

Serving Time in Virginia

As has become clear, the historian's simple act of selection irrevocably separates "history" from "the past." The reconstruction of an event is quite clearly different from the event itself. Yet selection is only one in a series of interpretive acts that historians perform as they proceed about their business. Even during the preliminary stages of research, when the historian is still gathering information, interpretation and analysis are necessary. That is because the significance of any piece of evidence is seldom apparent at first glance. The historian quickly learns that the words *evidence* and *evident* rarely amount to the same thing.

For historians attempting to reconstruct an accurate picture of the first English settlements in Virginia, the difficulty of taking any document at face value becomes quickly apparent. The early Virginians were, by and large, an enterprising lot. They gave America its first representative assembly, gave England a new and fashionable vice (tobacco), and helped establish slavery as a labor system in North America. These actions raise perplexing and important questions for historians, and yet the answers to them cannot be found in the surviving source materials without a good deal of work.

The difficulty does not arise entirely from lack of information. Indeed, some Virginians were enterprising enough to write history as well as make it, not the least of them being Captain John Smith. Captain Smith wrote an account of the young colony entitled *A Generall Historie of Virginia,* published in 1624. Much of his history is based on eyewitness, firsthand knowledge. At a vigorous age twenty-seven, he joined the expedition to Virginia in 1606 sent by the Virginia Company of London and played a crucial role in directing the affairs of the inexperienced Jamestown colony.

Yet Smith's evidence cannot be accepted without making some basic interpretive judgments. Simplest and most obvious—is he telling the truth? If we are to believe his own accounts, the young captain led a remarkably swashbuckling life. Before joining the Virginia expedition, he had plunged as a soldier of fortune into a string of complicated intrigues in central Europe. There he waged desperate and brave warfare on behalf of the Hungarian nobility before being taken prisoner by the Turks. Once a prisoner, he was made a slave to a young but "noble Gentlewoman" with the romantic name of Charatza Tragabigzanda. The smitten princess "tooke (as it

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Hmm? Sound familiar?

Smith's adventures (continue)

seemed) much compassion" on Smith, but alas, he came under the control of her sadistic brother, who reviled and taunted the captain so much, Smith lost his temper one day in the granary and "beat out [his] braines with his threshing bat" and made a daring escape, reaching England in time to sign on with the Virginia Company's expedition.

lucky timing!

In Virginia the adventures came nearly as thick and fast. While the colony's governing council quarreled at Jamestown, Captain Smith went off on an exploring and food-gathering mission. He established the first European contact with many of the Indian tribes around Chesapeake Bay, succeeded in buying needed corn from them, and was captured by a party of Indians loyal to Powhatan, the principal chief in the Chesapeake region. With Smith facing execution, once again he managed to win the affections of a beautiful princess—this one, Powhatan's young daughter Pocahontas.

How much of this romantic adventure story do we believe? The tone of Captain Smith's narrative makes it reasonably apparent that he was not the sort of man to hide his light under a bushel. (In writing of his adventures, he compared himself implicitly with Julius Caesar, "who wrote his owne Commentaries, holding it no less honour to write, than fight.") Indeed, several nineteenth-century scholars, including Henry Adams, challenged Smith's account of his Indian rescue as mere embellishment. Adams pointed out that the Pocahontas story did not appear in Smith's earliest published descriptions of the Virginia colony. Only in 1624, when the *Generall Historie* was issued, did the public first read of the Indian maiden's timely devotion. Captain Smith, Adams argued, probably invented the story out of whole cloth in order to enhance his reputation.

Limitations

We can, of course, look for independent evidence that would corroborate Smith's claims, but in the case of the Pocahontas story, no independent records survive. Yet other historians have defended Smith, Philip Barbour prime among them. Barbour has checked Smith's tales against available records in both Hungary and England and found them generally accurate as to names, places, and dates. Smith claimed, for example, that he used an ingenious system of torch signals to coordinate a nighttime attack by his Hungarian friends, "Lord Ebersbaught" and "Baron Kisell." No other records mention Smith's role, but we do know such an attack was launched—and that it was led by two Hungarians named Sigismund Eibiswald and Jakob Khissl. Similarly, although the records show no princess named Charatza Tragabigzanda, that may have been Smith's fractured pronunciation of the Greek *koritsi* [girl] *Trapedzoûndos* [from Trebizond]. Possibly, when he tried to discover the identity of his new mistress, someone merely replied that she was "*koritsi Trapedzoûndos*"—a "girl from Trebizond."

