

CHAPTER 1

Did Pocahontas Rescue John Smith?

Smith may be the best-known part of the history of the original English Jamestown colony of 1607 and 1608. In 2006, a year before the 400th anniversary of the supposed rescue, new volumes about Pocahontas and John Smith filled the bookstores. You could choose from books written for children or adults, scholars, or leisurely readers. But even after 4 centuries, these new books did not agree on the story to be told. What really happened between Pocahontas and John Smith?

The Walt Disney Company is responsible for the version that many of our students know best. In the 1995 movie, we learned that Pocahontas, a svelte, free-spirited 19-year-old, and John Smith, a dashing hunk of a colonist, fell in love, flouting orders that there should be no contact between the Indians and colonists. In the movie's dramatic climax, Pocahontas prevented Powhatan, her father and chief of the tribe, from cudgeling Smith to death. Her act of courage and compassion led to both sides laying down arms, and ushered in a new era of tolerance between two warring cultures. It is a tidy story, complete with drama, romance, and a moral lesson. But people, societies, and their histories are rarely this tidy (let alone so attractive and musical). Did this rescue really happen?

Historiographical Debate

Read contemporary works and you will not find a straightforward answer. In journalist David Price's book, *Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Heart of a New Nation*, you will find what the title suggests: a romantic tale of Smith and Pocahontas where she is attracted to the older traveler and saves him from death.¹ Price calls the rescue (a title of one chapter) the "most famous and controversial journey of Smith's career" and asserts that the evidence indicates the rescue did happen.² He then relegates a discussion of the controversy to the margins of his book so it doesn't divert the reader from his main



Source: Simon van de Passe, Pocahontas, 1616, engraving, 6¾ x 4¾ in., published in John Smith's *Generall Historie*, 1624, Virginia Historical Society, available at <http://www.indiana.edu/~vhl/images/pocahontas/pages/aapocengrav1616.jpg.htm>

story. Historian Camilla Townsend's book, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, published just a year after Price's, unequivocally states that the rescue did *not* happen.³ Both authors agree that controversy surrounds the story of Pocahontas's rescue of John Smith, both use the same historical evidence to make their case, but each comes to opposite conclusions. We have a historical problem: Did Pocahontas rescue John Smith?

The story of the rescue is not new. Generations of Americans have grown up hearing it. So how do we know whether it happened? Where did the story come from if its authenticity is debatable?

The answer is, from John Smith himself. The only eyewitness to the supposed event who left a paper trail was Smith, but his accounts of the event are riddled with inconsistencies. The first, written in 1608, the year the rescue supposedly occurred, makes no mention of the threat or rescue, and uses words like "friendship" and "kindness" to describe meeting Powhatan (see Source 1.1; all Sources are located at the end of each chapter). "Hee kindly welcomed me with good wordes and great platters of sundrie Victuals, assuring mee his friendship, and my libertie within foure days."⁴ On the other hand, another account, written 16 years afterward, uses words like "barbarous" and "fearful" to describe the meeting with Powhatan, and this is where

we first hear the famous claim that the chief's daughter, Pocahontas, "laid her owne [head] upon his to save him from death" (see Source 1.2).⁵ The entire passage reads:

Having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then, as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his brains, Pocahontas the King's dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death; whereat the Emperour was contented he should live.

Why is the rescue mentioned in one account and not the other? Was Smith scared of being berated as less of a man if the truth about an Indian girl rescuing him came to light? Was he merely trying to describe this new land and unfamiliar peoples in the first account, choosing to omit personal stories? And in the second account, was he capitalizing on Pocahontas's fame following her 1616 voyage to London as Indian princess and wife of John Rolfe, thus casting himself as a character in her early life now that she was dead and unable to respond? (Pocahontas succumbed to smallpox aboard a ship taking her back to Virginia in 1617.) Were his words designed to represent Pocahontas as exceptional, a sympathetic and peaceful Indian who converted to Christianity and differed radically from the rest of the Powhatan peoples who had become fierce enemies of the British in the intervening years?⁶

What do historians make of the contrast between Smith's two accounts? The first historian to publish an attack on John Smith's honesty was Henry Adams, great-grandson of President John Adams. Henry Adams claimed that no thinking person could believe the rescue story, given both Smith's initial silence and the inconsistencies in tone and detail between the two accounts (see Source 1.3).⁷ While Adams's argument is reasonable, the year that he penned this critique, 1867, is also telling. Later historians would read Adams's personal letters and find his skepticism politically motivated: attacking Virginia's favorite son, a hero responsible for Jamestown's survival in the early, brutal days of colonization, was in effect a swipe at this state that had been on the wrong side in the Civil War. It would not be the last time that the rescue story was used to send a message that had little to do with the event itself.

