

John Smith

“For in Virginia, a plaine Souldier that can use a Pick-axe and spade, is better than five Knights.”
(John Smith)

“He that will not work shall not eat.” (Smith)

Virginians know that Captain John Smith was vital to the survival of Jamestown in its early years.

John Smith “was borne in Willoughby in Lincolnshire, and a scholar in the two Free Schools of Alford and Louth. His father anciently descended from the ancient Smiths of Crudley in Lancashire, his mother from the Rickands at great Heck in Yorkshire.”

“His parents dying when he was about thirteen years of age left him a competent means, which he not being capable to manage, little regarded; his mind being even then set upon brave adventures, sold his satchel, books, and all he had, intending secretly to get to Sea, but that his fathers death stayed him.”

“But now the Guardians of his estate more regarding it than him, he had liberty enough, though no means, to get beyond the Sea.”

“About the age of fifteen years he was bound an Apprentice to Mr. Thomas Sendatt of Linne, the greatest Merchant of all those parts; but because he would not presently send him to Sea, he never saw his master in eight years after.”

“At last he found means to attend Mr. Perigrine Barty into France ..., [but since Barty and his brother were only young men, they did not really need him.”

“After a month or so] they sent him back again to his friends; who when he came from London they liberally gave him (but out of his own estate) ten shillings to be rid of him; such oft is the share of fatherless children. [Fortunately, the Barty brothers] gave him sufficient to return for England.”



John Smith (Getty Images/UniversalImagesGroup)

Learning to be a Soldier

“But [returning to England] was the least thought of his determination, for now being freely at liberty in Paris, growing acquainted with one Master David Hume, who making some use of his purse, gave [Smith] letters to [Hume's] friends in Scotland to prefer him to King James.”

“Arriving at Roane, [Smith] better bethinks himself, seeing his money near spent. Down the river he went to Haver de grace, where he first began to learn the life of a soldier.”

“Peace being concluded in France [1596], he went with Captain Joseph Duxbury into the Low Countries, under whose colors having served three or four years [1596-9], he took his journey for Scotland, to deliver his Letters.”

“At Ancusau he embarked himself for Lethe, but as much danger as shipwreck and sickness could endure he had at the holy Isle in Northumberland near Barwicke: (being recovered) into Scotland he went to deliver his Letters.”

“After much kind usage amongst those honest Scots at Ripweth and Broxmoth, but neither money nor means to make him a Courtier, he returned to Willoughby in Lincolnshire; where within a short time being glutted with too much company wherein he took small delight, he retired himself into a little woody pasture, a good way from any town, environed with many hundred acres of other woods: ...”

“Here by a faire brook he built a pavilion of boughs, where only in his clothes he lay. His study was Machiavelli's Art of War, and Marcus Aurelius; his exercise a good horse with his lance and Ring; his food was thought to be more of venison than anything else; what he wanted his man brought him. The country wondering at such an hermit.”

“His friends persuaded one Seignior Theodora Polaloga, Rider to Henry Earl of Lincoln, an excellent Horseman, and a noble Italian Gentleman, to insinuate into his woodish acquaintances, whose Languages and good discourse, and exercise of riding drew him to stay with him at Tattersall. Long these pleasures could not content him, but he returned again to the Low Countries.”

“Thus when France and Netherlands had taught him to ride a Horse and use his Arms, with such rudiments of War, as his tender years in those martial schools could attain unto, he was desirous to see more of the world, and try his fortune against the Turks, both lamenting and repenting to have scene so many Christians slaughter one another.” (The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captain John Smith)

The ‘Long War’

For 200 years, between the beginning of the sixteenth century and the early eighteenth century, Turkey (Ottoman Empire - Muslim) and Austria (Habsburg Empire - Christian) engaged in numerous wars.

The wars were dominated by land campaigns in Hungary, including Transylvania (today in Romania) and Vojvodina (today in Serbia), Croatia, and central Serbia. Initially, Ottoman conquests in Europe proved successful, reducing the Kingdom of Hungary to the status of an Ottoman tributary.

