

Captain john smith a controversial figure in america history essay



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Captain John Smith had his name written down as one of the most controversial American figure. To some, he was seen as a hero, and he says so about himself: " My greatest error in this is but a desire to do good: which disease hath ever haunted me since my childhood. And all the miseries and ingratitude I have endured cannot divest me from that resolution"[1]. To others, he was a villain. Beilby Porteus quoted " One murder makes a villain, millions a hero". This quote shows how a hero's actions must show a great accomplishment and be beneficial to a lot, not just a small one that only benefits himself (one murder). Captain John Smith was remembered as a villain for the few suspicions over the stories he wrote and for the problems he faced in his voyages. Other than that however, he was a great hero, a hero that brought prosperity to the first American settlement and led vast explorations across the Chesapeake Bay. He was one of the greatest captains that ever set foot on the New World.

Smith was accused of lying about his experiences in the New World and while he was there, he encountered some problems with the colonists. On their journey to the New World, Smith was charged with mutiny and he was imprisoned on board the ship[2]. His faith was saved when they landed in Virginia on April 26, 1607, as his name was listed to be one of the seven leaders of the new colony. In 1607, he faced conflicts with the other leaders and he wasn't satisfied with new policies formed in London. As a result, he left Jamestown for a year. Along with these problems, he was criticized most for the exaggerations and lies historians suspect him of. Suspicions and questions started to arise over the authenticity of his accounts after the

publication of his book *General Historie* in 1624[3]. Historian Kupperman said in her book *Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of his writings*,

“ He [referring to Smith] has often been seen as a braggart, who wrote to magnify his own role in colonial affairs beyond all recognition. He dared to compare himself to Julius Caesar, who wrote his own Commentaries, holding it no less honour to write, than fight” [...]. It is true that Smith reworked the same material in several books, and he became more insistent on the importance of his own role with each retelling, but each new work was also a milestone in Smith’s continuing effort to work out a consistent philosophy of colonization[4]“

This quote basically is saying Smith exaggerates a lot to make him seem better than he is. The most infamous story was about Pocahontas saving him in 1607. The main reason why they believed this to be a lie or a huge exaggeration is because of the big time difference between the incident happening and the year he told it, plus, it wasn’t written in his earlier writings. Historian Henry Adams, who was known for criticizing Smith in his article *Captain John Smith* that was published in the *North American Review* (1867), stated that Smith published the book 7 years after the death of Pocahontas on purpose so that there would be no one to contradict it[5]. Proofs he tried to give like his letter to Queen Anne couldn’t be found and the possible witnesses like Pocahontas and her dad were already dead. What even made the story more suspicious is that it was similar to ancient stories, like Greek Mythologies. Critics believe he completely misinterpreted the saving; it was actually a ritual for him to be accepted into the tribe[6]. An amateur Hungarian historian named Lewis L. Kroph, who was known to be <https://assignbuster.com/captain-john-smith-a-controversial-figure-in-america-history-essay/>

the first to disprove Smith's stories, declared in his book *Captain John Smith of Virginia*, published in 1890, that he doesn't believe Smith was ever in Transylvania as a slave like he said so[7]. Before 1890, people believed his journeys were real. His lies and exaggerations proven by some evidences in books published by historians brought a lot of people to remember him as a villain.

Despite his few considered villainous actions, historians still strongly acknowledge the many heroic actions he did and gave proof for his stories. Smith's biggest achievement was bringing prosperity to America's first settlement, Jamestown. The first year was hard for the settlers as they lacked food and were constantly attacked by the Indians. Smith did his best to defend his colonists using his military skills. During the year (1608) he left Jamestown, he explored and searched for food for the town. He came back due to the bad government and was elected president of the council[8]. He strengthened the defense, made the society more disciplined, and encouraged people to work for food using his quote: "" He who does not work, will not eat"[9]. Smith strongly disapproved of slavery and when he received a large amount of money, he donated it to the colony, he wasn't money hungry[10]. Along the river, he built forts where people could live and gather food, a method that other leaders would later copy[11]. Smith's good relations with the Indians saved the colony. He bargained and traded corn with the Indians. His way of dealing and trading gained the respect of the Indians. Smith didn't show weakness to the Indians, as historian William Randel, who wrote *Captain John Smith's Attitudes toward the Indians*, said, he " never let them forget the might of the English weapons", he did punish

the thieves severely but he “ never thought of exterminating the natives”, he was never racist against the Indians, Randel said he was “ a candid, liberal, and fair reporter” of the Indians[12]. The year he was gone in search of food, there were many fights between the Indians and the colonists, which is one of the reasons why he came back. When he was captured by the Indians, the chief Powhatan was impressed of Smith’s confidence and the tools he brought. He took part in a ritual (where Pocahontas saved him) and he was made subordinate chief of the Indians[13]. He was returned after a month with good relations. Historian A. G. Bradley, who wrote *Travels and Works of John Smith*, stated that Smith was “ a genius for Indian diplomacy” because he was able to get so much food from the Indians and not getting as much in return, and at the same time he was able to receive “ their good will and admiration”[14]. Historian J. A. Leo Lemay, an English professor in the University of Delaware, said that “[He] was not only fair, he was surprisingly kind and humanitarian. He treated the Indians as he treated whites...tortured [none], executed none, and saved Indians when others wanted to slay them.”[15]. His quote tells us that he was fair and equal with the Indians, he thought of them like he thought of his colonists; he cared about them and that is one of the main reasons why Jamestown survived. Lemay also defended Smith’s stories in his book *Did Pocahontas Save Captain John Smith?* , published in 1992. He said that for example, in one of Smith’s books, he said in a paragraph that he was attacked by 200 Indians and killed 2, but in the following paragraph, he said 300 and killed 3. Lemay argues that a liar would be more careful in not making these mistakes, and plus, it wasn’t a major exaggeration[16]. Lemay also argues that the reason why Smith didn’t put the story of Pocahontas in his earlier writings such as *A True*