Nevertheless, Adams surfaced the historical problem and later historians would continue to try to solve it. Historian Paul Lewis, in *The Great Rogue: A Biography of John Smith*, agreed with Adams about the improbability of a rescue (see Source 1.5).⁸ He asked questions about corroborating sources and challenged Smith on what he claimed were embellishments and inconsistencies within his separate accounts. Lewis pointed out that Smith's rescue story first appeared just as Pocahontas was becoming the darling of

the *London Gazette* and basking in royal attention.

Other historians took Smith at his word but, even while accepting that this event may have happened, claimed that Smith missed the point. Scholar J. A. Leo Lemay in *The American Dream of Captain John Smith* claimed that Smith was a trustworthy author who wrote different accounts for different purposes: to describe the new land in the first account, to promote colonization of it in the second (see Source 1.4).⁹ Lemay included another piece of primary evidence to make his case: a letter Smith wrote to Queen Anne in 1616 describing the rescue. Lemay claimed that there was no doubt that the event happened, but that Smith misunderstood its meaning: it was less a rescue than an elaborate native ritual. Historian Philip Barbour agreed, claiming that the event was actually a Native American rite meant to signify death and rebirth, symbolizing Smith's assumption of a new tribal identity under Powhatan's patronage (see Source 1.6).¹⁰ Something obviously happened, but its import was misunderstood by the actor at its center.

To take stock, what exactly *are* the facts of the story? What do these facts mean? While there are no easy answers to these questions, asking them puts us at the heart of the *Reading Like a Historian* approach.

Pocahontas and John Smith are the stuff of American myth. A single paragraph in a 400-year-old account written by an adventurer whom one contemporary called "ambitious unworthy, and vayne glorious"¹¹ spawned a story of which Americans never tire. Our story of Pocahontas, America's favorite Indian princess, usually starts with Smith's rescue, an event that shows her bravery and independence when faced with an evil deed. In fact, the representations we have of these historical figures and of the rescue story have become legitimate objects of study themselves, as they reflect the historical time and place in which they were created.¹²

Henry Adams and the Disney Company are not the only authors to narrate this story to their advantage. Consider John Chapman's painting, *Baptism of Pocahontas at Jamestown, Virginia*, hung in the Capital Rotunda in 1840 a few years before journalist John O'Sullivan coined the term "manifest destiny," and the work of westward conquest was gaining steam. The painting glorifies Pocahontas's conversion to Christianity, suggesting that bringing Christianity to the Indians is a realistic and noble endeavor (even if, as depicted in the painting, some surly, bad Indians rejected it). Consider, on a more frivolous note, the costly jewelry made of diamonds and pearls that bears Pocahontas's name available at Amazon.com.

And what has the mythologizing of Pocahontas and the rescue story meant for understanding and capturing what really happened? Scholars like anthropologist Helen Rountree and historian Camilla Townsend argue that it has obscured and narrowed our vision of this past.¹³ Focusing on an appealing picture of a romantic Indian princess and British captain has blotted out larger stories of British/

Powhatan encounters and the groups' evolving relationship as the colonists began to make the Chesapeake their permanent home. Pocahontas's story, reduced to a fairy-tale, CliffsNotes form, leads students to miss out on learning significant things about this encounter and the peoples involved in it.

The fact that we do not have access to Pocahontas's words leaves us with a deafening silence about the complete story. In fact, all our written sources were composed by British men, and we have no access to the unmediated voices of Pocahontas's people. While Smith, William Strachey, and others left lengthy descriptions of the Indians of the Chesapeake, their accounts are necessarily filtered through the authors' cultural and personal prisms. Historians must read this written evidence closely. Townsend tells her readers that she culled the specifics of the event from reading Smith's accounts and "placing each statement in the context in which it was written and juxtaposing it against confirming or damning external evidence"—essentially doing what historians do best, contextualizing and corroborating text to understand what it tells us about the past.¹⁴ Townsend's explicit treatment of "what the English knew" firmly establishes that we need to know how Smith's contemporaries and compatriots viewed and portrayed Indians and colonization to understand this event and Smith's rival accounts.

Similarly, knowing about the Chesapeake Indians' societies—their routines, rituals, and residences—sheds light on this event and the context in which it occurred. Archeologists and anthropologists have helped in building this knowledge. To document the scope and growth of Powhatan's chiefdom and relations between different Indian tribes and villages, E. Randolph Turner looked to archeological and geographical data to complement the English accounts.¹⁵ He and others analyzed variations and consistencies between unearthed ceramics and their locations, as well as surviving trade goods like copper and sea shell artifacts. Evidence of defensive cliffs surrounding Indian settlements contributes to what we know about how the tribes of the Chesapeake got along. These scholars use the evidence available to them to reconstruct possible Indian perspectives on the encounter.

