

5 John Smith



Smith's Turk's head coat of arms. The Latin motto means "Vanquish and live."

The Jamestown colony might not have survived without Captain John Smith. He was a tough, no-nonsense man who worked hard and expected everyone else to do the same. Some people admired him; others hated him.

Pocahontas admired him and saved his life—twice. She was a bright-eyed Indian princess who was about 12 years old when the settlers first came to Virginia. The pale-skinned men and their strange ways intrigued her and she came to visit them often. Sometimes she just turned

cartwheels in the middle of the Jamestown settlement; sometimes she brought food. It was John Smith who seemed to interest her most. In him she recognized a person whose intelligence and curiosity matched her own. Like her father, the great Powhatan, Smith seemed fearless.

Many of the settlers hated Smith, but they recognized that he was a leader. When he went back to England, even his enemies missed him. They said he was a braggart and that he couldn't possibly have done all the things he said he had done. He might have exaggerated a bit, but he really did do those things—like selling his schoolbooks and running away to sea. Or going off to Hungary to fight the Turks. There, on one bloody afternoon, Smith beheaded three Turks. A grateful Hungarian prince granted him a coat of arms with three Turks' heads emblazoned on it.

He wasn't a Hungarian hero for long; he was captured and sent as a slave to Constantinople, where a Turkish woman bought him. But her relatives didn't think much of him, and he was sold again. This time he killed his master, escaped, got thrown into the Mediterranean Sea, wandered through Russia, Poland, and Germany doing heroic things, and ended up in North Africa fighting pirates.

John Smith

arranged the exchange of an English boy, Tom Savage, for an Indian boy named Namontack. Savage became an adopted son of Powhatan, learned the Algonquian language, and later was able to translate for the colonists. Namontack went to England with Christopher Newport.

That first summer in Jamestown the settlers barely made it. "Our drink was water, our lodging, castles in the air," they reported. "With this lodging and diet, our extreme toil in bearing and planting palisades strained and bruised us....From May to September those that escaped lived upon sturgeon and sea crabs. Fifty in this time were buried."

Those early days

were't all misery. After their first Christmas in Virginia, Captain Smith wrote, "We were never more merry, nor fed more plenty of good oysters, fish, flesh, wild fowl and good bread, nor never had better fires in England than in the dry smoky houses of Kecoughtan."

In a page from John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia*, Smith lies captive before the Powhatan while Pocahontas pleads for his life to be spared.

Naturally someone who liked adventure the way John Smith did would be attracted to the adventure of a new world. Besides, like Sir Walter Raleigh, he had an idea that America could someday be an English land. He understood that there was more to be gained in the New World than gold. He realized that there were great opportunities for men and women with energy and courage.

John Smith was 28 when he took over the leadership of the Jamestown colony, and things were in a bad way. This was his motto: "If any would not work, neither should he eat." There were some grumblers, but everyone wanted to eat. So everyone worked.

Smith went and got food from the Indians. He learned their language and he learned the ways they hunted and fished. He had been a soldier and he was tough, but he was also fair and honest; the Powhatans soon understood that. They respected him and he respected them. They called him "werowance," or chief, of Jamestown. And that was what he was.

The Native Americans seemed undecided about how to act toward these strangers on their land. What would you have done if you were a Powhatan? How would you have treated the English leader, John Smith?

He had goods they wanted—axes and shovels and blankets—so they traded with him. He was a natural trader. He took his English goods to their villages and he came back to Jamestown with boatloads of corn. They told him of the prediction: that men from the east would destroy their villages. He told them he came in peace. Still, the Indians couldn't seem to make up their minds.

Sometimes they entertained Smith with dances and feasting. Other times they tried to kill him. Once he was brought before an Indian werowance and he expected to die. He pulled out his compass, showed how it worked, talked about the heavens and the earth, and soon had a tribe of friends. Another time he was taken to the great Powhatan, who seemed to have several Indian warriors ready to beat his brains out. But Pocahontas, who was the Powhatan's favorite daughter, came to his rescue. She



MAKING THIRTEEN COLONIES



This engraving is a copy of a 1587 map of "Virginia" by John White that influenced mapmakers for decades. The area shown is now part of the Carolinas. At the mouth of the big river in the middle is Roanoke ("Roainac") Island.

Rough Justice

In some parts of our country, when a criminal is found guilty of a serious crime, such as murder, he can be sentenced to death by the judge. A death sentence is called capital punishment. How did capital punishment start in this country? The English brought the tradition with them. (Some Indian tribes practiced capital punishment, too.)

It didn't take long for the settlers to use capital punishment—a few months. The first execution was in the Jamestown colony in 1607. The victim was not a common criminal, but a member of a prominent English family and one of the seven-man ruling council of the Jamestown colony. His name was Captain George Kendall. His crime was treason. The colonists believed Kendall was a spy for the Spanish. Kendall tried to escape aboard the ship *Discovery*, but was captured and condemned to die. He was executed by a firing squad.

put her head on Smith's, and Powhatan let him live. Was it a pre-arranged ceremony, or did Pocahontas actually save his life? No one knows for sure, but the Indians ended up adopting Smith into their tribe and making him an honorary chief. Now he was a member of Pocahontas's family.

When some other Indians tried to ambush Smith, Pocahontas warned him of the trap. Cats are supposed to have nine lives. John Smith had even more. While exploring the Chesapeake Bay, he was stung by a deadly stingray and was in such agony that he had his grave dug. He recovered—and ate the stingray. (The place where this happened, near the mouth of the Rappahannock River in Virginia, is now called Stingray Point.)

John Smith was asleep in his boat when some gunpowder exploded. It "tore the flesh from his body and thighs nine to ten inches square....To quench the tormenting fire, frying him in his clothes, he leaped over board in the deep river, where...he was near drowned." Smith was so badly wounded that he had to return to England. Pocahontas was told he was dead.

John Smith never got back to Virginia. But he did get to New England, which he named, and he mapped its coast as he had mapped much of Virginia. He wrote many books and became famous because of them. "I am no compiler by hearsay, but have been a real actor," he said. And so he was. We still read his books today, because they are so interesting.