

Name: _____

Date: _____ Period: _____

DID POCAHONTAS SAVE JOHN SMITH?

Think about how different cultures preserve their identities and beliefs. What are some ways that history, traditions, and beliefs are passed down from one generation to another?

What are some disadvantages of studying people who have oral cultures as opposed to those who share their histories through writings?

Sometimes historians have to narrow down the truth and piece together their own understanding of past events by examining multiple artifacts, documents, locations, and perspectives. The story of Pocahontas saving John Smith is still examined and debated by historians to this day. Today you will try to make your own determination on this event.

You will examine 5 documents:



Each of these documents recount John Smith’s capture by the Powhatans: an excerpt from John Smith’s “A True Relation” from 1608, an excerpt from John Smith’s letter to Queen Anne in 1616, an excerpt from John Smith’s “Generall Historie of Virginia” from 1624, an excerpt from Governor Edward-Maria Wingfield's Report of 1607, and an excerpt from oral traditions that were published in 2007 in *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*.

Full Transcript of Document #1:

next day we departed. This River of Topahanock seemeth in breadth not much lesse then that we dwell upon. At the mouth of the River is a Countrey called Cuttatawomen; upwards is Marraughtacum, Tapohanock, Appamatuck, and Nantaugstacum; at Topmanahocks, the head issuing from many Mountaines.¹²¹ The next night I lodged at a hunting town of Powhatans, and the next day arrived at Werowocomoco upon the river of Pamauncke, where the great king is resident: by the way we passed by the top of another little river, which is betwixt the two, called Payankatank. The most of this Countrey though Desert, yet exceeding fertile, good timber, most hills and dales, in each valley a cristall spring. [...?]

Arriving at Werawocomoco, their Emperour proudly lying upon a Bedstead a foote high upon tenne or twelve Mattes, richly hung with manie Chaynes of great Pearles about his necke, and covered with a great Covering of *Rahaughcums*: At his heade sat a woman, at his feete another, on each side sitting upon a Matte upon the ground were raunged his chiefe men on each side the fire, tenne in a ranke, and behinde them as many yong women, each a great Chaine of white Beades over their shoulders, their heades painted in redde, and [he] with such a grave and Majesticall countenance, as drave me into admiration to see such state in a naked Salvage, [...] hee kindly welcomed me with good wordes, and great Platters of sundrie Victuals, assuring mee his friendship, and my libertie within foure dayes; hee much delighted in Opechancanoughs relation of what I had described to him, and oft examined me upon the same. Hee asked mee the cause of our comming; I tolde him, being in fight with the Spaniards our enemy, beeing over powred, neare put to retreat, and by extreame weather put to this shore, where landing at Chesipiake, the people shot us, but at Kequoughtan they kindly used us; we by signes demaunded fresh water; they described us up the River was all fresh water; at Paspahugh, also they kindly used us; our Pinnasse being leake wee were inforced to

FOCUSED EXCERPT ON THE INCIDENT:

Arriving at Werowocomoco, their emperor proudly lying upon a bedstead a foot high upon ten or twelve mats . . . with such grave and majesticall countenance, as drove me into admiration . . . He kindly welcomed me with good words and great platters of sundry victuals, assuring me his friendship, and my liberty within four days. . . . He asked me the cause of our coming . . . demanded why we went further with our boat. . . . He promised to give me what I wanted to feed us, hatchets and copper we should make him, and none should disturb us. This request I promised to perform. And thus having all the kindness he could devise, sought to content me, he sent me home.

DOCUMENT #2 – Transcribed Letter from John Smith to Queen Anne in 1616

Take notes in the spaces between lines of this letter. Circle or highlight anything that stands out to you. What do you notice about Smith's sense of religion and patriotism?

Most admired Queen,

The love I bear my God, my King and country, hath so oft emboldened me in the worst of extreme dangers, that now honesty doth constrain me to presume thus far beyond myself, to present your Majesty this short discourse: if ingratitude be a deadly poison to all honest virtues, I must be guilty of that crime if I should omit any means to be thankful. So it is, that some ten years ago being in Virginia, and taken prisoner by the power of Powhatan their chief King, I received from this great Salvage exceeding great courtesy, especially from his son Nantaquaus, the most manliest, comeliest, boldest spirit, I ever saw in a Salvage, and his sister Pocahontas, the Kings most dear and well-beloved daughter, being but a child of twelve or thirteen years of age, whose compassionate pitiful heart, of my desperate estate, gave me much cause to respect her: I being the first Christian this proud King and his grim attendants ever saw: and thus enthralled in their barbarous power, I cannot say I felt the least occasion of want that was in the power of those my mortal foes to prevent, notwithstanding all their threats.