How much does this compensate for the silence of the peoples most embroiled in these early colonization efforts? It's not clear, but surely a more complete picture of the world of the John Smith/Pocahontas encounter contributes to understanding what is and isn't likely. Meanwhile, new information is being uncovered all the time. In 2003, a site determined to be Werowocomoco, the village where the rescue would have happened, was discovered in Gloucester County, Virginia. Archeologists thrilled in discovering ditches predating the English by more than 150 years, a find that suggested a separation of secular and sacred spaces within the village. Thinner, more fragile pottery shards distinguish the sacred space; scholars have speculated that

it may have been Powhatan's living quarters.¹⁶ Archeologists continue to excavate that site for more clues to understanding this people who left no written record.

First, scholars have shown that the Powhatan were not an isolated or loner tribe, but part of an extensive intertribal network on the Chesapeake. Part of the Indian group called the Algonquian by virtue of a shared language and way of life, Chief Powhatan led something akin to a tribal federation. The federation extended more than 6,000 square miles in the Tidewater area of Virginia and grew to more than 30 tribes and 12,000 people under his leadership. Each of these tribes paid tribute to Powhatan and had a chief, or *werowance*, loyal to the federation and Powhatan. Tribes probably joined the federation through war, alliances, and intertribal marriage.

Further, Pocahontas's father was not new to the world of diplomacy or intergroup relations when the English arrived in Jamestown: he was already a powerful leader of diverse groups. Skilled and successful at diplomacy in his world, Townsend calls him "a brilliant strategist"¹⁷ while Barbour uses the word "despotism" to describe his governance.¹⁸ Nor were the British, with their foreign but useful tools, their big ships and strange ways, new to Powhatan. The Spanish had already been to the region and skirmished with the Indians: This was not the first time Europeans had arrived in their midst.

The British colonizers knew of the earlier Spanish efforts, and this influenced their plans and approach. When the *Susan Constant*, *Discovery*, and *Godspeed* arrived, the passengers had designs on colonizing the area, and in fact knew the region as a power vacuum that they hoped to fill. But the British didn't share this view with the natives, and their ineptness and trouble with creating a productive and self-sustaining settlement may have helped their cover story of being temporary visitors. However, it also led to what is now infamously known as "the starving times," and in the first winter of the settlement, Captain John Smith started making voyages upriver to trade tools and beads for corn to save his compatriots from starvation. In his furthest trip up the Chickahominy River, he was captured by Opechancanough, Powhatan's brother, and taken from village to village. In late December Smith was brought before Powhatan at Werowocomoco, 12 miles from Jamestown. This is the site of the rescue story and where the story of Pocahontas begins.

Given her status as icon serving multiple purposes, it is striking how little verifiable knowledge about Pocahontas we actually have. The daughter of Powhatan and an unknown mother was about 9 or 10 years old when she would have first seen the captive John Smith in her village—and when the supposed rescue happened. In the following year, Pocahontas was a frequent visitor to Jamestown. She brought the settlement provisions and was credited by Smith with being responsible for the safe return of some Indian hostages. She translated for the colonists and Indians,

and Townsend conjectures that she may be responsible for the sole surviving Algonquian complete sentence recorded by Smith. While the exact nature of her visits is unknown, they seem to be friendly and helpful. However, before the year was up, she stopped visiting the colony and there is a single report that she married an Indian named Kocoom.

She did not appear again in British accounts until she was kidnapped in 1613 by an enterprising Englishman, Captain Samuel Argall. In the intervening years, Smith had returned to England with a gunpowder injury, and hostilities between the Indians and the colonists had accelerated. Hearing that Powhatan's daughter was near his ship, Argall seized the opportunity to use the Indian princess to British advantage. A member of a federation tribe, Patowomeck, helped lure Pocahontas aboard Argall's ship, where she was captured and held for ransom. For 3 months, Powhatan didn't respond to the ransom demands and then partially met them. Upon her release, Pocahontas stayed in Jamestown, under uncertain conditions, and within a year had converted to Christianity and met and married John Rolfe. In 1615, the two had a son, Thomas Rolfe, and the following year, they set sail for England. There, Pocahontas was regarded as an Indian princess and received at the court of King James I and Queen Anne. This is also when Simon Van de Passe produced the only existing portrait of her, an engraving that now hangs in the Smithsonian. Pocahontas's family set sail for their return to Virginia in the spring of 1617, but she fell ill and died before they cleared England. She would have been 19 or 20 years old.

Pocahontas is a romantic and popular historical figure for Americans today, and the rescue is what frames our perception of her. However, the common story that we know about this rescue may be more myth than history. Historians and scholars still debate the truth beyond the myth while pursuing an accurate telling of the story. In recent decades, new attention has been paid to understanding and incorporating Indian perspectives and cultural realities relevant to the event. Barbour, Lemay, Rountree, and Townsend—all of these scholars are attentive to this, but even so, they differ in their interpretations of the event. Questions persist. Is there evidence to convince us that Powhatan's tribe engaged in the kinds of ritual rebirths suggested by Barbour? And if we focus on the rescue, do we miss out on the true historical significance of Pocahontas—as a cultural broker whose interactions with the British, and eventual marriage to Rolfe, were more about diplomacy than affection? Is our focus on her misguided and overblown, given that she was a minor character in the events of the time? How did the rescue story eclipse all else in the American story of the British colonization of the Chesapeake region? At this point, the stories that we tell about Pocahontas and the rescue have taken on a life of their own, separate from any historical evidence. Helen Rountree adds still another twist on what Pocahontas teaches us.

