



## John Smith and Diligence

### Handout A: Narrative

#### BACKGROUND

During the reign of Elizabeth I, England started to challenge the dominance of the Spanish Empire in the New World. English adventurers were especially interested in the thousands of tons of gold and silver that the Spanish shipped from their colonies. In the 1570s and 1580s, Elizabeth sent out “Sea Dogs” (or privateers) to plunder not only the Spanish vessels carrying their wealth but also Spanish garrisons on the Caribbean Islands. When Elizabeth died in 1603, James I ascended the throne and continued her imperial mission. In 1606, James granted a patent to the Virginia Company to found a colony in Virginia as a private joint-stock company that would keep most of the profits earned in the venture. The Crown would receive a portion of the wealth and imperial glory.

John Smith was born in 1580, the son of a small-scale independent farmer. He sought adventure as a young man and traveled to the Netherlands to aid in the Dutch Revolt against Spain. When he returned to England, he studied books on war and learned skills such as the use of new types of weapons and horsemanship. Smith then traveled to battle the Ottoman Turks, who were expanding from the Middle East into Eastern Europe.

During his colorful travels, Smith was thrown overboard from a ship because Catholics on the ship blamed the Protestant Smith for storms that nearly wrecked their vessel. He was picked up by another boat, but the two ships exchanged cannon fire that left dozens dead. Smith was left a wealthy man when the victorious crew plundered the defeated enemy. After a brief stop in Italy, he made his way to the battlefield and distinguished himself in battle, winning a promotion and a coat of arms. In a successive battle, he was gravely wounded and forced into slavery. He eventually killed his master and escaped from slavery. He returned to England in 1604 as a wealthy gentleman-adventurer and quickly joined forces with several merchants and other investors. Together, they formulated a plan to start a joint-stock company that would settle a colony in Virginia and hopefully reap great rewards while patriotically serving England against the Spanish enemy. Within two years, they received a patent, and Smith was on his way to Virginia for a grand but dangerous adventure that would test his mettle and leadership skills.

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On the raw and chilly winter morning of December 20, 1606, gentleman-adventurer John Smith made his way down to the wharves along the Thames River in London. He was one of just over 100 passengers who were boarding three ships: the *Discovery*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Susan Constant*, which were all bound for Virginia in the New World. Smith went aboard the latter, where he knew several of the gentlemen on the ship as well as its captain, Christopher Newport.

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These Englishmen were traversing the broad Atlantic to attempt to colonize Virginia and challenge the Spanish Empire's dominance in the New World. They knew that it would take hard work, perseverance, and diligence just to survive, let alone confront their imperial rivals.

Their five-month journey did not start auspiciously, as contrary winds forced them to anchor off the coast of England for weeks of seasickness while they consumed the provisions intended for their journey. The passengers complained of the lack of progress and became frustrated and contentious. Compounding the dissension was the fact that the passengers were made up of fiercely independent Englishmen such as John Smith who guarded their individual rights and bristled against the kind of absolute authority exercised on ships. In mid-February of 1607, the pugnacious Smith ran afoul of Captain Newport and the leading gentlemen who were expected to rule the colony. They accused Smith of conspiring to "usurp the government, murder the council, and make himself king." He was clapped in chains for mutiny and "restrained as a prisoner."

The voyage continued for weeks with the crew and passengers battling storms as well as food and water shortages. They also began to suffer the effects of scurvy from vitamin C deficiency, but fortunately did not have an epidemic of fevers or other shipboard maladies that commonly wiped out many on such vessels. After three months at sea, the fleet sailed into the Caribbean and landed in Dominica. Newport and the gentlemen ordered the building of gallows so that Smith could be hanged for mutiny and treason. The minister, Rev. Robert Hunt, intervened to plead on Smith's behalf. Smith was saved from the noose but still confined on the ship. Having re-stocked the ship supplies, the fleet weighed anchor and departed for Virginia.

