



## Captain John Smith and the Virginia Company

John Smith was born at Willoughby, Lincolnshire, about a hundred and fifty miles north of London in eastern England, and was baptized on January 9, 1580. The son of a yeoman farmer, Smith spent his childhood just a few miles from the sea, which may have helped inspire his desire for adventure. He received a basic education in area schools, and then his father apprenticed him to a merchant in King's Lynn, a port town about thirty miles southeast of Willoughby. After Smith's father died in 1596, however, the sixteen-year-old youth abandoned his apprenticeship and began soldiering in the Netherlands.

Thus began a military career that took him to France, Scotland, Italy, Greece, the Balkans, Austria, Poland, and Germany, among other places. He learned horsemanship during a brief interlude at home, then participated in a war between the Hungarians and the Turks. Smith was captured by the latter and sent to Constantinople and the Caucasus. He escaped, traveled through North Africa, and returned home in 1605. His military prowess earned him the rank of captain and the title of gentleman; his experiences sharpened his ambition and thirst for further adventure.

Smith soon joined a new enterprise. Bartholomew Gosnold and others secured a charter on April 10, 1606, that established two companies to explore and colonize the coast of North America. One, based in Plymouth, had present-day New England as its objective; the other, in London, looked to the Chesapeake Bay area. The "Counsell of Virginia," composed of investors in both companies, oversaw the activities of the two groups. Some of the investors and their supporters had earlier been involved in the Carolina colonization effort. Smith joined the investors in the company bound for the Chesapeake, and on December 20, 1606, the three ships of the expedition set sail. With them went a box, not to be opened until the vessels arrived in Virginia, containing a list of the men who would govern the group there.

Between about a third and a half of this group were considered gentlemen, and the gentry included former soldiers and privateers. The rest of the party were seamen, laborers, and boys, except for a dozen craftsmen and artisans, including a tailor, a surgeon, a blacksmith, a mason, two bricklayers, four carpenters, and two barbers. Most of the "first Planters" hoped to find wealth and return home to England in a year or two. They were not interested in settling in Virginia permanently, or in farming, as they expected to be supplied with food and other necessities during their sojourn and then leave.

### Voyage to America

The voyage to America began badly and got worse, especially for Smith. First, contrary and stormy weather just off the English coast delayed the little fleet for six weeks and many on board became seasick. Next, close quarters, illness, and boredom inflamed the landsmen, who became fractious. Finally, on February 13, 1607, Smith was arrested for "mutiny" and confined. The undertaking seemed to be falling apart although it had scarcely begun.

Smith had run afoul of several of the company's principal leaders, most of whom were his social "betters" as well as his elders. Christopher Newport, an experienced seafarer who was about forty-one, commanded the fleet for the duration of the voyage. Edward Maria Wingfield, a soldier from a noble family who became the colony's first president, was about fifty-six. Bartholomew Gosnold, a founder of the company, was thirty-four and captained one of the ships. Newport and Wingfield especially disliked Smith, considering him an upstart and a social

climber. Smith probably irritated them beyond merely being young, ambitious, and contentious. Gosnold eventually intervened and got Smith out from under arrest when the ships arrived in Virginia.

After the first landing and fight with the local inhabitants on April 26, Newport opened the box and read the list of councilmen: Newport, Wingfield, Gosnold, John Ratcliffe, Captain John Martin, Captain George Kendall, and—last—Captain John Smith. Probably at the instigation of Newport and Wingfield, the council refused to allow Smith to take his seat. On April 29, the company held a ceremony including a cross raising at the landing site, which Newport named Cape Henry, and took formal possession of the country for King James and the Protestant faith. The newcomers then set off to explore the James River and find a location for their settlement.

## **Jamestown Settlement**

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For the next two weeks, the colonists “discovered” up and down the river, past the mouth of the Chickahominy River to the Appomattox River. Along the way, they encountered several Powhatan tribes, most of whom were friendly and hospitable, feasting and entertaining the newcomers. The Englishmen were impressed by the towns they visited, as well as by the cornfields they saw. They considered a point of land called Archer’s Hope for their settlement, but when they could not anchor near the shore they selected instead the peninsula they called Jamestown Island. There, the water near the shore was deep enough that the ships could be tied to trees on the bank. On May 13, the Englishmen arrived, and the next day they began to establish their settlement. The place they had selected lay on the eastern edge of Paspahugh territory.