The story of a young woman firmly rooted in her own culture, held hostage by bellicose newcomers, forcibly and then willingly assimilated into their culture, killed by a mysterious disease, buried far from her homeland, and ultimately used by the dominant society as a symbol for the oppression of her own people is not only an authentic account of Pocahontas's experiences but is also emblematic of the histories of generations of Native people.¹⁹

The literature and scholarship concerning Pocahontas and John Smith are extensive and lively. From Barbour's compelling story and Lemay's careful and persuasive analysis to Rountree's ethnohistorical approach and Tilton's detailed telling of the making of a myth, the truth behind this story is worth investigating. More important, the story of John Smith's "rescue" lays bare history's weak points and shows us that what so many Americans have taken as fact relies, in fact, on a single (somewhat dubious) source. And when we compare this source to other documents from the same author, questions multiply. Genuine history is about asking questions, which makes the Pocahontas/John Smith story the ideal candidate for initiating our students into the art of historical detection.

Why Teach About John Smith and Pocahontas?

A Manageable Historical Problem to Start Your Course. The Pocahontas/John Smith rescue story is a compelling way to start teaching for historical thinking. While there is no shortage of interpretive work that has been done on the event, the actual documentary record is surprisingly thin. Essentially what this means is that over a few class periods, your students can encounter the main sources that fuel this debate. By reading John Smith's two conflicting accounts, students are immediately thrust into the center of the controversy and confronted with a historical problem that is not easily solved. Having evaluated the primary documents behind this event, students can return to their textbook's narrative and look at it through new eyes: "How can they write something with such certainty when it's not even clear that it happened?!"

History presented as a series of problems to be explored, rather than a set of stories to be committed to memory, may be a new experience for your students. The early colonial setting of the John Smith/Pocahontas problem means that from the beginning of your course, students can encounter history as a different enterprise than what many of them expect. Identifying and working through a historical problem, complete with guiding questions, varied and contradictory sources, and no single right answer challenges students' ideas that history is static, where the only thinking involved is figuring out how so much material can be memorized. While the narrow question of whether Pocahontas actually rescued John Smith may seem

expendable given the curricular terrain, the question's limited scope offers many instructional advantages. Students experience key facets of historical investigation with rich opportunities to think historically, but they are not overwhelmed by the historical record. Complex questions are easier for novices to grasp when they are not overwhelmed by dozens of documents.

Are Primary Sources Always “Primary”? Indeed, investigating the Pocahontas/John Smith story offers multiple avenues to developing students' historical understanding. The contrast in Smith's stories challenges students' ideas about first-hand or primary accounts—that is, that they are always the most reliable source for understanding the past. Often students privilege primary sources as reflections of historical truth and don't recognize the need to interrogate them. But here, the primary sources contradict one another, and these contradictions cannot be resolved by appealing to different writers with different perspectives. Why does the same source, John Smith, say different things? Working with the secondary historical interpretations introduces students to more complexity and challenges the simplistic notion that primary sources teach us more than the interpretations of modern-day historians. Scholarship done over the past few centuries provides alternative explanations to Smith's for what this event may have meant to the Powhatan, who, alas, left no written records of his own.

Starting with the Known. Finally, the topic's familiarity is another big advantage. It is the rare student who hasn't heard of Pocahontas or who cannot recite some version of the John Smith/Pocahontas story. This familiarity means that students are likely to be interested in the topic and problem, and be surprised by the fact that historians are still arguing about it. It is easier to work with contradictory sources when they take up a topic that students already know. Once students realize that the story they've been told may be more myth than history, questions about how we know the past take on new meaning. Instead of a numbing list of facts, history becomes an invitation to join a raucous debate about evidence and argument.

How Might You Use These Materials?

Scenario 1 (1–2 Hour Lesson). Did Pocahontas rescue John Smith? Use these sources and tools to engage students in reading and analyzing multiple accounts to create an evidence-based argument about the likelihood of the rescue.

Start off by asking students what they know about Pocahontas and John Smith. Elicit what students know about these individuals and their time, and where they learned it. Some will cite the 1995 Disney *Pocahontas* film. Show the Disney version of the rescue (Chapter 25 of the

DVD, or approximately 1:09 into the movie). Use the timeline (Tool 1.1; all Tools are located at the end of chapters) along with any work you have done on the exploration and colonization of the Americas to briefly establish relevant background to the alleged event, then introduce the lesson's guiding question: Did Pocahontas rescue John Smith? In successive rounds, have pairs of students work with document sets and accompanying worksheets to help them answer this question. After each round of documents, lead a whole-class discussion. In this discussion, revisit the guiding question and prompt students to defend their answers with evidence from the documents. Listen for questions that students have generated to highlight how historical digging often leads to more questions.

