



## *John Smith*

John Smith was born in Lincolnshire, England in 1580. His father was a farmer, but John yearned for adventure. At the age of 16, he became a soldier and his early travels took him to wars and experiences throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. He rose to the rank of captain, but was captured and sold into slavery. He escaped and eventually made his way back to England.

Restless in England, John Smith joined the Virginia Company's expedition to Virginia. Three ships set sail in December 1606 and reached Virginia in

April 1607. Aboard ship Smith was accused of attempting mutiny and was made a prisoner. Once in Virginia the group opened a sealed box with instructions from the Virginia Company, and Smith was named as one of seven men to lead the colony. He was allowed to take his place on Jamestown's governing council.

Soon after their arrival, John Smith accompanied Captain Christopher Newport and 22 other men on an exploratory trip up the river looking for a passage to the Pacific Ocean. They met and dined with native Powhatan Indians, and for the first time learned of the paramount chief, Wahunsonacock, who ruled over all of the Powhatans. It would be several months before Smith would meet Chief Powhatan.

When the first re-supply ship did not return to Jamestown in November, John Smith set out to trade with the Indians for food. This took Smith to many villages up and down the river, and he soon became quite knowledgeable about the Powhatan people. Smith's frequent involvement with the Indians made him one of the colony's most effective speakers of Algonquian, the language of the Powhatan Indians.

On a hunting and exploration expedition in December 1607, Smith was captured by several Indian warriors and taken to a local chief named Opechancanough, one of Chief Powhatan's brothers. If he wanted to live, Smith needed to show he was an important man. He noticed that the Indians seemed to regard anything they did not understand as supernatural, so he showed Opechancanough his compass. The Indian chief was fascinated when the compass was turned and the needle kept pointing in the same direction. Later Smith asked for a messenger to carry a letter to Jamestown. He told the colonists in the letter to frighten the messenger with cannon fire and to send back items that he had promised the Indians. The colonists followed Smith's instructions, and the Indians were amazed that Smith received exactly what he'd asked for. The Powhatans had no written language, and they probably thought that the English could make paper speak. Smith was taken to village after village, but finally he arrived at Werowocomoco. Here he was taken to meet Chief Powhatan who asked why the English had come and what Smith was looking for. After providing Smith with a feast, the Indians laid his head on two stones as if to beat out his brains. Smith later wrote that Pocahontas took his

head in her arms and laid her head upon his to save him from death. Today we think that this was probably a ritual where Chief Powhatan was showing his power over the English colonists.

By early 1608 only 38 of the original 104 colonists were still alive. Most had died of illness or starvation. Food and supplies were scarce and the remaining settlers argued with one another. Supply ships arrived in January 1608, but over the next year and a half, Smith would lead many trading missions to acquire badly needed food for the colony. Smith also led several expeditions to explore and map the Chesapeake Bay area. On one trip he caught a sting ray that stung and almost killed him. Smith's keen observations of Virginia's natural environment and native people were later published in England.

When he became president of the council in the fall of 1608, he enforced discipline. He thought it was folly for the colonists to spend their time searching for gold. Instead he ordered all the men to plant crops and build shelters. Those who would not work would not get food. He trained men in military skills, using match-lock muskets. He also worked well with the Indians and proved to be a good diplomat, interpreter and trader. Smith was the strong leader who would guide the colony through its early years, helping it to survive.

Badly wounded by a gunpowder explosion in the fall of 1609, Smith returned to England, where he promoted colonization of North America. He returned to America in 1614, traveling to Maine and the Massachusetts Bay areas. He named the area "New England".

When Smith learned that Pocahontas had arrived in England in 1616, he wrote a letter to Queen Anne telling her of Pocahontas' friendship to the Virginia colony and asking that she be received as a royal visitor. As a result, Pocahontas was treated as a prince's daughter and was respectfully received by the ladies in the Queen's court. Smith also paid a visit to Pocahontas while she was in England. The two had crossed into each others cultures more than any other Englishman or Indian woman had done. Smith spent his remaining years in England writing books about America. Smith died in 1631.

*Historical background materials made possible by Archibald Andrews Marks.*