

## Pocahontas Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Question: *Did Pocahontas save John Smith's life?*

#### Materials:

- Walt Disney's *Pocahontas* Movie (segment where Pocahontas saves John Smith)\*\*
- Copies of Pocahontas Timeline
- Copies Pocahontas Documents A and B
- Copies of Historian Interpretations A and B
- Copies of Pocahontas Worksheets

\*\*[Note: Teacher must supply this resource.]

#### Plan of Instruction:

1. Today we are going to talk about a topic in history that you've probably all heard about. What do you know about Pocahontas?

Write student answers on the board.

Ask students: How do you know what you know about Pocahontas? (Some students will inevitably say the Disney movie).

Focus on one question: Did Pocahontas save John Smith's life?

2. Play movie clip.
  - Ask students: So, do you believe the movie? Is this what actually happened between Pocahontas and John Smith? We should probably look at the primary sources.
  - Review important background information, (i.e., English arrive in 1607, land in Jamestown, John Smith is taken prisoner by Powhatan tribe).
3. Hand out Timeline, John Smith Documents A & B, and John Smith Documents Worksheet. Have students complete in groups.
4. Debrief: Why would John Smith write two different accounts? Do students believe that Pocahontas saved his life or not?
5. Review students' claims/ hypotheses.

6. Explain the difference between primary and secondary sources. Hand out Historian Interpretations A and B and Historian Interpretation Worksheet. Student complete worksheet in groups.
7. Debrief:
- Which historian did students find more convincing? Why?
  - What evidence did both historians use to support their argument?
  - Could there be a third interpretation?
  - What did the movie get right and what did it get wrong? Why would Disney choose to make the movie that way?
8. Summary: Our Pocahontas activity was just like the lunchroom fight activity and Snapshot Autobiography. In both cases, we needed to ask “How do we know what we know?” What’s the evidence?

In history, most of the evidence is written in documents. When we read those documents, we have to ask certain questions:

Who wrote the document?  
Why did they write it?  
What else was going on at the time?  
Do other sources agree or disagree with this account?

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Citations:

John Smith, *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of note as hath happened in Virginia Since the First Planting of that Colony, 1608.*  
<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/jamestown-browsemod?id=J1007>

John Smith, *General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles, 1624.*  
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/smith/smith.html>

Paul Lewis, *The Great Rogue: A Biography of Captain John Smith*, 1966, (172-173).

J.A. Leo Lemay, *The American Dream of Captain John Smith*, 1991.

## Document A: “True Relation” (Modified)

Arriving in Werowocomoco, the emperor welcomed me with good words and great platters of food. He promised me his friendship and my freedom within four days. . . .He asked me why we came and why we went further with our boat. . . . He promised to give me what I wanted and to feed us if we made him hatchets and copper. I promised to do this. And so, with all this kindness, he sent me home.

*Source: Smith's own words, from **A True Relation** of such occurrences and accidents of note as hath happened in Virginia Since the First Planting of that Colony, published in **1608**.*

## Document B: “General History” (Modified)

They brought me to Meronocomoco, where I saw Powhatan, their Emperor. Two great stones were brought before Powhatan. Then I was dragged by many hands, and they laid my head on the stones, ready to beat out my brains. Pocahontas, the King’s dearest daughter took my head in her arms and laid down her own upon it to save me from death. Then the Emperor said I should live.

Two days later, Powhatan met me and said we were friends. He told me to bring him two guns and a grindstone and he would consider me his son.

*Source: From Smith’s later version of the story in **General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles, published in 1624.***

# John Smith Documents Worksheet

***Did Pocahontas save John Smith's life?***

***True Relation*** says

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***General History*** says

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Why would Smith add on to his earlier story?

Why might Smith lie or exaggerate and invent new information?

Why wouldn't Smith lie about the story?

## Paul Lewis

### Historian, Interpretation A (Modified)

Author, The Great Rogue: A Biography of Captain John Smith (1966)

In 1617, Pocahontas became a big media event in London. She was a “princess” (daughter of “king” Powhatan), and the first Indian woman to visit England. Because she converted to Christianity, people high in the church, as well as the King and Queen, paid attention to her.

While all this was going on, John Smith published a new version of *True Relation*, adding footnotes that say that Pocahontas threw herself on Smith to save him. Smith even takes credit for introducing Pocahontas to the English language and the Bible.

Then, in 1624, Smith expands his story in *General History*. He adds details to the story, and says that Pocahontas risked her life to save his. Why would a chief who had been so friendly before, suddenly decide to kill John Smith?

*Source: Excerpt from The Great Rogue: A Biography of Captain John Smith, written by the historian Paul Lewis in 1966.*

## J.A. Leo Lemay Historian, Interpretation B (Modified)

Author, The American Dream of Captain John Smith (1991)

John Smith had no reason to lie. In all of his other writings he is very accurate and observant. For 250 years after his captivity, no one questioned his story.

The reason the two versions differ is that their purpose is different. In *A True Relation*, Smith didn't want to brag about his adventures, he wanted to inform readers about the land and people of Virginia. In the *General History*, his goal was to promote settlement in Virginia (and added stories might get people interested).

There is no doubt the event happened. Smith may have misunderstood what the whole thing meant. I think it was probably a common ritual for the tribe, where a young woman in the tribe pretends to save a newcomer as a way of welcoming him into the tribe.

*Source: Excerpt from The American Dream of Captain John Smith, written in 1991 by historian J.A. Leo Lemay.*

# Historian Interpretation Worksheet

*Did Pocahontas save John Smith's life?*

*Paul Lewis* says

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*J.A. Leo Lemay* says

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Which historian interpretation do you find more convincing?  
Why?

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