They sailed for another month and suffered terrible storms until land was sighted in late April. They cruised into the Chesapeake Bay, making landfall several times to erect crosses to claim the land for King James and investigate the area for a suitable place to settle. The gentlemen finally opened the instructions from the Virginia Company, which included a list of the dozen individuals who were to serve on the colony's governing council. To their horror, Smith's name was on the list. Unsure of how to proceed, they released him from prison but temporarily declined to seat him on the council. On May 14, they went ashore several miles up the James River and decided to build their colony at the site they named Jamestown.

The men aboard the ships filed off and were immediately put to work setting up their tents, planting food, hunting, and other tasks. A week later, Smith helped lead a small expedition up the James River to discover whether it was the fabled Northwest Passage across the American continent with access to Asia for trade. The local Native Americans wavered between attacking the colonists—which prompted the Englishmen to erect a palisaded fort—and bringing them food. Meanwhile, the death toll climbed due to an epidemic of salt poisoning and typhus from drinking out of the James and other contaminated water sources. By the end of summer, half the colonists were dead. When the Council President Edward Wingfield was tried and jailed for hoarding food during these lean times, Smith daringly and diligently set out on several trips to trade with the Indians for bushels of corn. He combined strong-arm tactics such as firing his pistol into the air with shrewd trading—the Native Americans respected him on both accounts and bartered their corn with Smith. On one such trip, his companions were captured and executed by being skinned alive, while Smith barely was saved from being

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beaten to death by the dramatic intervention of Pocahontas.

When Smith returned to the Jamestown settlement, dozens of new settlers had arrived. However, the storehouse, homes, and palisade burned down in the middle of a brutally cold winter. As spring dawned in the region and quickly gave way to the heat and humidity of the summer, the colonists were laid low by the same diseases that plagued them the previous summer. Meanwhile, Smith traveled up the Chesapeake to the Potomac River with several companions in search of gold and food. Therefore, he missed the worst of the ravaging disease in the colony and arrived back in September, finding the colony's leadership in disarray.

The council turned to John Smith, who seized his opportunity to become the colony's president. He whipped the settlers into shape, putting them to work rebuilding the church and storehouse. They rebuilt the fort and were compelled to participate in the militia and weekly training. Smith promoted diligence in order to establish order, discipline, and the sense of pride needed for survival. Since the colonists had not planted much food, Smith used a variety of tactics to get corn from Native Americans. He also encouraged the development of various commodities such as glass to bring back to England for the profit of the company. Additionally, he dispersed the colonists between modern-day Hampton and Richmond so that they could take advantage of different food sources. Throughout the winter, he went on trips to secure food for the colony, instituted martial discipline, and forced all to work at least six hours a day. Smith declared, "He that will not work shall not eat."

In August, the colony was starting to thrive when the remnants of a provisioning fleet that was smashed apart by a hurricane limped into Jamestown with almost 400 hungry new settlers, but no provisions. Smith was up to the challenge, but "factious spirits" conspired against him. After heading up to the Richmond settlement and arguing about its defensibility with its leaders, Smith sailed back to Jamestown.

While he was napping, Smith's enemies lit his powder bag on fire, causing it to explode and burn "the flesh from his body and thighs...ten inches square in a most pitiful manner." He jumped into the James with his clothes aflame and skin bubbling to extinguish the "tormenting fire." The settlers fished his apparently lifeless body out of the water and carried him back to Jamestown to his bed. While he was recuperating, several assassins broke into his bedroom while he was sleeping and tried to kill him. Smith drove them off, but he became paranoid of further attacks. In October, Smith, fearful for his life, returned to England. The colony descended into chaos without his strong leadership and suffered the "starving time" in which the colony nearly failed.

Smith was a dedicated and diligent leader during the settling of Virginia. He helped develop the idea of settlement, provided important leadership during the colony's most tenuous years, and executed the tasks that needed to be done for the common good.