

JAMESTOWN

Story of Survival, Study in Contrasts



John Smith



John Rolfe

by
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The Susan Constant, Godspeed, and Discovery sailing into Jamestown (Scene from the film 1607: A Nation Takes Root)

Jamestown, as we now celebrate, became England's first successful foothold in America. Much that we know as America found its origin here. In 1619 the House of Burgesses convened for the first time in the choir of Jamestown Church, laying the foundation of representative government on this continent. The American dream of private land ownership set its first roots in the sandy, yellow soil of Jamestown. And Nathaniel Bacon's ill-conceived rebellion against the authoritarian rule of Governor Berkeley in 1676 may have engendered the first stirrings of revolutionary spirit that swept the colonies a century later.

But history is not just about events and institutions: It is above all about people. It is not recorded that Captain John Smith or John Rolfe ever met on either side of the Atlantic. Smith never found the gold he sought, but in Rolfe's golden leaf the Virginians eventually found prosperity. Except for their shared resolve and ambition, it's difficult to imagine two more divergent personalities than the voluble, swashbuckling captain and the staid, reticent planter. Yet in the early days of Jamestown, these two men, the factionist and the conciliator, laid the rudimentary groundwork for what would become America.

The English Swashbuckler

The *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery* had arrived in 1607 under the command of Christopher Newport in search of gold and a passage to India. The adventurers were convinced they had found their water route in the river named for Powhatan, the Algonquin chief who had established an empire of 8,000 square miles and as many subjects along the Chesapeake. They renamed the waterway after the king who had chartered their company, and the settlement at its mouth was similarly hailed as James Fort. Because of the low-lying island's deep water access and seclusion from the view



Captain John Smith as portrayed in the film *1607: A Nation Takes Root*

of Spanish privateers, they considered their location ideal to take up their enterprise. They were wrong.

The first party included a good number of artisans, craftsmen, and laborers, in addition to the gentry whom historians often portray as whittling during their leisure hours while the fort was being constructed, or idly bowling in the town's streets as the starving time loomed. Among the unladen class was a former mercenary of 27 who had begun his world travels at age 16 upon the death of his father. Nothing, except his name, was mundane about John Smith (to which he had appended the rank *Captain* while fighting against the Ottoman Empire in Hungary). A man given to hyperbole and embellishment, Smith, by his account, had already cheated death (twice through his daring) and escaped slavery (once by charming his owner's lady, and again by killing her brother). Those survival instincts would be further tested throughout his time in Jamestown. Smith arrived in the Chesapeake under sentence of death by Captain Newport, who had confined his

The Godspeed

feisty passenger below deck for fomenting a mutiny. But as the gallows were being erected, sealed orders from the company were opened, revealing the seven members designated for their governing council. Last on the list was John Smith, and Newport was forced to relent.

Smith's assertive nature soon made him a polarizing leader. Feelings among colonists may have been mixed upon learning of his capture in December while foraging along the Chickahominy River. Smith's men were killed in the ambush, and Opechancanough, the chief's



Powhatan Indians watch the arrival of the ships
(Scene from the film *1607: A Nation Takes Root*)



Lord De La Warr was not delicate in subduing either the Indians or the colonists. (Scene from the film *1607: A Nation Takes Root*)



half-brother and successor, brought the captain before Powhatan to learn his fate. What then transpired is a matter of interpretation. Perhaps his captors were impressed at Smith's poise or mystified by his pocket compass. It could be, as Smith later wrote, that the 11-year-old Pocahontas threw herself on Smith's body, moving her father to spare the prisoner. Or Smith may have been the unwitting participant in a ritualistic trial that resulted in his elevation to a place of honor. We do know, in any case, that after four weeks he was escorted back to Jamestown.

Upon his return, Smith found the

colony in even greater straits, and himself again under the threat of death for the loss of his men. The *Discovery*, with most of the remaining colonists aboard, was departing for England. Smith assumed command, threatening to blow the ship out of the water; however, it was probably Newport's timely arrival with two ships carrying fresh supplies and 80 new colonists that saved the captain from execution and colony from desertion. Days later a fire, carelessly ignited by one of the newcomers, set a thatch roof ablaze, destroying most of the fort's buildings and supplies. And it was only through Smith's

influence with Powhatan that essential provisions were secured for the winter.

By September of 1608, Smith's admirers outnumbered his detractors (mostly men of birth who loathed this bumptious son of a rent farmer), and he was elected president of the council. Smith famously decreed, "He that will not work shall not eat," and he imposed stern discipline on the entire colony—gentleman and commoner alike. Upon learning that the corn supply had been ruined by rats and rotting, Smith immediately organized three separate groups to search for game, fish, and oysters—the latter ultimately becoming the colony's winter staple. Under his leadership, relative peace and a fragile stability emerged.

In that same year, Smith made his mark as a cartographer, mapping much of the area he called the Virginia Sea. During his exploration of the Chesapeake and its tributaries in search of gold, food, or trade, Smith covered some 3,000 miles in two separate voyages, venturing up the Potomac to Great Falls and as far north as Baltimore. Today such names as Stingray Point and Antipoison Creek evoke his experiences there. But in the growing colony, Smith was never far from controversy. Despite Jamestown's relative prosperity, highborn men of influence arranged for his dismissal under a new charter issued by the King. While awaiting various charges, Smith obstinately ignored the King's orders and might have remained in power had he not been seriously injured when a spark from a pipe landed in his powder sack. Badly burned, Smith returned to England for treatment.