A week later, Newport decided that sufficient progress had been made that he could follow the Virginia Council’s instructions and explore upriver in hopes of finding a way to the western sea, which was believed to lie just beyond a great lake or mountain. For the next few days, he led a party of twenty-three men, including Smith, up the James River to the falls just above the town of Powhatan. Again, the group was greeted by seemingly friendly inhabitants eager to trade. Newport erected another cross there to claim the area for England but told the Native people that it signified the unending friendship between the English and the Powhatan. Disappointed that the falls impeded further navigation, Newport led the explorers back to Jamestown, where he learned that some Powhatan warriors had attacked the settlement and killed two Englishmen. He ordered a proper fort constructed, and soon a triangular, stockaded structure was erected with two bastions facing up- and downstream to guard against attacks by the Spanish and a third facing inland to confront the Powhatan. The English installed a cannon in each bastion.

Newport departed for England on June 22, taking *Susan Constant* and *Godspeed* and leaving Wingfield in charge. Soon thereafter, conditions at Jamestown deteriorated and the men began to die of various diseases brought on by bad water and sanitation, most likely salt poisoning, typhoid, and dysentery. Gosnold, perhaps the most experienced and respected leader in the colony, was among the dead. On September 10, Ratcliffe, Smith, and Martin deposed Wingfield and then tried him on various charges including atheism. Wingfield returned to England the next year and protested vehemently, but the Virginia president but the colonists fared no better until Smith (by his account) began trading with the Native people for food, sometimes at the point of a gun. Throughout the fall, he and several companions went from one town to another in search of corn, frequently escorted by Native guides.

## **Smith in Captivity**

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In November and early in December, Smith made several forays for corn on the Chickahominy River. One day, he and two other Englishmen, accompanied by two Powhatan Indians, rowed upstream to find the river’s source. About twenty miles above the Chickahominy town of Appocant, the party separated, and Smith continued with one Native guide while the other explorers remained together. Suddenly, about two hundred men surrounded Smith, captured him after a struggle, and brought him before Opechancanough (Smith’s companions had been killed). After impressing his captors with his compass, Smith was then marched from one town to another and displayed to the people before being presented to Powhatan at Werowocomoco. There, according to Smith’s famous account published in 1624, he was about to be executed when the ten-year- old Pocahontas—Powhatan’s favorite daughter—intervened to save him and he was thereafter “adopted” as one of the people.

This episode has generated a vast amount of debate among historians, both in regard to the story of Smith's captivity as well as the meaning or meanings of what happened to him. There are numerous discrepancies between Smith's first account, written in 1608, and his retelling in 1624, as well as additional material and details in the later version. According to the 1608 account, Smith was captured, marched here and there, threatened with death, presented to Powhatan, feasted, and escorted back to Jamestown a few days later, after lengthy conversations with the Native leader. The 1624 version adds other death threats and Pocahontas's rescue of Smith as well as various details, and also extends the period of captivity by about a month.

Assuming that Smith described what occurred as accurately as he could (Pocahontas aside), he clearly did not understand the implications of the marching to and fro, the repeated near-death experiences, and the ceremony before Powhatan—all seemed to him to be the impromptu actions of people who were unsure of what to do with him. Smith wrote that he was suspected of being a foreign captain who had killed some Powhatan people a few years earlier, and he was displayed to see if anyone could identify him as the killer, who supposedly was taller than Smith. He also thought that the ceremony before Powhatan was a "divination" ritual whereby the leader hoped to learn his intentions regarding the English settlement. Clearly, there was more to all of this than Smith thought, but what?

Several historians believe that the actions of Opechancanough and Powhatan were in fact purposeful, that the chiefs had been given reports on Smith's activities for some time and believed he was a "war chief" similar in authority to Opechancanough. Everything that Smith endured after his capture was an elaborate ritual designed to bring him and the other colonists under the authority of Powhatan. Smith was ritually "killed" and "resurrected" to symbolize his change of station, to make him and the other Englishmen a part of the Powhatan polity. Through the ritual, the newcomers became a tributary part of the polity, another "tribe" within the overall organization led by Powhatan. This relationship obligated Powhatan to sustain the English, just as he did the other tribes within his domain, but it also obligated the English to recognize Powhatan's authority, obtain his permission before undertaking certain actions, assist him in conflicts with tribes outside the polity, and give him the respect due someone in his position. This interpretation of the Smith captivity has the virtue of making intelligible much of what followed in the sad history of English-Powhatan interactions.