In the first round, students work with Smith's accounts and accompanying tools (Sources 1.1 and 1.2, Tool 1.2). As they work, listen to see if students recognize that Smith tells contrasting stories in the two sources. Can they identify phrases and details that exemplify this difference? In the second round, students work with two historians' accounts and accompanying tools (Source 1.3, 1.4, Tool 1.3). Again, pay attention to whether students note differences between these accounts. In the optional third round, students tackle the final two historians' accounts and tools (Source 1.5, 1.6, Tool 1.4). Throughout the entire lesson, the question of whether Pocahontas rescued John Smith guides student work and class discussion. **Finally, students write an answer to the question with the requirement that they use evidence (e.g., direct quotes, details and specifics) from the documents to support their argument. You may want to preface the writing assignment by revisiting the Disney movie and asking students to address how the historical sources challenge the well-known animated version of the event. Use Tool 1.5 to structure this assignment.**

Scenario 2 (2–3 Hour Lesson). What is history anyway? Use these sources and tools to make explicit for your students some core features, materials, and vocabulary of historical investigation.

Replicating Scenario 1, begin to integrate direct instruction about the nature of history into your lessons. This additional instruction works best after students have completed the document analysis rounds but before they write their final essay, although it may be integrated after each step.

You might teach your students about the difference between Document Sets 1 and 2, i.e., secondary and primary sources. You could define “source,” “evidence,” and “interpretation.” You can review the students' process of getting smarter about this lesson's guiding question, which included reading, analyzing, and synthesizing the multiple accounts; backing up assertions with evidence; and asking questions of the sources and of themselves to pinpoint what else they would like to



know or what they indeed don't know. Point out that historians ask questions about what happened and what it meant. And help students recognize that historical investigation is a recursive process, where one has to continually check claims against the available evidence, and absolute answers are not always possible.

Targeted list of skills in this scenario

- Evidence-based thinking and argumentation
- Questioning sources
- Synthesizing multiple accounts

To check for understanding, students can answer the question in writing as they do in Scenario 1. Alternatively, they can address the following question: Why can't we know for certain whether Pocahontas rescued John Smith? Write down a minimum of three reasons.

- **For each reason write at least two specific details or quotes that support that reason.**
- **Compare sources to make your point in at least two instances.**

Students' responses could take the form of a paragraph, essay, talk show interview, or graphic organizer, among other possibilities. This question prompts students to think about what it means to "do" history and the role of historical texts in developing historical interpretations.

Scenario 3 (2–3 Hour Lesson). Myth or history, what's the difference? Use these sources and tools to make explicit the evidentiary nature of reconstructing the past and how this contrasts with myth-making.

Students participate in the reading and discussion rounds described in Scenario 1, experiencing how historians must analyze and synthesize multiple accounts to create coherent arguments. However, in this scenario, students subsequently analyze examples of myth-making, including the Disney movie and John Chapman's 1840 painting of Pocahontas that hangs in the Capital Rotunda.

After looking carefully at each artistic piece, students consider the questions, What symbols are used? What larger messages (both to its contemporary audience and present-day audience) are embedded in this representation



of Pocahontas? What purposes does this representation of Pocahontas serve (both at the time of its creation and present day)? **In a whole-class activity, guide students in making a chart comparing history to myth.** See David Lowenthal's essay "Fabricating Heritage" for help in considering what this comparison might look like.²⁰

Targeted list of skills in this scenario

- Evidence-based thinking and argumentation
- Questioning documents
- Synthesizing multiple accounts
- Building vocabulary specific to the historical discipline
- Identifying how historical knowledge is produced



Targeted list of skills in this scenario

- Distinguishing between myth and history
- Close analysis of memorials and public history

Sources and Tools

SOURCE 1.1: "TRUE RELATION" (ADAPTED)

Note: These are John Smith's own words about what happened.

Arriving at Werowocomoco, their **emperor** proudly lying upon a bedstead a foot high upon ten or twelve mats . . . with such grave and majestical **countenance**, as drove me into admiration . . .

He kindly welcomed me with good words and great platters of sundry **victuals**, assuring me his friendship, and my liberty within four days. . . . He asked me the cause of our coming . . . demanded why we went further with our boat. . . . He promised to give me what I wanted to feed us, hatchets and copper we should make him, and none should disturb us. This request I promised to perform. And thus having all the kindness he could devise, sought to content me, he sent me home.

WORD BANK

emperor—ruler, king
countenance—face
victuals—foods

Source: Excerpt adapted from John Smith (1608). A true relation of such occurrences and accidents of note as hath happened in Virginia since the first planting of that colony. In L. G. Gardiner (Ed.). (1907). *Narratives of Early Virginia, 1606–1625*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 48, 50.