Yet even if we grant Smith the virtue of honesty, significant problems remain when using his account; problems common to all historical evidence. To say that Smith is truthful is only to say that he reported events as he saw them. The qualification is not small. Like every observer, Smith viewed events from his own perspective. When he set out to describe the customs of the Chesapeake Indians, for instance, he did so as a seventeenth-century

LIMITATIONS

Englishman. Behind each observation he made stood a whole constellation of presuppositions, attitudes, and opinions that he took for granted without ever mentioning them. His descriptions were necessarily limited by the experience and education—or lack of it—that he brought with him.

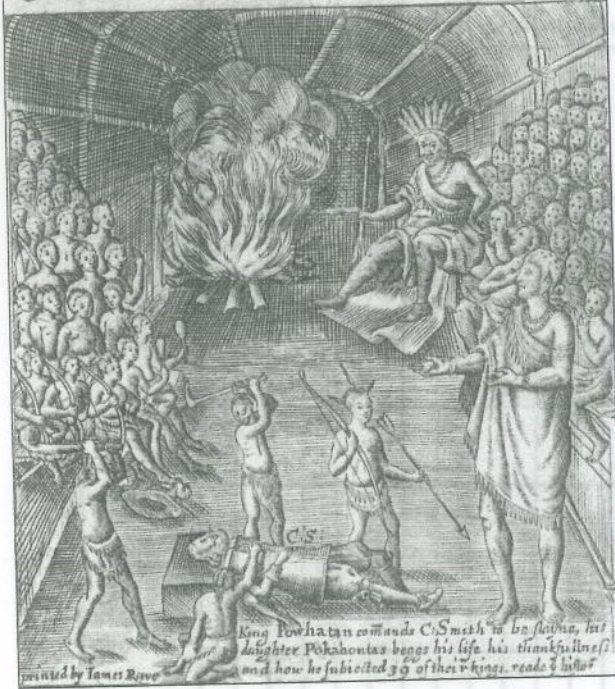
The seriousness of these limitations becomes clearer if we take a hypothetical example of what might happen if Captain Smith were to set down a history, not of Indian tribal customs, but of a baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees:

Not long after, they tooke me to one of their greate Counsells, where many of the generalitie were gathered in greater number than ever I had seen before. And they being assembled about a great field of open grass, a score of their greatest men ran out upon the field, adorned each in brightly hued jackets and breeches, with letters cunningly woven upon their Chestes, and wearinge upon their heades caps of a deep navy blue, with billes, of a sort I know not what. One of their chiefs stood in the midst and would at his pleasure hurl a white ball at another chief, whose attire was of a different colour, and whether by chance or artyfice I know not the ball flew exceeding close to the man yet never injured him, but sometimes he would strike att it with a wooden club and so givinge it a hard blow would throw down his club and run away. Such actions proceeded in like manner at length too tedious to mention, but the generalitie waxed wroth, with greate groaning and shoutinge, and seemed withall much pleased.

Before concluding any more than that Smith would make a terrible writer for the *New York Post* (we don't even know if the Yankees won!), compare the description of the baseball game with the account by the real Smith of what happened to him after his capture. (Smith writes in the third person, referring to himself as "he" and "Captain Smith.")

At last they brought him to Meronocomoco, where was Powhatan their Emperor. . . . Before a fire upon a seat like a bedsted, [Powhatan] 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 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 beat 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.

The Country wee now call Virginia beginneth at Cape Henry distant from Roanock 60 miles, where was Sr Walter Raleigh's plantation: and because the people differ very little from them of Powhatan in any thing, I have inserted these figures in this place because of the convenienty.



