

Pocahontas and John Smith

Version A

John Smith is the only person at the famous meeting in Werowocomoco who wrote about what happened. In 1608, he described how Chief Powhatan welcomed him, and told him that he would be freed within four days. Smith wrote three more books about his life in Virginia. However, he did not mention the famous meeting again until 1624, when he wrote a book called *The Generall Historie of Virginia*.

In this book, Smith described in detail how Pocahontas risked her life to save him. But he wrote this 17 years after it had happened! Some historians note that this book was published after Pocahontas had become famous in England. By this time, both Pocahontas and Chief Powhatan had died. Therefore, there were no other key witnesses to the meeting who could verify the events in his book.

Other Historical Evidence

Historians also look at other evidence to understand what may have happened. Some believe that Smith was telling the truth about what he saw, but that he misunderstood what had happened. For example, the "rescue" may have been an adoption ritual to make Smith a member of the tribe. In this ritual, the tribe acted out "killing" Smith, and then saving him. Then he could be "reborn," or adopted, as one of Powhatan's sons. If this was true, Pocahontas was simply playing her part by rescuing him.



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Archaeologists have found the site of Werowocomoco. There they dug up English copper, which may mean that Smith met with the chief to discuss trade. The colonists may have wanted to trade this copper for food. The chief, on the other hand, may have been more interested in ruling over the colonists. That is why he wanted to make Smith part of his tribe.

While no one knows for sure whether Pocahontas and Smith had a romantic relationship, historians doubt this is true. And some historians don't believe that any rescue, real or acted out, happened at all. John Smith was an adventurer who had written many dramatic stories about his travels. He had even written about being rescued by other women. Perhaps only his first story about meeting Powhatan and being treated well was true.

Glossary

archaeologists: people who study the remains of past human societies to learn about their lives and cultures

Writing Assignment

Using your notes from the lesson and updated activity chart, write a one- to two-page paper on one of the following topics:

1. In your own words, compare and contrast the popular and historical versions of the story of how Pocahontas met John Smith.
2. Why do you think the popular story continues to be told, even though there is historical evidence to contradict it? Why do we continue to have these different versions?
3. How do historians interpret history? What evidence do they use? Use information from the story of Pocahontas to support your explanation.

If you would like more information about Pocahontas and John Smith to complete your paper, check out the following Web sites:

A True Relation by Captain John Smith, 1608

<http://www.americanjourneys.org/aj%2D074/>

Pocahontas

<http://www.apva.org/history/pocahont.html>

John Smith Assumes Presidency of Jamestown

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/sep10.html>

Captain John Smith

<http://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/smith.cfm>

Powhatan Renape Nation: The Pocahontas Myth

<http://www.powhatan.org/pocc.html>