

Pocahontas and John Smith

Version B

The popular version of the Pocahontas story begins with John Smith's writings about his dramatic rescue. Since then, the story has been retold many times in books and films, where it is often portrayed as an interracial love story. But can we really know what happened?

John Smith's Story

John Smith is the only eyewitness to leave a written record of what happened at Werowocomoco. In 1608, when he first wrote about the famous meeting, he described how Chief Powhatan "kindly welcomed me with good words...assuring me his friendship, and my liberty within four days." In the next few years, he wrote three more books about his Virginia experiences, but he said no more about this incident.

It was not until he published *The Generall Historie of Virginia* in 1624 that he wrote in detail about how Pocahontas risked her life to save him. This was 17 years after it had happened! Some historians have noted that this later version was published after Pocahontas had become famous in English society, and after both Pocahontas and Chief Powhatan, the only other key witnesses to the event, had died.

Other Historical Evidence

Historians also look to other evidence to better understand what may have happened. Some believe that things took place just as Smith described, but that he misunderstood what happened. Based on new understandings of tribal rituals, historians think the "rescue" may have been an adoption ritual. Smith was symbolically killed and reborn as one of Powhatan's sons. Pocahontas's act was simply her playing a part in this ritual.

Recent archaeological excavations have uncovered the site of Werowocomoco. Because English copper was found at the site, some archaeologists believe Smith may have been meeting with the chief to discuss trade. Smith may have wanted to trade scraps of copper for food for the colonists. The chief, on the other hand, may have been more interested in bringing Smith into his tribe in order to rule over him.

While no one knows for sure whether Pocahontas and Smith had a romantic relationship, historians doubt this is true. Smith respected Pocahontas and Pocahontas seemed fond of him, but nothing indicates that they were romantically involved. And some historians



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question whether any rescue, actual or staged, happened at all. John Smith was an adventurer, who had written dramatic accounts of his other travels, including rescues by other prominent women. Perhaps only his first account of meeting Powhatan, in which he was treated well and then sent home, was true.

The Rest of the Story

We may never really know whether or not Pocahontas rescued John Smith from execution and, if she did, what the reasons were behind her actions. The rest of their story is better understood. In 1608, Pocahontas brought food to the English colonists when their settlement fell on hard times. Good relations continued between the groups until the Native Americans stopped bringing food. Tree-ring dating showed this occurred when a severe drought affected the region. The Native Americans may have feared they would not have enough food to feed themselves.

The English then started a war with the Virginia tribes to take what they wanted. Chief Powhatan and his people abandoned Werowocomoco in 1609 because of the hostilities. During this time, Smith was badly burned in a gunpowder explosion and returned to England. Pocahontas was told that Smith was dead. The English later captured Pocahontas. While a prisoner, Pocahontas converted to Christianity, married John Rolfe, had a son, and returned with Rolfe to England.

In England, Pocahontas learned that Smith was still alive and saw him again for the first time in eight years. She expressed her sadness to Smith that he, as a tribal family member, did nothing to try to contact her or her father or come back to help them. A few months after the meeting, Pocahontas died as she set sail back to the colonies, and was buried in England.

Glossary

archaeological excavations: the process of digging for the artifacts, or remains, of past human societies; this is done with care and precision to avoid damage to the artifacts and to the site, or location, itself

archaeologists: a person who studies the remains of past human societies to learn about their lives and cultures

symbolically: doing something in a way that is meant to represent a particular meaning to the audience

tree-ring dating: the scientific process of studying the rings formed inside a tree trunk to learn about the climate conditions during the tree's lifetime; moist, long growing seasons lead to wide rings, and dry conditions can result in narrow rings

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>