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If we had not first read the account of the baseball game, it would not be nearly as obvious just how little Smith has told us about what is going on here. Indeed, anyone who reads the *Generall Historie* or any of the captain's writings will be impressed by their freshness and the wealth of detail. But that is because we, like Smith, are unfamiliar with the rituals of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake Indians. Quite naturally—almost instinctively—we adopt Smith's point of view as our own. And that point of view diverts us from asking questions to which Smith does not have the answer. What, after all, is the reason the Indians painted their heads and shoulders red and wore white down

Tell 'em what they want to hear!

on their heads? We know no more than we did when baseball players were described as wearing bright outfits with letters woven upon their chests.

Even more to the point, consider the form of Smith's narrative as it has been passed down to us over the years. The good captain is about to die until he is suddenly rescued at the last moment by "the Kings dearest daughter." Does the story have a familiar ring? Indeed—there is at least half an echo of Smith's being pitied by Princess Tragabigzanda. And—equally important—the story has become prominent in our folklore because the romantic traditions of the nineteenth century delighted in such stories: a pure and noble-born woman saves the life of a brave commoner. Smith tells a story that fits a narrative pattern we love to hear.

But what if we lay aside the narrative perspective of Smith's story and consider the same facts from the point of view of Powhatan? Powhatan was the leader of a confederacy of Algonquian Indians living around Chesapeake Bay. He was, in short, the most powerful person in the region. But his control over the lesser chiefs in the area varied. Some tribal groups resisted paying tribute to him; others at a greater distance showed no allegiance and were indeed rivals.

Into this situation stepped Smith, along with the strange new tribe of white people who had just arrived from across the salt water. In hindsight, we see the arrival of Europeans as a momentous event that changed North America radically. But from Powhatan's point of view, here was simply another new group of people—strange indeed, but human beings nonetheless—whom he would have to set into the balance of his own political equation. Should he treat the newcomers as allies or enemies? Some historians and anthropologists have suggested that Powhatan's behavior toward Smith was in fact a kind of ritualized adoption ceremony and that Smith's supposed execution was a kind of initiation rite in which the captain was being ritually humiliated and subordinated. Once Smith passed the test of bravery in the face of apparent death, Powhatan was willing to adopt him as a vassal. As Smith himself puts it, Powhatan decides his prisoner can make hatchets for him and bells and beads for Pocahontas.

Powhatan's subsequent actions also suggest that he now considered Smith a chief, or *werowance*, over this new tribe of English allies. At the end of another ceremony two days later, the chief told Smith "now they were friends" and that Smith should go to Jamestown and send back "two great gunnes, and a gryndstone"—just as other Indian allies supplied Powhatan with tribute. In return, Powhatan would give Smith land and treat him "as his sonne."

This interpretation of Smith's capture and adoption must remain speculative but it is responsible speculation, informed by study of the ways of Algonquian Indians by historians and anthropologists. And we would have been blind to the interpretation without having separated Smith's information from the narrative perspective in which it came to us.

It is easy enough to see how a point of view is embedded in the facts of an eloquent narration. But consider for a moment evidence recorded by one of the pedestrian clerks whose jottings constitute the great bulk of history's raw

nice sounding "BS" = "eloquent narration"

material. The following excerpts are taken from the records of Virginia's general assembly and the proclamations of the Governor:

We will and require you, Mr. Abraham Persey, Cape Marchant, from this daye forwarde to take notice, that . . . you are bounde to accepte of the Tobacco of the Colony, either for commodities or upon billes, at three shillings the beste and the second sorte at 18d the punde, and this shalbe your sufficient discharge.

Every man to sett two acres corn (Except Tradesmen following their trades) penalty forfeiture of corn & Tobacco & be a Slave a year to the Colony. No man to take hay to sweat Tobacco because it robs the poor beasts of their fodder and sweating Tobacco does it little good as found by Experience.