By the sixteenth century, the Ottomans had become a threat to Europe, with Ottoman Barbary ships sweeping away Venetian possessions in the Aegean and Ionia. When, on several occasions, the Ottomans reached the gates of Vienna, considered a cultural capital of Europe, it seemed a threat to the survival of Europe and of its dominant religion.

The Protestant Reformation, the France-Habsburg rivalry, and the numerous civil conflicts of the Holy Roman Empire served as distractions. (World Encyclopedia)

In 1600, learning of the war being fought between Christian forces of the Holy Roman Empire (HRE) and the Muslim Ottoman Turks, John Smith set off for Austria to join the HRE army.

On his way to Austria, Smith experienced several adventures, including serving on a pirate ship in the Mediterranean Sea. His pirate service earned him 500 gold pieces enabling him to complete his trip through Italy, Croatia and Slovenia to Austria where he joined the HRE army.

Smith fought against the Turks in battles waged in Slovenia, Hungary and Transylvania earning several awards for his bravery in battle. One award was his promotion to captain, a title Smith remained proud of the rest of his life.

The Prince of Transylvania gave Smith the title of “English gentleman”, and with it a coat of arms that consisted of three Turks' heads representing the three Turks killed and beheaded by Smith in individual jousting duels.

Smith had become a very accomplished soldier and leader.

But his good fortune ended in 1602 when he was wounded and captured in battle and sold into Turkish slavery. Smith was forced to march 600 miles to Constantinople.

As Smith describes it: “we all sold for slaves, like beasts in a market-place; where every merchant, viewing their limbs and wounds, caused other slaves to struggle with them to try their strength.” (Smith, *The True Travels, Adventures and Observations of Captain John Smith*) In Constantinople, the enslaved Smith was presented by his master as a gift to his fiancée, Charatza Tragbigzanda.

According to Smith's account, Charatza became infatuated with him, and apparently in an attempt to convert Smith to Islam, she sent him to work for her brother, Tymor Bashaw, who ran an agricultural station in present-day Russia, near Rostov, “to learne the language, and what it was to be a Turk, till time made her Master of her selfe.” (Smith)

Instead of instructing Smith, Tymore mistreated him, often beating him. During one such beating, Smith overpowered Tymore, killing him and fleeing his enslavement using Tymore's horse and clothing.

Traveling for days, unsure of his route, Smith was befriended by a Russian and his wife, Callamatta, whom Smith called this “good lady”. Their assistance helped Smith regain his strength and begin his travels across the remainder of Russia, Ukraine, Germany, France, Spain, and Morocco before finally returning to England in 1604. (All in this section from World Encyclopedia and NPS)



Jamestown

Back in England, Smith's military exploits impressed prominent men, especially Captain Bartholomew Gosnold, a man intent on founding an English colony in the Chesapeake region of Virginia.

Gosnold, and other important men in London, organized the Virginia Company of London and were granted a charter by King James I on April 10, 1606, to establish a colony in Virginia.

On December 20, 1606, three small ships carrying 104 settlers, including Smith, left England, bound for Virginia. During the trip, Smith was arrested for mutiny.

According to Smith, the gentlemen on board were jealous of his military and naval experience and looked down on him because of his rural upbringing. He said they accused him of plotting to seize power for himself. He spent most of the voyage in irons and was nearly hanged.

Prior to departure, the leaders of the Virginia Company had selected seven voyagers to govern the colony. They put the names of the chosen in a sealed box, which was not to be opened until arrival in Virginia.

Upon landfall four months later, the colonists opened the box and discovered that Smith's name was among the chosen leaders. Smith was allowed to take up a position on the council — but he remained disliked.

(The first President of the new Virginia colony was Edward Maria Winfield. The other six council members were: Bartholomew Gosnold, Christopher Newport, John Martin, John Ratcliffe, George Kendall, and John Smith.)

Established on May 13, 1607, the colony was named Jamestown, in honor of the king. [It became the first permanent English settlement in North America, and first of 13 English colonies that won independence from England and became the first 13 states of the United States of America.]

Jamestown's fate hung in the balance for many years, and some historians credit Jamestown's survival to the efforts of Captain Smith.

