

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

John Smith (1580-1631)

From *A True Relation* and *The General Historie of Virginia*

A True Relation (1608) is a brief account of the Jamestown colony's first year, written from Smith's point of view and emphasizing and justifying his own actions. He bargains with different Indian nations and their leaders, describes their towns and houses, and disciplines other expedition members. Yet, simple as this seems, it is not an easy document for modern readers. Place names are strange, and the times and durations of different events are often unclear. It is also often unclear why these events are selected for description and how they fit together.

The names of the places, tribes, and chiefs were strange to Smith, too, however. In the first year he and the English had barely learned them. Smith also lacked a more comprehensive view of events because he was just becoming established as leader. Indeed, when the little party of 105 men arrived in Virginia, he was excluded from the governing council because he had led a mutiny during the ship's stop in the Caribbean (though he does not tell us this here). The *True Relation* therefore emphasizes his activities because they are what he knew best and because by making them into the settlement's history, he consolidated his power. He impressed his character on the settlement and on the "true" relation. He also needed to defend his actions, sometimes against criticisms the reader is scarcely aware of.

In the passage below he describes conditions in June, 1607, as he begins to take charge, describes his negotiations with the Indians for food, defends the execution of Captain Kendall, and then narrates his visit to and imprisonment by Powhatan. Later he narrates more diplomacy with Powhatan and other chiefs, justifies his sternness in dealing with them and their followers, and tells a little about an expedition to look for precious stones.

The passage from *The General Historie* (1624) describes Pocahontas's saving him from execution. The pages before it give a much longer account of his capture, the way he was led to Powhatan's town, and how he was treated. Comparing the two accounts, one can see many differences, the most important being that in the latter Smith was not just defending his actions, he was mythologizing them, turning himself from leader into legend.

The selection below is from *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Happened in Virginia* and from *The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*, both of which are included in *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, ed. Edward Arber (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910). The information in brackets is from this same edition. The standard biography of Smith is Philip Barbour's *The Three Worlds of Captain John Smith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964).

Reading

A Description of New England (1616): An Online Electronic Text Edition
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=etas>