So Smith left Virginia much as he had arrived—under a cloud of accusations. He had been here for less than two and a half years. He would later sail to "northern Virginia" on a failed colonizing project along the coastline of Maine and Massachusetts Bay, where he was captured by pirates. With the blessing of the Prince of Wales he named this region New



A Powhatan Indian village as re-created at the Jamestown settlement

England, and in his later years Smith would show his flair for exuberant prose as America's first historian, vividly recalling his adventures in an untamed land. He would even meet Pocahontas again in a strained and bizarre reunion before her death in England. But Smith would never return to Virginia. Upon his departure, Rolfe was still stranded in Bermuda. They had never met.

The Virginia Planter

John Rolfe had departed for America with the dream of cultivating tobacco that could compete with the Spanish imports in Europe. But with his destination almost in sight, he was delayed for almost a year. Rolfe was shipwrecked in a gale off Bermuda while aboard the *Sea Venture*, flagship of a supply expedition to the beleaguered colony. This mishap, later romanticized by Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, was in fact a harrowing ordeal. But this detour and Rolfe's later Caribbean acquisitions would sow the seeds of salvation and eventual prosperity for the new Virginians. Finding Bermuda habitable, the castaways used the native cedars and their own wreckage to construct the appropriately-named *Patience* and *Deliverance* that finally transported them to the colony.

Tying up in Jamestown after ten months in Bermuda, Rolfe found the colony in shambles. Natural events and

the disorder that had set in following Smith's departure revealed a grim and squalid scene. Hundreds of colonists had died of starvation. Whispers of cannibalism included the account of one man who had murdered his wife, pickled her carcass in brine, and subsisted on it over the winter. Within a couple of weeks, Governor Gates and most of the settlement's disheartened inhabitants were under sail and bound for England. But on their second day downstream, they ran straight into the well-stocked fleet of Lord De La Warr, Gates' aptly-named successor, who brusquely turned the ships around. De La Warr (or Delaware in the modern spelling)

was not delicate in subduing either the Indians or the colonists. Because of his genocidal tactics and severe governance, few mourned his departure in March of 1611.

By the next spring Rolfe, had begun to cultivate tobacco, the cash crop that would transform Virginia. Pious and reserved, Rolfe, whose wife had died shortly after arriving, possessed none of Smith's swagger, yet through his enterprise, and his marriage "for the good of the colony," Rolfe would bolster the tiny fort as England's first successful colony. Virginia's Indian tobacco was harsh; even locals preferred the sweeter Spanish product grown in the sunny loam of the West Indies. But at Varina Farm, 30 miles upstream from Jamestown, Rolfe experimented with seeds he had obtained in the Caribbean, and by 1614 he had produced a mild, aromatic strain that was suitable to Virginia's climate. His first barrels exported that fall would undercut the Spanish product in Europe.

In the same year, Rolfe's marriage to Pocahontas provided an eight-year peace that afforded Jamestown the stability to flourish and establish plantations along the James. But in spite of that historic union, Rolfe was never intimate with

John Rolfe, Pocahontas and family departing for England (Scene from the film *1607: A Nation Takes Root*)





An aerial view of the Jamestown settlement

Indian culture. By contrast, Smith's relationship with Powhatan and Opechancanough (to whom Smith had been both a captive and captor) was a complex fabric of cajoling, coercion, ritual, and trade. For Smith there were few sentiments of brotherhood, and whatever tokens of friendship he offered were motivated by survival or economic necessity.

Rolfe, who first met Pocahontas while she was technically a hostage in Jamestown, was a scrupulously practical man. Often depicted as solemn, even dull, we know that Rolfe had serious reservations about marrying the "savage" princess. In a letter seeking Governor Dale's permission, he presented his case:

For the good of this plantation, for the honour of our countrie, for the glory of God, for my owne salvation, and for the converting to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, an unbeleeving creature, namely Pokahuntas. To whom my hartie and best thoughts are, and have a long time bin so intangled, and inthralld in so intricate a laborinth, that I was even aweariet to unwinde my selfe thereout.

It's tempting to suppose that the tender sentiments, so gingerly suggested at the end of the widowed planter's letter, were more sincere than the priggish and practical concerns he stated. And there is every indication that upon "Rebecca's" death following their public relations trip

to London, Rolfe was again a grieving widower. He soon returned to Virginia and prosperity and would marry yet again. But in 1622 Rolfe died suddenly at Varina Farms, apparently in an Indian raid led by the same Opechancanough whose life is so contentiously linked with Smith's.

If you come to Virginia this summer to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Jamestown, you will enjoy a meticulous reconstruction of America's first permanent English colony. But as you walk the settlement's streets, listen for the footsteps of the men and women like Smith and Rolfe and Pocahontas who started us down the path to where we find ourselves today. The original site, Historic Jamestowne, is a National Historic Site jointly administered by the National Park Service and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. Jamestown Settlement, adjacent to the original site, is a museum with galleries, exhibits and historical interpreters depicting 17th century life. For a complete listing of events for Jamestown 2007, visit their website at www.Jamestown2007.org.

Photos courtesy of Jamestown Foundation

1607: A Nation Takes Root is a film shown at the Jamestown settlement visitors' center.

Fred Hardy resides in Fork Union and spends a great deal of time at Rotherwood, his family's farm in Cumberland County.