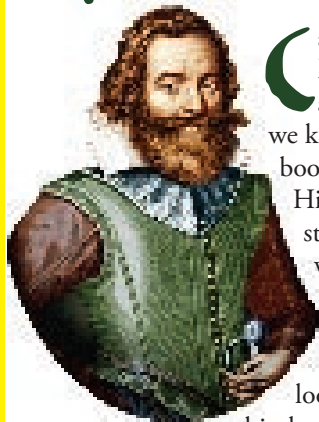




SEA HISTORY for kids

How We Know about John Smith and Pocahontas



Captain John Smith led an extraordinary life, even before he stepped foot on the shores of the New World. A lot of what we know about John Smith comes from the books and reports he wrote about his life. Historians have also compared Smith's stories to other records, or *sources*, that were written by other people who were there at the same time.

We learn about history by studying records from the past. You can look at actual things people have left behind, or *primary sources*. Examples of primary sources include letters, photos, diaries, and newspaper articles. Some are published, such as autobiographies, interviews, maps, and legal records. Some are not. Items your family might store in your own home (letters, diaries, scrapbooks, mail) fall into this category. Primary sources can also include pictures and artifacts. We can learn a lot from what we see in photos, movies, and artwork. Artifacts (objects) from the past, such as clothing, tools, and shipwrecks, can help us figure out things about people's lives, even if there was little written down.

If you wanted to learn about John Smith's travels in the New World, you could read his book, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & The Summer Isles*, which he published in 1624, and look at the maps and reports he made during his travels.

To learn history, you could also read *secondary sources*—writings someone else created about a topic in history (your history book at school, for example), usually long after the event has passed. Secondary sources are a great way to learn about a topic in history, but you always need to remember that the person writing that secondary source may not have seen *all* the primary sources. They might not be telling the full story. Good historians might make some excellent guesses or *hypotheses* about details for which they couldn't find any sources. While they work very hard to tell the story the way it really happened, there is always the chance that they interpreted events incorrectly. We all try to tell the truth the best we can when we write about history, but we can't completely escape our own opinions and beliefs.

Let's look at the case of John Smith and his friend Pocahontas (her real name was actually Matoaka). What we know about them can be confusing because different stories have been told about them for so long. When Disney made the movie *Pocahontas* in 1995, the John Smith and Pocahontas of history faded away as

the fictional movie characters took over. To learn about the real people, we need to study their history. Many primary sources related to the Jamestown colony, including the stories of John Smith and Pocahontas, have survived to this day. John Smith published several books about his adventures too. From these primary sources, we know that the real Pocahontas of 1607 was a young girl about 10 or 11 years old, not a young woman. John Smith was a short, red-headed, bearded hothead of sorts, not the clean-shaven blond cartoon character seen singing in the Virginia forests in the movie.

There are many, many differences between the cartoon characters and the real people, but the most important thing to remember is that, in the end, it is often impossible to know *all* the facts, even the most important ones. Historians are not even sure if Pocahontas actually saved John Smith's life by throwing



herself over his body when her fellow tribesmen were about to bash his brains in with a club (some historians think it was an Indian ritual where an outsider was officially accepted into the tribe by staging a fake killing and then having a tribal member pretend to save him). In fact, the story of Pocahontas saving John Smith comes from a book he wrote 15 years later. When historians research the primary sources that document the story of Pocahontas and John Smith, many important

details do not agree with the popular story we know today. It seems unlikely that they were in love with each other because of their age difference. For example, documents show that, when Pocahontas grew up, she married another Englishman named John Rolfe. As his wife, she converted to Christianity, changed her name to Rebecca, and dressed like an English lady, not a Native American.

We may never know the full story of Pocahontas and John Smith, but we can use their example to remind us that, when a story features historical characters, you have to look at what primary sources were used to write that story before you judge how accurate it is. The more sources you can find, the more reliable the story will be.

You might think that by 2007 we would know everything there is to know about our past, but we still have a lot to learn—and it is always exciting when some unknown primary source suddenly is discovered and can either back up or completely change the history we think we already know. †

