

John Smith's True Story Is Way Better Than the Fictional Tale

By: [Carrie Whitney, Ph.D.](#) | Dec 8, 2020



Colonial settler Capt. John Smith was supposedly saved from execution by Native American Pocahontas in the mid 1610s. But was he really? KEAN COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

While plenty of people older than age of 8 know that the [Pocahontas](#) and John Smith love story is just a myth, and kind of a gross one considering he was 27 when he encountered the 10- or 11-year old girl, Smith's real-life story hasn't gotten much attention outside of academic circles. But the genuine Capt. John Smith had more effect on the trajectory of history than any two-dimensional animated version could ever hope to.

"He was one of the very most important people in early English colonization," says Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Silver professor of history emerita at New York University and editor of "[Captain John Smith, A Select Edition of His Writings](#)." "His image has endured for all the wrong reasons." Popular culture seized on the event with Pocahontas, but his interactions with her were the least important among his accomplishments.

Who Was John Smith?

Born in 1580 in Lincolnshire, England, Smith was the son of yeoman farmers (non-slaveholding, small landowning farmers), according to his autobiography, explains Kupperman. After his father died, Smith left home and his life of adventure began.

According to the [Jamestown Rediscovery Project](#), Smith helped the French fight for Dutch independence from Spain and then became a sailor on a merchant ship. By 1600, he had linked up with the Hapsburgs to [fight the Ottomans](#) in Hungary. He was captured, sold into slavery and given to a young woman in Istanbul. Although she is reported (by Smith) to have fallen in love with Smith, she sent him to her brother, who [treated him badly](#). Smith wound up killing the brother to escape and traveled throughout North Africa and Europe before returning to England, where he arrived just at the time the [Virginia Company](#) was making plans to establish a colony in North America.

This might all sound like a tall tale, but scholars have shown that Smith's places, battles and dates line up with accepted records, while his astonishing version of the events places him within literary genres of the time, according to Kupperman.

John Smith landed in Virginia in April 1607 where the Jamestown settlement would be founded.

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The Adventurer in Virginia

The next stop for Smith was colonial Virginia. The Virginia Company voyage set off for the "New World" Dec. 20, 1606, with Smith aboard. While sailing to North America, he was accused of a mutiny, and when the ships docked in the Chesapeake Bay in April 1607, where the [Jamestown](#) settlement would be founded, he was a prisoner. Once the colony leaders realized that the Company had intended Smith to be part of the governing council, they released him.

Smith spent his time in Virginia exploring the area and bartering with local peoples. He was in Virginia for slightly less than two years, but his role there was important. "[H]e was the only person on the leadership who had actual experience dealing with other cultures," says Kupperman, who contrasts Smith's behavior with that of [Capt. Christopher Newport's](#). When Newport visited the local Algonquin leader Chief Powhatan, for instance, he met him with soldiers, trumpets and flags, what Kupperman

calls "a ridiculous display." Smith, on the other hand, visited Powhatan accompanied only by four men.

"He understood a lot more about how you can get people to be interested in helping you in these situations," says Kupperman. "And swagger is not really it."

Smith's contributions at Jamestown went beyond his cross-cultural awareness. The English had not yet explored the Chesapeake Bay when they arrived in 1607, according to [Paul P. Musselwhite](#), assistant professor of history at Dartmouth. An earlier attempt at settlement in the region, the [lost colony of Roanoke](#), had not ended well. But within five years, Smith's work helped the English develop a map and knowledge of the geography and peoples of the area.

John Smith's 1606 map of Virginia shows the Chesapeake Bay, Potomac River, other geographic features, as well as a vignette of the Native leader, Powhatan, in council.

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The Misconceptions About Pocahontas

Smith did a lot during his short time in Virginia, but what he didn't do was fall in love with Pocahontas — or vice versa.

"The most critical misconception is the one about his relationship with Pocahontas," says Musselwhite. In reality, it would have been practically impossible for him to have had any kind of important relationship with her because he was a nearly 30-year-old soldier and she was a tween girl. Smith played up their connection later when Pocahontas visited England and had become the center of attention at the court.

During his first year in Virginia, Smith was captured by some of Powhatan's men. According to the legend, Pocahontas intervened in Smith's near-execution by throwing herself across his body, thereby saving his life.