After some six weeks fattening amongst those Salvage courtiers, at the minute of my execution, she hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save mine; and not only that, but so prevailed with her father, that I was safely conducted to Jamestown: where I found about eight and thirty miserable poor and sick creatures, to keep possession of all those large territories of Virginia; such was the weakness of this poor commonwealth, as had the salvages not fed us, we directly had starved. And this relief, most gracious Queen, was commonly brought us by this Lady Pocahontas. Notwithstanding all these passages, when inconstant fortune turned our peace to war, this tender virgin would still not spare to dare to visit us, and by her our jars have been oft appeased, and our wants still supplied; were it the policy of her father thus to employ her, or the ordinance of God thus to make her his instrument, or her extraordinary affection to our nation, I know not: but of this I am sure; when her father with the utmost of his policy and power, sought to surprise me, having but eighteen with me, the dark night could not affright her from coming through the irksome woods, and with watered eyes gave me intelligence, with her best advice to escape his fury; which had he known, he had surely slain her. Jamestown with her wild train she as freely frequented, as her fathers habitation; and during the time of two or three years, she next under God, was still the instrument to preserve this colony from death, famine and utter confusion; which if in those times, had once been dissolved, Virginia might have lain as it was at our first arrival to this day. Since then, this business having been turned and varied by many accidents from that I left it at: it is most certain, after a long and

troublesome war after my departure, betwixt her father and our colony; all which time she was not heard of.

About two years after she herself was taken prisoner, being so detained near two years longer, the colony by that means was relieved, peace concluded; and at last rejecting her barbarous condition, she was married to an English Gentleman, with whom at this present she is in England; the first Christian ever of that Nation, the first Virginian ever spoke English, or had a 11 child in marriage by an Englishman: a matter surely, if my meaning be truly considered and well understood, worthy a Princes understanding. Thus, most gracious Lady, I have related to your Majesty, what at your best leisure our approved Histories will account you at large, and done in the time of your Majesty's life; and however this might be presented you from a more worthy pen, it cannot from a more honest heart, as yet I never begged anything of the state, or any: and it is my want of ability and her exceeding desert; your birth, means, and authority; her birth, virtue, want and simplicity, doth make me thus bold, humbly to beseech your Majesty to take this knowledge of her, though it be from one so unworthy to be the reporter, as myself, her husbands estate not being able to make her fit to attend your Majesty.

The most and least I can do, is to tell you this, because none so oft hath tried it as myself, and the rather being of so great a spirit, however her stature: if she should not be well received, seeing this Kingdom may rightly have a Kingdom by her means; her present love to us and Christianity might turn to such scorn and fury, as to divert all this good to the worst of evil; whereas finding so great a Queen should do her some honor more than she can imagine, for being so kind to your servants and subjects, would so ravish her with content, as endear her dearest blood to effect that, your Majesty and all the Kings honest subjects most earnestly desire. And so I humbly kiss your gracious hands,

Captain John Smith, 1616

DOCUMENT #3 – Excerpt from John Smith’s “Generall Historie of Virginia”

Use a highlighter to only highlight critical information in this excerpt that can help you determine details in the infamous incident in which John Smith claims that Pocahontas saved his life. What are the most important details in this account?

The next voyage hee proceeded so farre that with much labour by cutting of trees in sunder he made his passage, but when his Barge could passe no farther, he left her in a broad bay out of danger of shot, commanding none should goe a shore till his returne: himselfe with two English and two Salvages went up higher in a Canowe, but hee was not long absent, but his men went a shore, whose want of government, gave both occasion and opportunity to the Salvages to surprise one George Cassen, whom they slew, and much failed not to have cut of the boat and all the rest. Smith little dreaming of that accident, being got to the marshes at the rivers head, twentie myles in the desert, had his two men shine (as is supposed) sleeping by the Canowe, whilst himselfe by fowling sought them victuall, who finding he was beset with 200. Salvages, two of them bee slew, still defending himselfe with the ayd of a Salvage his guid, whom he bound to his arme with his garters, and used him as a buckler, yet he was shot in his thigh a little, and had many arrowes that stucke in his cloathes but no great hurt, till at last they tooke him prisoner. When this newes came to James towne, much was their sorrow for his losse, fewe expecting what ensued. Sixe or seven weekes those Barbarians kept him prisoner, many strange triumphes and conjurations they made of him, yet hee so demeaned himselfe amongst them, as he not onely diverted them from surprising the Fort, but procured his owne libertie, and got himselfe and his company such estimation amongst them, that those Salvages admired him more then their owne Quiyouckosucks. The manner how they used and delivered him, is as followeth. The Salvages having drawne from George Cassen whether Captaine Smith was gone, prosecuting that opportunity they followed him with 300. bowmen, conducted by the King of Pamaunkee, who in divisions searching the turnings of the river, found Robinson and Emry by the fire side, those they shot full of arrowes and slew. Then finding the Captaine, as is said, that used the Salvage that was his guide as his shield (three of them being shine and divers other so gauld) all the rest would not come neere him. Thinking thus to have returned to his boat, regarding them, as he marched, more then his way, slipped up to the middle in an oasie creeke & his Salvage with him, yet durst they not come to him till being neere dead with cold, he threw away his armes. Then according to their composition they drew him forth and led him to the fire, where his men were slaine. Diligently they chafed his benumbed limbs. He demanding for their Captaine, they shewed him Opechankanough, King of Pamaunkee, to whom he gave a round Ivory double compass Dyall. Much they marvailed at the playing of the Fly and Needle, which they could see so plainely, and yet not touch it, because of the glasse that covered them. But when he demonstrated by that Globe-like Jewell, . . . they all stood as amazed with

