

Jamestown: Did it happen?

In 1607 English settlers set up a colony in Jamestown in land inhabited by a group of natives known as the Powhatan. The daughter of the Powhatan chief, Pocahontas found herself in the middle of her tribe and these new settlers. Pocahontas ultimately ended up married to an Englishman and returning to England. What happened to lead to such a drastic life change for this young native girl?

Essential Question: Did Pocahontas save John Smith's life by protecting him from her tribe?

Instructions: Analyze the sources below. Complete the questions and charts as you read. After completing the questions answer the Essential Question above. Be sure to cite specific evidence from the documents in your final answer.

Popular Source

John Smith is captured by a group of natives. Their chief, surrounded by male warriors with faces painted in many different colors, asks him if he would be leaving soon. He says he can't until spring. He explains that he might have some things to interest the natives such as gun powder. A sound like a war cry breaks out and the scene goes black. It returns with Smith narrating that Pocahontas saved him. It ends with the natives discussing how they will proceed.

Source: *Scene from The New World directed by Terrence Malick, 2005*

1. According to this source what happened between Pocahontas and John Smith?
2. What did the natives decide to do with Smith and the other colonists?
3. How could we find out if this account is historically accurate or not?

Document A

Arriving in Werowocomoco, their emperor was proudly lying upon a bed a foot high. At his head sat a woman, at his feet another; on each side were his chief men with a great chain of white beads over their shoulders, their heads painted red. The emperor had such a grave and majestic look as to draw me into admiration to see such a naked savage in such a state.

He kindly 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: *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.*

Document B

They brought me to Meronocomoco, where I saw Powhatan, their Emperor. On each side of him sat a young girl of 16 to 18 years and along each side were two rows of men, all with their heads and shoulders painted red.

After I feasted with them in a barbarous manner a discussion was held among the savages. At the conclusion of the discussion 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: *John Smith, General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles, 1624.*

Documents C and D

Historians interpret the differences in John Smith's stories differently. Read the two sample interpretations below to get an idea of the differing views.

Historian Interpretation 1

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.

Historian Interpretation 2

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

4. Complete the following chart as you analyze documents A and B.

	If you were writing a report on the events that occurred in Jamestown would this be a reliable source to use? Why or why not?	What does this account say about Pocahontas?
Document A		
Document B		

5. Both documents A and B are from the same person (and, in fact, the person directly involved) but provide very different explanations of events. Why might John Smith have changed his story?

6. In the time between the two accounts by Smith Pocahontas married an English colonist and moved to England. She became a celebrity and was treated like a queen. She sadly died of disease shortly after living to be only 22. Why might these events lead to Smith changing his story?

7. **Assertion:** After analyzing the five sources I believe that Pocahontas did / did not save John Smith from her tribesmen.

Reason: I think this because _____

Evidence: This is shown by document ___ which says _____

and by document ___ which says _____