The first months of Jamestown's existence were very difficult due to food shortages, unhealthy drinking water, disease, occasional skirmishing with the Powhatan Indians, and ineffectual council leadership due to bickering and the untimely death of Bartholomew Gosnold.

Smith's approach to these problems differed from many of the council members. He regarded the other leaders as gentlemen with no knowledge or experience in how to fight for survival. (Szalay)

Smith tried to focus the colonists on their immediate needs and not spend valuable time searching for gold, but he wrote,

“There was no talk, no hope, no work but dig gold, wash gold, refine gold, load gold - such a bruit of GOLD that one mad fellow desired to be buried in the sands, lest they should by their art make gold of his bones!”



Despite these fruitless endeavors to find gold, the colony became more stable as additional settlers and food arrived. (NPS)

After five months in Jamestown, Smith and two other councilmen came together to remove colony president Edward Wingfield from office. John Ratcliffe was assigned to be the new president.

Under Ratcliffe's leadership, Smith was appointed cape merchant and tasked with trading with the natives for food. Smith conducted expeditions throughout the region.

Chief Powhatan and Pocahontas

On one such expedition in December 1607, Smith and his party were ambushed on the Chickahominy River by a large Powhatan hunting party. Smith was the sole survivor and was brought to Werowocomoco, the village of the paramount chief's residence.

What happened next is unclear, as Smith gave varying accounts, and the story has been mythologized in popular culture.

The popular story is that the natives were ready to kill him, when Pocahontas, Chief Powhatan's 11-year-old daughter, threw herself on top of Smith, trying to shield him from death. However, Smith did not write this version until 1624 in his book, "Generall Historie."

In a letter written soon after the event and long before “Generall Historie” was published, Smith described feasting and conversing with Chief Powhatan.

Most historians believe that the Powhatan people conducted an adoption ceremony, welcoming Smith into their community, but that Smith did not understand this.

Also, anthropologist Helen C. Rountree points out that Pocahontas may well have been too young to even attend the ceremony. Girls her age were responsible for preparing food and cleaning up afterward.

Chief Powhatan announced that they were friends and that if Smith gave him two cannons and a grindstone, he would give Smith the village of Capahosic and would consider him a son.

It is now understood that Chief Powhatan was trying to expand his empire and neutralize the English threat, but Smith may not have seen this motivation.

After four weeks, on friendly terms with the Powhatan people, Smith was released and escorted back to James Fort.

By this time, only 38 of the 104 settlers were still alive.

More settlers arrived at Jamestown in January 1608, and Chief Powhatan sent some food to the English, but misfortune struck in early January with the accidental burning down of most of the fort.

They continued contact for some time, and Pocahontas often visited Jamestown with food. Though she and Smith were acquainted, they were never romantically involved. (All in this section is from Szalay and NPS)

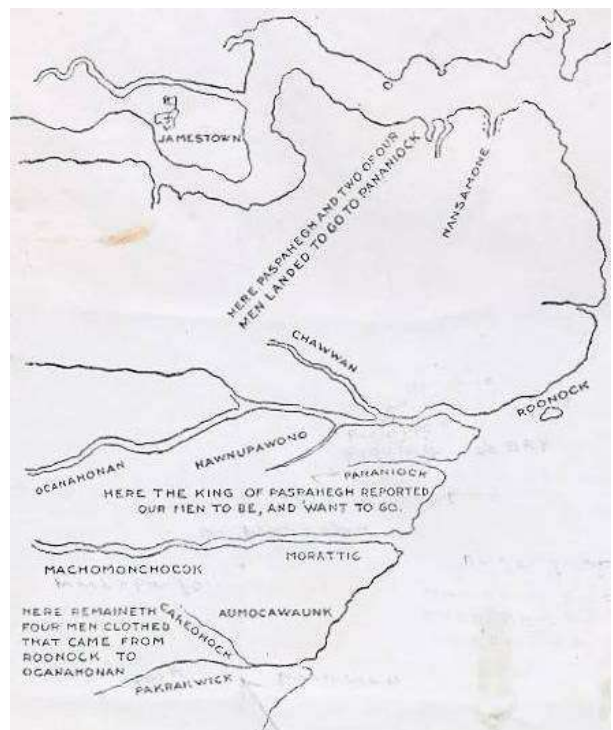
Mapping the Chesapeake

When Smith returned to Jamestown in January, he discovered that he had been replaced on the council.