Online facsimile edition available at www.americanjourneys.org/aj-074/

(Original)

Arriving at Weramocomoco, their emperour proudly lying upon a Bedstead a foote high upon tenne or twelve Mattes . . . with such a grave and majesticall countenance, as drave me into admiration. . . . hee kindly welcomed me with good wordes, and great Platters of sundrie victuals, assuring mee his friendship, and my libertie within foure days. . . . Hee asked mee the cause of our comming . . . demaunded why we went further with our Boate. . . .

. . . Hee promised to give me Corne, Venison, or what I wanted to feede us: Hatchets and Copper wee should make him, and none should disturbe us. This request I promised to performe: and thus, having with all the kindnes hee could devise, sought to content me, hee sent me home. . .

SOURCE 1.2: "GENERAL HISTORY" (ADAPTED)

Note: These are John Smith's words about what happened from a later version of his experiences.

At last they brought [*Smith*] to Meronocomoco, where was Powhatan their Emperor. At his entrance, all the people gave a great shout . . . and . . . having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long **consultation** was held. But the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan. Then, as many as could laid hands upon him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beat out his brains. Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no **entreaty** could **prevail**, got his head in her arms, and laid down her own upon his to save him from death; whereat the Emperor was contented Smith should live.

Two days after, Powhatan having disguised himself in the most fearful manner he could, caused Captain Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone . . . then, Powhatan, more like a devil than a man, came unto him and told him how they were friends, and presently he should go to Jamestown, to send him two great guns, and a grindstone, for which he would forever **esteem** him as a son. . . .

Source: Excerpt adapted from John Smith (1624). *General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles*. In P. L. Barbour (Ed.). (1986). *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580–1631)*, Vol. 2. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 151.

Also available online at <http://www.virtualjamestown.org/firsthand.html>

(Original)

At last they brought him to Meronocomoco, where was Powhatan their Emperor. . . . At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout . . . and . . . having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then, as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas, the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death; whereat the Emperour was contented he should live. . . .

Two dayes after, Powhatan having disguised himselfe in the most fearefullest manner he could, caused Captaine Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone . . . then Powhatan more like a devill then a man . . . came unto him and told him now they were friends, and presently he should goe to James towne, to send him two great gunnes, and a gryndstone, for which he would . . . for ever esteeme him as his sonne. . . .

WORD BANK

consultation—discussion
entreaty—request, plea
prevail—succeed
esteem—value, respect

SOURCE 1.3: “ADAMS’S INTERPRETATION” (ADAPTED)

Note: Here is how one historian interprets John Smith’s two accounts.

John Smith’s two completely different versions don’t match up. The later one, *A General History of Virginia*, exaggerates a lot of details in *A True Relation*, and brings up new information Smith never mentioned in the 16 years between the publication of the two.

When Smith describes his captivity (winter of 1607-1608) in *A True Relation*, he says Powhatan was kind and generous. He says he found no cause to fear for his life. (This proves Smith thought it was wrong to doubt Powhatan’s goodwill.) Plus, Smith never mentioned Pocahontas in *A True Relation*. Therefore, a thinking person can’t believe it.

A True Relation mentions Pocahontas coming to Jamestown later in 1608. Smith says he gave her gifts in return for her father’s kindness. Wouldn’t he have been thanking her for saving his life (*if it happened*)?

Finally, Smith wrote in 1612 (in *A Map of Virginia*) that while he was in captivity he witnessed a method of execution practiced by the tribe. He describes a prisoner’s head being placed on a sacrificing stone, while “one with clubs beats out their brains.” Isn’t it rather odd that he didn’t mention his own experience here, since it sounds just like what happened to him?

Source: Summary adapted from Henry Adams (1867, January). “Captain John Smith.” *The North American Review* 104(214).

SOURCE 1.4: “LEMAY’S INTERPRETATION” (ADAPTED)

Note: Here is how another historian interprets John Smith’s accounts.

John Smith had no reason to lie. In all of his other writing about native customs and geography, he is very accurate and observant. For 250 years after his captivity, no one questioned his story.

The reason the two versions differ is that their purpose is different. In *A True Relation*, Smith didn’t want to brag about his adventures; he wanted to inform readers about the land and people of Virginia. In the *General History*, his goal was to promote **colonization** in Virginia (and added stories might get people interested in the activities of the Virginia Company).

And to those critics who say Smith never mentioned Pocahontas’s bravery until 1624—after some of her fame would enhance his status—he did write about her before she came to England. In 1616, Smith wrote to Queen Anne to tell her of Pocahontas’s bravery and other rare qualities, and he described how Pocahontas rescued him from Powhatan, and how she saved all Jamestown from starvation.

There is no doubt that the event happened. Smith may have **misinterpreted** what the whole thing *meant*. I think it was probably a ritualistic death and rebirth, with Pocahontas acting as his sponsor into Indian identity.