admiration. Notwithstanding, within an houre after they tyed him to a tree, and as many as could stand about him prepared to shoot him, but the King holding up the Compass in his hand, they all laid downe their Bowes and Arrowes, and in a triumphant manner led him to Orapaks, where he was after their manner kindly feasted, and well used. . . . Drawing themselves all in fyle, the King in the middest had all their Peeces and Swords borne before him. Captaine Smith was led after him by three great Salvages, holding him fast by each arme: and on each side six went in fyle with their Arrowes nocked. But arriving at the Towne (which was but onely thirtie or fortie hunting houses made of Mats, which they remove as they please, as we our tents) all the women and children staring to behold him . . . All this while Smith and the King stood in the middest guarded, as before is said, and after three dances 13 they all departed. Smith they conducted to a long house, where thirtie or fortie tall fellowes did guard him, and ere long more bread and venison was brought him then would have served twentie men, I thinke his stomacke at that time was not very good; what he left they put in baskets and tyed over his head. About midnight they set the meate againe before him, all this time not one of them would eate a bit with him, till the next morning they brought him as much more, and then did they eate all the old, & reserved the new as they had done the other, which made him thinke they would fat him to eat him. Yet in this desperate estate to defend him from the cold, one Maocassater brought him his gowne, in requitall of some beads and toyes Smith had given him at his first arrivall in Virginia. Two dayes after a man would have slaine him (but that the guard prevented it) for the death of his sonne, to whom they conducted him to recover the poore man then breathing his last. Smith told them that at James towne he had a water would doe it, if they would let him fetch it, but they would not permit that; but made all the preparations they could to assault James towne, craving his advice, and for recompence he should have life, libertie, land, and women. . . . At last they brought him to Meronocomo, where was Powhatan their Emperor. Here more then two hundred of those grim Courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had beene a monster; till Powhatan and his trayne had put themselves in their greatest braveries. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedsted, he sat covered with a great robe, made of Rarowcun skinnes, and all the tayles hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of 16 or 18 yeares, and along on each side the house, two rowes of men, and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red; many of their heads bedecked with the white downe of Birds; but every one with something: and a great chayne of white beads about their necks. At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queene of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, in stead of a Towell to dry them: having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her

armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him aswell of all occupations as themselves. For the King himselfe will make his owne robes, shooes, bowes, arrowes, pots; plant, hunt, or doe any thing so well as the rest. . . . Two dayes after, Powhatan having disguised himselfe in the most fearefull manner he could, caused Capt. Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. . . . That night they quarterd in the woods, he still expecting (as he had done all this long time of his imprisonment) every houre to be put to one death or other: for all their feasting. But almightie God (by his divine providence) had mollified the hearts of those sterne Barbarians with compassion. The next morning betimes they came to the Fort [at Jamestown], where Smith having used the Salvages with what kindnesse he could, he shewed Rawhunt, Powhatans trusty servant two demi-Culverings & a millstone to carry Powhatan: they found them somewhat too heavie; but when they did see him discharge them, being loaded with stones, among the boughs of a great tree loaded with Isickles, the yce and branches came so tumbling downe, that the poore Salvages ran away halfe dead with feare. But at last we regained some conference with them, and gave them such toyes; and sent to Powhatan, his women, and children such presents, as gave them in generall full content.

DOCUMENT #4 – Governor Edward-Maria Wingfield’s Report from December 1607

Notice the difference between the original transcription and the following modern translation. When historians use written sources like this, what are the risks and benefits of using a modern translation as opposed to just a transcription? Write your response in the lines that follow.