Settlers thought Smith was responsible for his companions’ deaths on the Chickahominy River, and he was sentenced to hang.

Luckily for Smith, the night of his sentencing, about 100 new settlers from England arrived with food and other reinforcements. Smith’s charges and execution were forgotten during the celebration.

With the arrival of new settlers and the help from the Powhatans, the situation at Jamestown began to slowly improve. At this point, the Virginia Company sent Smith to explore the Chesapeake in search of gold and a passage to the Pacific Ocean.



In 1608, Smith made a rough-sketch map of the Chesapeake Bay, which he sent to England ahead of his return in 1609. It fell into Spanish hands in England and was published by Don Pedro de Zuñiga. Known as the "Zuñiga map," it documents Indian settlements..

Smith embarked on two lengthy voyages, investigating 2,500 miles of territory. He did not find gold or a route west, but he did acquire food for the colonists, learned about the natives and created highly accurate maps of the area.

(These and later maps of his became one of Smith's greatest accomplishments and were used by future explorers.) (All in this section is from Szalay)



Presidency and War

When he returned to Jamestown, Smith's popularity once again plummeted. A private letter he had written detailing his dissatisfaction with colony leadership and Virginia Company policies had been published in England. Company and colony leadership was understandably displeased.

Nevertheless, in September 1608, Smith was elected president of the colony. He immediately set about strengthening defenses and securing more food.

Smith declared, "He that will not work shall not eat," and forced the colonists to plant crops, repair the fort, develop products like pitch and soap ash for export, and more.

According to Smith, his policies yielded productive results — but they nevertheless remained unpopular. The death toll fell but colonists were still unable to produce enough food and remained dependent upon Indian trade.

This was problematic because Virginia was experiencing a severe drought. The Powhatan community was also short on food, and therefore refused to share with the English for a time.

Unfortunately, relations were tenuous between the English and the Powhatan Indians as Smith responded to this situation with violence, burning villages, stealing food, imprisoning, beating, and forcing the natives into labor.

This violent approach caused further problems for Smith, since Virginia Company officials and other colony leaders wanted to convert the Indians to Christianity.

In 1609, the colonists decided to “coronate” Chief Powhatan in an attempt to improve relations with the natives while putting them under King James’ rule. Smith warned that this wouldn’t work, and he was right. Powhatan refused to kneel and the ceremony was a failure.

Powhatan cut off aid to the settlers and tried to have Smith killed. Some versions of the story attest that Pocahontas warned Smith of the murder plot.

Relations between the English and the Powhatans were ruined, and the First Anglo-Powhatan War began. It ended only when Pocahontas married John Rolfe in 1614.

(Rolfe is the one who introduced a new strain of tobacco from seeds at Jamestown. Tobacco became the long awaited cash crop for the Virginia Company, who wanted to make money off their investment in Jamestown. This helped turn the settlement into a profitable venture.)

Smith continued to have political troubles, enacting controversial policies and refusing to step down as president. The Virginia Company decided instead to do away with the title and send a governor. (All in this section is from Szalay)

Explosion

In September 1609, Smith was victim of a gunpowder explosion and suffered severe burns.

“Smith ... took the row-boat for Jamestown. ... While he was sleeping in his boat his powder-bag was accidentally fired; the explosion tore the flesh from his body and thighs, nine or ten inches square, in the most frightful manner.”

“To quench the tormenting fire, frying him in his clothes, he leaped into the deep river, where, ere they could recover him, he was nearly drowned. In this pitiable condition, without either surgeon or surgery, he was to go nearly a hundred miles.”