It seems clear that it was an initiation ceremony and Pocahontas' role was scripted, explains Kupperman. Smith was going through a symbolic death and being reborn as a member of the Algonquin community. Afterward, Powhatan said that he would call him "son."

Pocahontas and other Indigenous children did spend time at James Fort, according to Musselwhite. Sending children was a way to create cultural connections, and Pocahontas and Smith probably spent some time together. Whether he would have distinguished her from other children at the fort at the time is hard to know.

The most critical misconception about John Smith is the love connection between himself and Pocahontas.

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The Colonizer of New England

By September 1608, Smith had become the president of the council for the Virginia Colony, encouraging discipline and farming. "Smith's strong leadership helped the colony survive and grow but also made him enemies within the fort. As he slept in a boat in the river one night, Smith was badly injured by a mysterious gunpowder explosion," according to the [Jamestown Rediscovery Project](#). His injuries were severe enough that he was forced to return to England.

But that only meant he turned his focus elsewhere, and Smith became one of the principal theorists of early English colonization, Kupperman says.

"That's his real importance," she says. "He had this vision for what the English colonies could be." It was [centered on settlers](#) from the "middling group" of English society who had independence and were willing to work hard for themselves.

In 1614, Smith returned to America from London and spent just five weeks mapping New England, he saw the way forward. Until that time, colonization had been financed by rich, elite men, who expected to get a good return on investment. Smith asserted that the only way to build a real community was for individuals — settlers — to work for themselves. And that became the American colonization model.

In fact, Smith developed the [name](#) and concept of New England. It was Smith who determined how English people geographically defined the limits of New England, according to Musselwhite. Like his 1612 map of Virginia, the New England map he published in 1616 has been shown by modern scholars to be surprisingly accurate.

And Smith's efforts writing about New England and promoting it to anyone who would listen led to its being the place that settlers like the pilgrims decided to go, says Musselwhite. That is "perhaps an underappreciated contribution."

Smith the Writer and Publicist

Following nearly two decades of 17th-century travel, Smith entered a new phase of his life. He ceased adventuring and turned his attention more fully to writing and self-promotion. While other soldiers and adventurers may have gone on to India or become pirates, Smith realized he could make a career as a writer, says Musselwhite.

Although Smith is almost entirely famous in popular culture because he was a fighter and a practical man, his recognition has endured because he was able to pivot and worked to win patronage at court. He was certainly not a gruff, egalitarian, according to Musselwhite.

After leaving New England, he spent the rest of his life in London. Kupperman explains that Smith knew all of the contemporary writers and was part of that group. He hung out with a more quill and parchment crowd, many of whom wrote forwards and introductions for his books.

"His circle really was this community of writers in early 17th-century London," says Kupperman.

And as far as his books, he has often been described by historians as a liar because he repeatedly wrote about the same material, changing and embroidering it. A main accusation against Smith is that he was constantly aggrandizing himself; the Pocahontas story offers a good example.

Kupperman says that is true, but he was also communicating in the style of the day.

If his later writings and general history are used as important sources for understanding the world of colonial promotion, they are not a source of "objective, factual detail," Musselwhite says. But Smith represents the most powerful example of what colonial promotion had become by the 1620s. All of the personal stories were woven into grandiose claims in an attempt to develop a patronage network and colonial schemes.

In 1624, Smith, who died in 1631, compiled all of his writings about the colonies into "[The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles](#)."

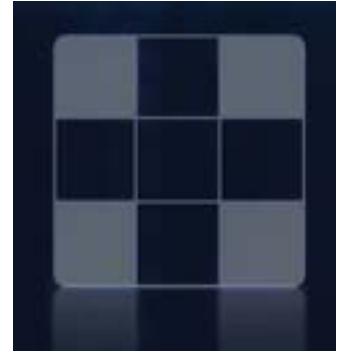
"The reason his image has endured is 90 percent because of his own creation," says Musselwhite. "You would really describe him as a pragmatic and tireless soldier and as a tireless self-promoter and publicist."

Today, we might call him an influencer.

Now That's Interesting

John Smith was a reportedly short man, about 5 feet, 4 inches tall (1.6 meters) with dark hair and a beard — a far cry from Disney's depiction of John Smith as tall, blonde and clean-shaven. Why Disney, why?


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