

## LESSON 8

### Did Pocahontas Really Rescue Captain John Smith?

#### Background Information

Captain John Smith, one of the earliest heroes in American history, came to Jamestown with the first settlers. His strong leadership may have been the major reason this first settlement survived the difficulties of the first year.

John Smith was quite an adventurer. One of his most well-known exploits happened in 1607, when Pocahontas rescued him from being killed by her father, the Indian chief Powhatan. There is some question, however, whether this dramatic rescue ever took place. Some historians believe Smith made up the story.

Historians do not always agree about what happened in the past. They write theories or hypotheses of what happened. In history these hypotheses are called "interpretations."

Two interpretations of the Pocahontas-John Smith episode are presented in this lesson. Since each is believed by several historians, they are called, respectively, Interpretation A and Interpretation B. Read each interpretation and its evidence then decide whether Pocahontas did, in fact, rescue Captain John Smith from death.

#### Relevant Information

1. In *A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia*, published in 1615, author Raphe Hamor did not mention the Pocahontas incident at all. Hamor was one of the leaders in Jamestown, knew Pocahontas well, and referred to her several times in his book.
2. Other people in Jamestown said that Smith and two others were attacked by Indians. The two others were killed, and Smith was held by Powhatan for several days. On Smith's return to Jamestown, he was arrested for having permitted the death of his two companions.
3. The following story about the famous explorer De Soto was published in 1609. De Soto was supposedly captured by the Indians and brought before their chief, Utica.

"By command of [Indian Chief] Utica, De Soto was bound hand and foot to four stakes...that he might be burned; but a daughter of the chief pleaded that he might be spared. Though one Christian, she said, might do no good, certainly he could do no harm, and it would be an honor to have one for a captive; to which the father agreed, directing the injuries of De Soto to be healed."

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### Captain John Smith: Interpretation A

(1) The rescue of Captain John Smith by Pocahontas in 1607 is one of the great tales in American history. In truth, however, John Smith was not saved by Pocahontas. The Indians actually were friendly with him and let him go after four days. In his book *True Relation*, Smith said that Powhatan assured him of the Indians' friendship and gave him food to eat.<sup>1</sup>

(2) It wasn't until 1624, when Smith wrote his *Generall Historie of Virginia*, that the first mention of the Pocahontas rescue appeared.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, he made the story up to make himself look good. After all, before her death in the 1620s, Pocahontas had become famous in London, and Smith could gain some of that popularity by saying that the beautiful Indian had rescued him.

(3) Also, since Smith was a constant liar, his word can't be trusted. For example, although he claimed to have been involved in European wars in Hungary and Transylvania against the Turks, many of the names he mentioned in those tales didn't exist. There

is no evidence to show that the main characters in Smith's story—an English Jesuit, Lord Ebersbaught, Baron Kissell, or Henry Volda—ever existed. Smith also claimed that in one battle he single-handedly killed and beheaded three Turkish soldiers.<sup>3</sup> This is ridiculous!

(4) Smith also wrote often of the many women who fell in love with him, and on at least two other occasions, he claimed that beautiful women had rescued him.<sup>4</sup>

(5) The biggest flaw in the Pocahontas tale is that if such a daring rescue had taken place, why did Smith fail to mention it in his book *True Relation*, which was printed only the next year? Did he forget about it? Why, then, did he remember it seventeen years later when he wrote his *Generall Historie of Virginia*?

(6) The answer is that the rescue by Pocahontas never took place. It was a story made up by a liar who wanted to raise his reputation as an adventurer and a ladies' man.

### Endnotes for Interpretation A

<sup>1</sup> John Smith, *True Relation*, 1608 (Rewritten in modern English) "Arriving at Weramocomoco, their Emperor (Powhatan) was proudly lying upon a bedstead a foot high.... He kindly welcomed me with good words and great platters of food, assuring me of his friendship, and of letting me go within four days."

<sup>2</sup> John Smith, *Generall Historie of Virginia*, 1624, Reprinted in Henry Johnson, *Teaching of History* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), p. 309.

"At last the Indians brought me to Meronocomo, where Powhatan their Emperor was. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe.... Having given me the best food that such barbarous people could offer, a long discussion was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many Indians as could laid hands on me and dragged their clubs to beat out my brains. Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no plea for mercy could stop the murder, got my head in her arms, and laid her...head upon mine to save me from death: Whereas the Emperor [Powhatan] was contented that I should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper."

<sup>3</sup> Lewis L. Kropf, a Hungarian historian, compared Captain Smith's accounts of his adventures in Europe in the Turkish wars against Hungarian documents about the wars with the Turks. Kropf concluded that the places and people mentioned in Smith's writing were pure fictions.

<sup>4</sup> John Smith wrote that he escaped in a small boat from a band of pirates and was rescued by the beautiful Lady Chanoyes. At another time, Smith wrote that some barbarians attacked him. He managed to escape and was nursed back to health by the beautiful Lady Callamata.

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### Captain John Smith: Interpretation B

(1) Captain John Smith's rescue by Pocahontas in 1607 is one of the great stories in early American history. Recently, however, some historians have questioned whether the event actually took place. These historians argue that Smith was a notorious liar who made up the rescue story to make himself look better. But these historians are wrong. Recent evidence shows that Smith was not a liar and that the Pocahontas rescue probably happened the way the Captain reported it.

(2) First, while Smith did not mention the rescue in his book *True Relation*, printed in 1608, there are several explanations for this. The publisher, who, after all, said that there were other parts which he decided not to include,<sup>1</sup> may have left it out of the manuscript. Also, in 1608 Smith may not have thought the rescue important enough to mention. Thus, there may be good reason why Smith failed to mention the incident in the book.

(3) Second, some of Smith's more questioned stories turn out to be very accurate. In his accounts of wars in Hungary and Transylvania (parts of Europe) against the Turks, he refers to

people who historians believe didn't exist. In fact, they did exist. There was an English Jesuit involved named William Wright; "Lord Ebersbaught" was Carl Von Herbertsdorf; "Baron Kissel" was Hanns Khisl; Volda was the noble, Folta. Smith wrote in 1602 that "Volda" completed his twentieth year in military service, which is exactly right. Other historians thought the people Smith mentioned didn't exist because Smith misspelled so many of their names.<sup>2</sup>

(4) Smith's story which stated that he cut off the heads of three Turkish soldiers has also been proven true. Szamoskoezy, a person from that time, reported that Smith killed the three Turks in duels during a siege on a city—exactly the way the Captain described the events.

(5) Smith's accuracy in writing about the wars against the Turks, as well as other reports, shows him to be not only a brave and capable fighter, but also a truthful and reliable reporter of events. Although we have only Smith's account of the Pocahontas rescue story, we can depend on his accuracy as to what happened.

### Endnotes for Interpretation B

<sup>1</sup> John Smith, *True Relation*, 1608. [For the full quotation, see endnote 1 of Interpretation A.] In the introduction of *True Relation*, the publisher wrote, "Somewhat more was written by Smith, which being as I thought [fit only to be private] I would not venture to make it public [publish it]."

<sup>2</sup> Laura Polanyi Striker, a historian trained in Hungary, found all the names mentioned by Smith in her study of Hungarian documents. She also found the information about Folta completing his twentieth year of service in 1602.



Did Pocahontas really rescue John Smith? Explain your answer.

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