Source: Summary adapted from J. A. Leo Lemay (1991). *The American Dream of Captain John Smith*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

WORD BANK

colonization—settlement, domination

misinterpreted—misunderstood, got the wrong idea about

SOURCE 1.5: “LEWIS’S INTERPRETATION” (ADAPTED)

Note: Here is how another historian interprets these events.

Why is it that none of the other members of the Virginia Company who kept diaries ever wrote about Pocahontas saving Smith’s life? (Ten fellow Virginia company members kept journals in 1608.) Surely someone would have written about it if Smith came back to Jamestown and shared his story.

Thus, no one in England had ever heard of her until 1617 when she was a big media event in London. She was a “princess” (daughter of “King” Powhatan), and the first Indian woman to visit England. Because she had converted to Christianity, people high up in the church, as well as the King (James I) and Queen (Anne), paid attention to her.

While all this was going on, John Smith published a new edition of *A True Relation* that now had footnotes in the part about his capture. These notes mention Pocahontas throwing herself on Smith to beg his release, and her father giving in to her request. Smith even goes on to take credit for introducing Pocahontas to the English language and the Bible.

In 1624, Smith polished this story in his *General History*. This version expands the details of his rescue, saying Pocahontas risked her life to save his. He also describes Chief Powhatan providing the Jamestown colonists with Indian guides. Would the same chief who wanted to kill Smith now try to help him?

Source: Summary adapted from Paul Lewis (1966). *The Great Rogue: A Biography of John Smith*. New York: David McKay Company.

SOURCE 1.6: “BARBOUR’S INTERPRETATION” (ADAPTED)

Note: Here is how another scholar interprets the disputed event.

The bringing in of two big stones, and forcing John Smith to stretch out on them, seemed to Smith like he was about to be executed. When a young girl (Pocahontas) knelt and placed her head on Smith, he was released. The way he saw it, she saved his life.

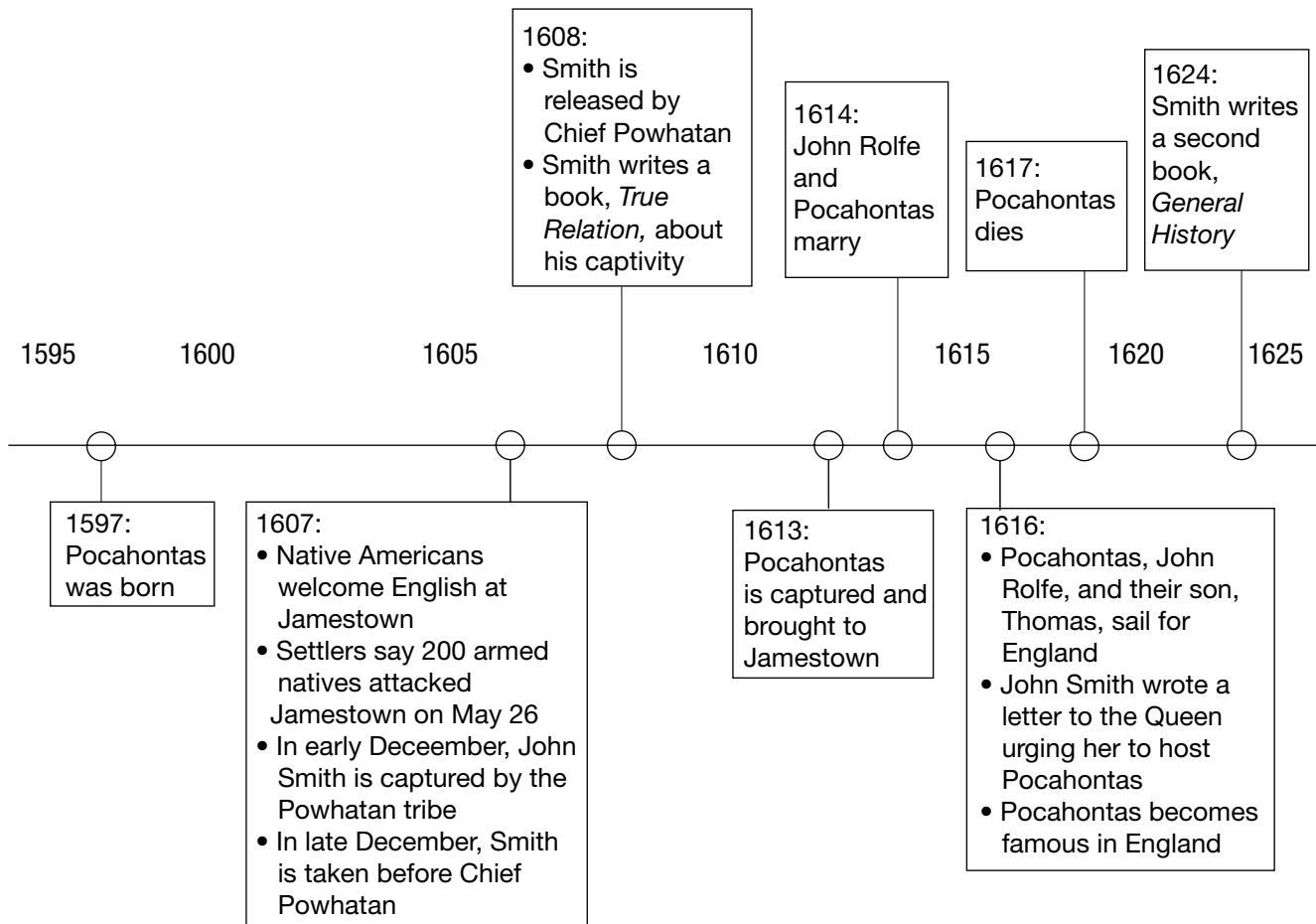
What almost certainly happened was that Smith was the center of a **ritual** similar to what young boys in the tribe went through before entering manhood. They have a pretend execution or death and then are reborn as men. Pocahontas was preselected to be his protector. She did not actually save his life because the Powhatan were not really going to kill him.