With these excerpts we face the opposite of Smith's description: small bits of information dependent on a great deal of assumed knowledge. Whereas Smith attempted to describe the Indian ceremony in some detail because it was new to him, Virginia's general assembly knows all too much about tobacco prices and the planting of corn. Policy is stated without any explanation, just as the box score in the paper lists the single line, "Yankees 10, Red Sox 3." In each case the notations are so terse, the "narratives" so brief, that the novice historian is likely to assume they contain no point of view at all, only the bare facts. But the truth is, each statement has a definite point of view that can be summed up as simple questions: (1) Did the Yankees win and if so by how much? (2) Should the price of tobacco be three shillings or eighteen pence or how much? (3) What should colonists use hay for? And so on. These viewpoints are so obvious, they would not bear mentioning—except that, unconsciously, we are led to accept them as the only way to think about the facts. Because the obvious perspective often appears irrelevant, we tend to reject the information as not worth our attention.

But suppose a fact is stripped of its point of view—suppose we ask, in effect, a completely different question of it? Historians looking back on twentieth-century America would undoubtedly learn little from baseball box scores, but at least by comparing the standings of the 1950s with those of the 1970s, they would soon discover that the Giants of New York had become the Giants of San Francisco and that the Brooklyn Dodgers had moved to Los Angeles. If they knew a bit more about the economic implications of major league baseball franchises, they could infer a relative improvement in the economic and cultural status of the West Coast. Similarly, by refusing to accept the evidence of tobacco prices or corn planting at its face value, historians might make inferences about economic and cultural conditions in seventeenth-century Virginia.

In adopting a perspective different from any held by the historical participants, we are employing one of the most basic tactics of sociology. Sociologists have long recognized that every society functions, in part, through structures and devices that remain unperceived by its members. "To live in society means to exist under the domination of society's logic," notes sociologist Peter Berger. "Very often men act by this logic without knowing it. To

discover this inner dynamic of society, therefore, the sociologist must frequently disregard the answers that the social actors themselves would give to his questions and look for explanations that are hidden from their own awareness."

Using that approach, historians have taken documents from colonial Virginia, stripped them of their original perspectives, and reconstructed a striking picture of Virginia society. Their research reveals that life in the young colony was more volatile, acquisitive, rowdy, raw—and deadly—than most traditional accounts have assumed. Between the high ideals of the colony's London investors and the disembarkation points along the Chesapeake, something went wrong. The society that was designed to be a productive and diversified settlement in the wilderness soon developed into a world in which the singleminded pursuit of one crop, tobacco, made life nasty, brutish, and short. And the colony that had hoped to pattern itself on the free and enlightened customs of England instead found itself establishing something that the government of England had never thought to introduce at home: the institution of human slavery.

A COLONY ON THE EDGE OF RUIN

None of the English colonial ventures found it easy to establish successful and independent settlements along the Atlantic coast, but for the Virginia colony, the going was particularly rough. In the first ten years of the colony's existence, £75,000 had been invested to send around 2,000 settlers across the ocean to what Captain Smith described as a "fruitfull and delightsome land" where "heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for mans habitation." Yet at the end of that time, the attempt to colonize Virginia could be judged nothing less than unmitigated disaster.

Certainly most members of the Virginia Company viewed it that way. In 1606 King James had granted a charter to a group of London merchants who became formally known as "The Treasurer and Company of Adventurers and Planters of the City of London for the First Colony in Virginia." The Virginia Company, as it was more commonly called, allowed merchants and gentlemen of quality to "adventure" money in a joint stock arrangement, pooling their resources to support an expedition to Virginia. The expedition would plant a colony and extract the riches of the new country, such as gold or iron, and also begin cultivating crops that would yield a high return, such as grapes for the production of wine or mulberry trees for the production of silk. King James, a silkworm buff, even donated some of his own specially bred worms. The proceeds would repay the company's expenses, the investors (or "adventurers") would reap handsome profits, the colonists themselves would prosper, and England would gain a strategic foothold in the Americas. So the theory went.

The reality ran rather differently. After four difficult months at sea, only 105 of the original 144 settlers reached Chesapeake Bay in April of 1607.