“When Smith returned wounded to Jamestown, he was physically in no condition to face the situation. With no medical attendance, his death was not improbable.” (Warner)

Though Smith claimed that the explosion was an accident, historians think it may well have been attempted murder. The severely injured Smith was sent back to England. (LiveScience)

Smith Leaves Jamestown

“He had no strength to enforce discipline nor organize expeditions for supplies; besides, he was acting under a commission whose virtue had expired, and the mutinous spirits rebelled against his authority.”

“Ratcliffe, Archer, and the others who were awaiting trial conspired against him, and Smith says he would have been murdered in his bed if the murderer's heart had not failed him when he went to fire his pistol at the defenseless sick man.”

“However, Smith was forced to yield to circumstances. No sooner had he given out that he would depart for England than they persuaded Mr. Percy to stay and act as President, and all eyes were turned in expectation of favor upon the new commanders.”

“It is no doubt true, however, that but for the accident to our hero, he would have continued to rule till the arrival of Gates and Somers with the new commissions; as he himself says, ‘but had that unhappy blast not happened, he would quickly have qualified the heat of those humors and factions, had the ships but once left them and us to our fortunes ...’”

“... and have made that provision from among the salvages, as we neither feared Spaniard, Salvage, nor famine: nor would have left Virginia nor our lawful authority, but at as dear a price as we had bought it, and paid for it.” (Warner)

After he left, Jamestown experienced a terrible famine known as the Starving Time, which only 60 out of 240 settlers survived. (LiveScience)

Smith Returns to Explore “New England”

Always the adventurer, Smith undertook a voyage in 1614 exploring the shores of northern Virginia, which he mapped and renamed New England.

It was actually through Smith that the Plymouth name came about. The Pilgrim Separatists did not name Plymouth, Massachusetts; this area had been called Plymouth years before they arrived. It had been called a variety of things over the years, Patuxet, Accomack, Port Saint Louis and Plimouth.

John Smith’s book, ‘A Description of New England,’ is a presentation “To The High Hopeful Charles uses Prince of Great Britaine” that Smith states,

“So favourable was your most renowned and memorable Brother, Prince Henry, to all generous designs; that in my discovery of Virginia, I presumed to call two namelesse Headlands after my Soueraignes heires, Cape Henry, and Cape Charles.”

Smith then asks,

“whereof I heere present your Highness the description in a Map; my humble sute is, you would please to change their Barbarous names, for such English, as Posterity may say, Prince Charles was their Godfather.”



After Smith presented his map, Prince Charles renamed many of the locations for the version to be published. Rivers, mountains, islands, capes and Native settlements received English names

This is somewhat confusing in the case of Native settlements which are depicted on Smith's map as though they were existing English towns with English names such as "London," "Oxford," and "Plymouth."

In fact there were no permanent English settlements at the time of Smith's exploration, despite how it may appear on the map at first glance. A few of Prince Charles's names have stuck. Among them Cape Ann, the Charles River and ... Plymouth. (Browne)

However, "because the booke was printed ere the Prince his Highnesse had altered the names, I intreate the Reader, peruse this schedule; which will plainly shew him the correspondence of the old names to the new."

It noted the Accomack name was changed by Prince Charles to Plymouth. Smith's book was printed in 1616, four years before the Pilgrims landed at that site.



Portion of John Smith's 1614 Map Noting 'Plymouth'

Intending to establish an English colony there, Smith's efforts were frustrated when he was captured by French pirates while sailing to New England in 1615.

Escaping from the pirates, Smith returned to England where he wrote extensively about his life's adventures.

John Smith and Another Mayflower 'Connection'

In 1620, the Pilgrims nearly selected Captain Smith to be their military advisor but instead selected Myles Standish, however, they did use Smith's map of New England.

Captain John Smith died in London on June 21, 1631, and was buried at St. Sepulchre's Church.

"Captain John Smith has lived on in legend far more thrillingly than even he could have foreseen. Much has been made—largely by ill-informed people—of trivial inconsequences in his narratives, and controversy has at times raged rather absurdly. ..."

"To be sure, much of what John Smith wrote was exaggerated. ... Rare indeed was the man who wrote in Stuart times without ornament, without exuberance. Let it only be said that nothing John Smith wrote has yet been found to be a lie." (Philip Barbour)

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young