and exemplified the virtues of heart and love.

Sarah Winnemucca, 1844-1891, was a Native American educator, lecturer, tribal leader, and writer who is best known for her book *Life*

Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims (1883). Her writings, valuable for their descriptions of Northern Paiute life and insights into the impact of white settlement, are among the few contemporary Native American works. She was the first Native American known to secure a copyright and publish in the English language.



Pocahontas

A granddaughter of Truckee and daughter of Winnemucca, both Northern Paiute chiefs, Sarah Winnemucca lived during part of her childhood in the San Joaquin Valley of California, where she learned both Spanish and English. She lived for a time with a white family in Nevada and adopted the name Sarah. In 1860 she briefly attended a convent school in San Jose, California, until objections from the parents of white students forced her to leave. She assumed the role of peacemaker on a few occasions, and from 1868 to 1871 served as an interpreter at Camp McDermitt in northeastern Nevada. In 1872 she accompanied her tribe to a new reservation, the Malheur, in southeastern Oregon.

After a year of teaching in a school for Native American children at Vancouver Barracks, Washington Territory, and marrying in late-1881 to L.H. Hopkins, an army officer, Winnemucca (often known among whites as "the Princess") went on an eastern lecture tour to arouse awareness about injustices against Native Americans. Aided by General Howard, Elizabeth Peabody, and others, the tour was a success, and sales of her book, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, raised money

for Winnemucca's expenses. She secured thousands of signatures on a petition calling for the promised allotment of reservation lands to individual Paiutes. The US Congress passed a bill to that end in 1884. However, the bill has yet to be enforced.

Another important Native peacemaker was Pocahontas, also known as Matoaka, who was the daughter of Powhatan. Powhatan was the leader of an alliance of about 30 Algonquian-speaking groups and petty chiefdoms comprising about 15,000 people in Tidewater, Virginia known as Tsenacommacah. Pocahontas was born in 1595 and had 26 brothers and sisters, but she was her father's favorite child.

English colonists settled in Jamestown in 1607 when Pocahontas was believed to be eleven years old. Pocahontas is most famously linked to the English colonist Captain John Smith, who arrived in Virginia with about a hundred other settlers in April of 1607. Known for being a peacemaker and for her kindness, Pocahontas befriended many of the Jamestown colonists. For example, realizing that many were becoming very ill due to lack of food, she brought them food that they did not have the knowledge to find or cultivate on their own.

Pocahontas' father is said to have declared John Smith to be his son and even gave him an Indian name, Nantaquoud. Pocahontas is also famous for her heroic acts in aiding the colonists at Jamestown. She eventually went on to marry colonist John Rolfe. She went on an extended trip to England, was baptized into Christianity, visited the Queen of England, and was the toast of England with her husband where she later died at the young age of 22.



Sacagawea

Another important Native woman who played an important role in aiding the exploration of the American continent is Sacagawea, a Lemhi Shoshone woman. She was born sometime around 1790 but was kidnapped from her Shoshone village by Hidatsa Indians when she was twelve years old. She was promptly sold into slavery to a French fur trapper, Toussaint Charbonneau, who made her one of his wives. Sacagawea is best known for her role in assisting the Lewis and Clark expedition. She and her husband were guides from the Great Plains to the Pacific Ocean and back.

Although there are conflicting opinions concerning how important Sacagawea was to the Lewis and Clark expedition, she did serve as the interpreter and negotiator to the Shoshone tribe which was led by her brother Cameahwait. She helped Lewis and Clark obtain essential supplies and horses while she carried her infant son on her back. Furthermore, Sacagawea helped identify edible plants and herbs and prevented hostile relations with other tribes simply by being part of the expedition.

Sacagawea was even more important on the return trip because she was familiar with the areas in which they were traveling and was able to guide the expedition back safely. Lewis and Clark received the credit for discovering hundreds of animals and plants that Sacagawea had probably known for years. Although she received no payment for her help, her husband was rewarded with cash and land. To this day, there are no reliable pictures or drawings of Sacagawea. Recently, the United States government engraved her image on the new one dollar coin. Sacagawea is buried in Lander, Wyoming.

In conclusion, Indigenous women were and still remain a powerful example of peacemakers. Inter-tribal Native women continue to overcome many issues within and outside their respective communities. There are currently more than 500 federally recognized sovereign United States Native American Nations. Through patience, endurance, fortitude, strength, intuition, and knowledge their contributions to the founding of this country will one day be fully realized.