And what of the Pocahontas story, the dramatic rescue? Here again, there is not universal agreement among historians, although the consensus seems to be that it never happened, and that Pocahontas probably would not have been present at such a ritual. Most modern scholars agree that Smith added the rescue tale to his 1624 *Generall Historie* because she had been briefly famous in England not long before, and invoking her memory and her glamour might boost interest in his book.

Regardless of the truth or accuracy of Smith's accounts of his captivity, once it ended and he had been escorted back to Jamestown on January 2, 1608, Powhatan people soon began to appear there regularly bearing food. Smith found the colony in a state of near chaos. The company had been reduced to fewer than forty because of disease and starvation, Ratcliffe charged Smith with responsibility for the deaths of his companions when he was captured, and the leaders of the colony were making preparations to abandon Jamestown. That evening, however, Christopher Newport returned from England with more than a hundred men and ample supplies, and in the general celebration that followed the leadership dropped the charges against Smith.

### **Stage Set for Voyages of Discovery**

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The "first supply," as it is known, brought more artisans to Virginia, including goldsmiths and refiners as well as a gunsmith and a blacksmith. The search for precious minerals was about to begin in earnest, as soon as the new men were settled. They unloaded most of the supplies; then, disaster struck when the whole place burned, including the supplies. Mere survival replaced mining as Newport's first objective, and Smith, because of his new association with Powhatan, became the key to survival.

Smith soon arranged a meeting between Newport and Powhatan at Werowocomoco, and there Powhatan

reiterated the arrangement between himself and the English. Smith, since he wrote about the meeting later, probably understood the implications; it is unclear whether Newport did, but he had no intention of being subservient to anyone else. Each side exchanged youths to learn the other's language and customs, and, perhaps, to serve as spies. Trading took place, and by being overly generous, Newport temporarily wrecked the rate of exchange (so many beads for so much corn) that Smith had established. The meeting ended amicably and from Newport's viewpoint was a complete success. A food supply was guaranteed, and his men were now free to search for gold. They soon discovered a "mine" upriver on the Pamunkey and packed barrels with supposedly gold-laden earth. Newport sailed for England on April 10, to be disappointed when the "ore" was analyzed there and deemed worthless.

For Powhatan, however, the meeting was less than successful because the English deceived him. Smith, during his captivity, had lied to Powhatan about why the English were in Virginia in the first place, claiming that they had merely come to escape the Spanish. In fact, of course, the English intended to colonize the country and take up residence wherever they pleased as soon as they could identify good sites for mines and trading posts. They were not about to take direction from Powhatan, ask his permission before exploring and settling, or otherwise kowtow to him.

Smith explored the Nansemond River after Newport departed, and then returned to Jamestown to help work on the new buildings and cornfields. Smith had been urging the settlers to plant their own crops rather than to rely on supplies from England or corn from the Powhatan, but with limited success. He also tried to organize them to work on various construction projects, such as repairing the fort, again with little success.

The ship *Phoenix* (it had been in Newport's fleet but was blown off course by a storm), commanded by Captain Francis Nelson, soon arrived with more colonists and provisions. Ratcliffe wanted to employ Nelson and his vessel in the search for precious metals, but Nelson refused and planned instead to sail for England. Smith, meanwhile, had decided to lead his own expedition using a barge or shallop with a few other men. This enterprise also would keep him away from Ratcliffe (the two men despised each other).

On June 2, 1608, Smith, his crew, and his vessel accompanied Nelson and *Phoenix* to present-day Cape Charles. Nelson sailed for England, while Smith directed the shallop into the Chesapeake Bay on his first voyage of exploration. Before they parted, Smith gave Nelson a sketch map of part of the Bay and its river system, as well as a letter to a friend, published later that year as *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia since the first planting of that Collony*. A copy of part of Smith's map soon arrived in Spain, sent from London in a diplomatic dispatch in September 1608 by the Spanish ambassador, Don Pedro de Zuñiga. The dispatch and map constituted one of Zuñiga's several attempts to interest King Philip III in eliminating the Virginia colony. The map would have made it relatively easy to do so, for the triangular James fort was clearly noted on the north side of the carefully drawn James River. Only a few months after Smith drew his first map, then, it had become an element in an international intrigue that threatened the English settlement's existence.