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Relation (1608) is because it was unnecessary. A True Relation was a book that mainly described Virginia's geography and the Indian culture[17], so the story of Pocahontas's saving not included isn't a problem. Lemay also asks, "why would he want to lie in the first place?" If the story wasn't true, why would he want to ruin his reputation and make him seem helpless among the Indians when he said in his books what a great Indian fighter he is and how he won many battles[18]? Plus, Lemay also says that many enemies of John Smith were alive during the time his book was published and none of them did anything to disprove it[19]. Throughout his book, Lemay pointed out places where Henry Adams misrepresented John Smith. He said that Adams ignored information and arguments and information that supported Pocahontas's story on purpose so that he could stand his argument. As Lemay quoted, "" it is the nature of propaganda to slant the truth in order to make a point." [20], and that is exactly what Adams did to prove his argument. Aside from Adams being disproved, another historian, Kroph was disproved by Smith's biographer, Bradford in his book Captain John Smith : His Life and Legend (1953). Kroph was Hungarian, giving him the advantage of reading documents about if Smith was ever in Transylvania; it limited other historians to those evidences. Bradford, asked another Hungarian historian named Striker to check Kroph's sources and investigate herself into the story. Her argument was published in Bradford's book. She said that Kroph had misinterpreted and misrepresented many of the sources, and he overlooked others[21]. She proved that Smith knew Eastern Europe better than any westerners who wrote during his time. John Smith even knew that people would be questioning his stories because in his Book General Historie he said " I know I shall bee taxed for writing so much of my selfe, but I care <https://assignbuster.com/captain-john-smith-a-controversial-figure-in-america-history-essay/>

not much, because the judicial know there are few such Soldiers as are my examples, have writ their owne actions, nor know I who will or can tell my intents better than my selfe.”[22]It showed he was a brave man, and he defended his stories saying that even though his stories may seem exaggerated, his superiors will still know there isn't any soldier as good as him that could've written such big achievements, and that only he could write best about himself, no one else. If it wasn't for Smith, Jamestown would hardly have survived its few first years.

During the year he left Jamestown in search of food, he also explored the Chesapeake Bay. He went on two voyages following rules given by England, which were to find a northwest passage to the Pacific and a route to Asia through the Chesapeake Bay, find gold, silver, and mineral wealth, trade with the Indians, map the area, and claim land for the King[23]. He went on shallows with about a dozen men on each voyage and they had very limited knowledge about where they were going. Where he landed, he claimed the land for the King using crosses, and along his way, he befriended with many Indian tribes who supplied him with food[24]. On June 2nd, 1608, he sent back the first accurately detailed map of Virginia[25], which consisted of the locations of the many Indian tribes and it also charted to unknown rivers, the Potomac and the Rappahannock[26]. His map would prove useful to future settlers. Smith and his men exploration logged more than 3000 miles; they suffered greatly but Smith helped them through the difficulties. His genius skills and understanding of the Indians helped them through the journey, he didn't fight unnecessary battles and his exploration went without

a disaster. Professor and Mrs. Kenneth Murdock said in their book *The Life of Captain John Smith: The Widener*,

“ The successful termination of the adventure is the proof of the excellence in his management; while the details of his daily progress sufficiently show that this success was due, not to mere luck or blind fortune, but to the admirably executive mind by which the whole progress was conceived and counseled”[27]

Their quote says that the success of the exploration was due to the great leadership by John Smith, it wasn't by luck or chance, but it succeeded because of how he took care of the journey. Unfortunately, in October 1609, he was injured by a gunpowder accident and was sent back to England to be treated. Back home, he didn't give up on the success of the settlement, he wrote narratives and drew maps of the Jamestown to popularize it, hoping for more colonists to settle there[28]. In 1614, he was able to return to the New World, an area known today as Maine and Massachusetts; Smith called the area New England and brought back furs and fishes[29]. However, he was unable to ever return to Virginia again. Smith's harsh and challenging exploration of the Chesapeake Bay and his determination to popularize the area definitely makes him a heroic icon.

In conclusion, John Smith was a great leader. His stories were given proofs and his exaggerations shouldn't be viewed negatively because there could be truth behind them. The Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Water Trail was created in honor of John Smith and the first settlement. He was a hero that cared for his country and colonists and would never have let

them fall. Captain John Smith set the base for a new nation to grow, a nation known today as America.