TRANSCRIPTION:

The 10th of December, Mr Smyth went vp the ryuer of the Chechohomynies to trade for corne. He was desirous to see the heade of that riuer; and, when it was not passible wth the shallop, he hired a cannow and an Indian to carry him up further. The river the higher grew worse and worse. Then hee went on shoare wth his guide, and left Robinson & Emmery, twoe of our Men, in the cannow; wch were presently slayne by the Indians, Pamaonke's men, and hee himself taken prysoner, and, by the means of his guide, his lief was saved; and Pamaonché, haueing him prisoner, carryed him to his neybors wyroances to see if any of them knew him for one of those wch had bene, some twoe or three yeeres before vs, in a river amongst them Northward, and taken awaie some Indians from them by force. At last he brought him to the great Powaton (of whome before wee had no knowledg), who sent him home to our towne the viijth [seventh] of January.

MODERN TRANSLATION:

The 10th of December Mr. Smith went up the river of the Chechohomynies to trade for corn. He wanted to see the head of the river and, when it was no longer possible to sail in a shallop, he hired a canoe and an Indian to carry him further. The higher he went up the river, the worse and worse it became. He went ashore with his guide, and left Robinson & Emmery, two of our Men, in the canoe. These two men were killed by the Indians, Pamaonke's men, and Smith himself taken prisoner, though his guide saved his life. Pamaonché, having him prisoner, carried him to his neighbors to see if any of them thought he was one of the men who, two or three years ago in a river to the north, had taken away some Indians by force. At last, he brought him to the great Powhatan (who we know little about), who sent him home to our town the seventh of January.

DOCUMENT #5 – Excerpt from Dr Linwood ‘Little Bear’ Custalow and Angela L. Daniel ‘Silver Star’, *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History* (published in 2007), adapted from pp. 9-60.

This is the oral history account of Pocahontas held by the Mattaponi tribe in Virginia. It is written in modern English, but as you read it, look at the way that people and their circumstances are described. Take notes in the margins.

Everyone loved Pocahontas for her laughing and joyous nature. Although Wahunsenaca [Powhatan, her father] had other children, he had a special love for Pocahontas, and she, in return, had a special love and respect for her father. All their actions were motivated by their love for each other[...] and for her people. Pocahontas was about ten years old when the English colonists arrived during the spring of 1607. Captain John Smith was twenty-seven years old when he arrived [...] He was not an upper class Englishman of high social status. Instead, he was an adventurer.

When the English colonists reached the shores of Powhatan land, various Powhatan werowances, or tribal chiefs, sought to entertain them and procure friendly relations and trade [...] Rather than going in and destroying English colonists, they wanted to make them allies and part of the Powhatan nation. Many of the Powhatan people were afraid of the English because they used “thunder sticks” to kill them. They had begun to believe that Smith was like a deity because of his gun and sword. When Smith went into any village, he would take four or five armed English colonists with him. They would traumatise the people with their weapons, demanding food. As they left, Smith would throw down a few blue beads, claiming to have “traded” with the Powhatan people. [...] Although Smith alleged years later that Pocahontas saved his life during a four-day ceremony in the process of his being made a Powhatan werowance, his life was never in danger. His life did not need saving.

Wahunseneca gave Smith his word that Smith would be released. Smith’s fears was either a figment of his own imagination, or an embellishment to dramatize his narrative. Pocahontas would not have been in the ceremony to save him because the priests would not have allowed Pocahontas to be there [as a young girl]. Smith and Pocahontas’ father, Wahunsenaca, pledged their friendship to each other. In Powhatan society, one’s word is one’s bond. A bond is considered sacred. Our people could not conceive of deception because one keeps one’s word. Our people, including Pocahontas, did not perceive deception within Smith; however, it later became clear that he had no intention of honoring this new relationship. Wahunsenaca’s agreement with Captain John Smith sealed the friendship and bond between the Powhatan and the English, providing all the more reasons for the Powhatan to send food to the starving colonists during their first winter. [...]

YOUR HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT

Take a moment to review each of these 5 documents. What are the similarities in the account between all of them?

What differences are there between these 5 accounts?

When Smith describes his captivity in *A True Relation*, he describes Powhatan as kind and generous. Pocahontas is not mentioned at all. On a map from 1612, Smith describes seeing a Powhatan execution method in which a prisoner's head was placed on a sacrificing stone, while "one with clubs beats out their brains." In his later account, he states that this is what was about to happen to him.

In all of his other writings about native customs and geography, historians agree that John Smith is very accurate and accurately descriptive in his observations.

Do you feel that John Smith exaggerated or lied in any one of his accounts? _____

What reasons do you think he might have had for writing these variations? Who were his documents for? What would he gain or lose by including or omitting different details?