WORD BANK

ritual—custom, ceremony

Source: Summary adapted from Philip Barbour, *Pocahontas and Her World* (1969). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

TOOL 1.1: TIMELINE OF EVENTS RELATED TO POCAHONTAS AND JOHN SMITH



TOOL 1.2: COMPARING SMITH'S ACCOUNTS

1. Are there different facts in Smith's two accounts of his captivity in December 1607?
(Use the space below to answer or create a Venn diagram on back of this sheet.)

A True Relation (Source 1.1) says:

General History (Source 1.2) says:

2. Why would Smith add on to his earlier story?
3. Why might he lie or exaggerate and invent new information?
4. Why wouldn't he lie about the story?

TOOL 1.3: COMPARING HISTORIANS AND SMITH

Assuming that the basic facts (though not necessarily the interpretation of the facts) in Smith’s latest account (the *General History of Virginia*) are true, record below a “play-by-play” description of the facts in the passage:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Which historians believe that the basic sequence above did occur?

Describe what they think the facts (above) mean:

1. Historian _____ believes . . .

2. Historian _____ believes . . .

TOOL 1.4: COMPARING HISTORIANS AND SMITH

Refer to the “play-by-play” description of the facts in Smith’s latest account. Compare this to Lewis’s and Barbour’s interpretations of these facts.

Which historians believe that the basic sequence above did occur?

Describe what they think the facts (above) mean:

1. Historian _____ believes . . .

2. Historian _____ believes . . .

TOOL 1.5: ANALYTICAL ESSAY
DID POCAHONTAS SAVE JOHN SMITH?

1. Watch the Disney clip of Pocahontas saving John Smith again. Disney claims that their film is “responsible, accurate, and respectful.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Explain your position in an essay. Use evidence from the documents to support your analysis of this film clip.

2. Write an outline of your essay and share it with your teacher.

a. Include a clear *position*.

b. List the *points* you want to make to support your position.

c. Cite key pieces of *evidence* that support your position.

3. Write your essay.

a. Convey your position in the introductory paragraph.

b. Explain your points and your evidence

c. Conclude with a wrap-up of your argument.

Suggested Resources

<http://www.virtualjamestown.org/>

This site, created through collaboration between Virginia Tech and the University of Virginia and its Center for Digital History, includes a rich set of teaching and learning resources, including first-hand accounts and video interviews with local Indians.

<http://historicjamestowne.org/>

Maintained by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia's Antiquities and the National Park Service, this site includes biographies of the early colonists and teaching resources for involving students with the ongoing archeological digs and the area's geography.

<http://www.apva.org/jr.html>

Maintained by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia's Antiquities, this is the home page for the archeological efforts at the Jamestown site. It includes exhibits and updates about the ongoing digs and brief histories relevant to Jamestown.

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/loudountah/exploresources.php>

A unique site that shows a video of an elementary teacher planning and using John Smith's 1612 map of Virginia with her students as well as a scholar's analysis of the map.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/POCA/POC-home.html>

This site focuses on Pocahontas and representations of her over time. Here you can find the Baptism painting.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pocahontas>

This companion site to the PBS video *Pocahontas Revealed* includes a feature on the "science of Jamestown," interviews with a historian and a tidewater Indian chief, and an interactive exhibit of the changing images of Pocahontas.

<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/pocahontas/index.php>

An archive maintained by an English professor, this site has an extensive variety of resources concerning Pocahontas.

<http://www.nps.gov/jame/historyculture/index.htm>

Maintained by the National Park Service, this site includes fact sheets about many aspects of Jamestown and its residents.

<http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/amerhistory/interactives/>

Users can match representations of Pocahontas with descriptions and then access lively contextual clues to place them on a timeline. This interactive web-based activity uses changing representations of Pocahontas to introduce chronological thinking.

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