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## Historic Narrative - Section 10

### Smith the Writer

While Smith continued to seek employment, he also set about turning his earlier work, *A True Relation*, and his notes and sketch maps from his Chesapeake Bay voyages, into a book. The result, *A Map of Virginia*, appeared in 1612. It consists of a book in two parts, and the map, which was reissued in many “states” between then and 1632. The first part of the book is Smith’s “Description of the Country,” which details the fauna and flora of the Chesapeake region, as well as the American Indians who lived there. The second part describes the history of the colony and has a separate title page: *The Proceedings of the English Colonie In Virginia since their first beginning from England in the yeare of our Lord 1606, till this present 1612*. Although Smith contributed to this section, other authors’ names are on the title page. Interestingly, three of them—Anas Todkill, Walter Russell, and Nathaniel Powell—accompanied Smith on one or both of his Chesapeake Bay voyages.

Smith returned to America in 1614, when he explored present-day Maine and the Massachusetts coast, and then sailed back to England. Attempting to return the next year in the employment of the Plymouth Company, he was captured by pirates but escaped to France, then England. There he wrote *A Description of New England*, published in 1616. Although he advanced several schemes for colonization and other endeavors in America, he remained in England the rest of his life. In 1624, he published his magnum opus, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*. It is in part a compilation of others’ writings as well as his own efforts. It also reflected his frustration over not recovering a leadership role in the colonization movement, and his anger with the Powhatan over the attack of March 22, 1622. Nonetheless, despite his personal disappointments, Smith continued to promote colonization for the rest of his life.

He wrote several other books as well as poems, but it is for the *True Relation*, the *Map of Virginia*, and the *Generall Historie* that he is best remembered. They are self-promoting, of course, but also readable and exciting firsthand accounts of the wonders that he saw, especially in the Chesapeake Bay region. Smith viewed himself as the father of England-in-America, as he explained in one of his books: “that the most of those fair plantations did spring from the fruits of my adventures and discoveries is evident.” He died on June 21, 1631. His epitaph was his last act of self-evaluation, delightfully ironic given the skepticism with which his writings often have been read:

Here lies one conquered that hath conquered kings,  
Subdu’d large territories, and done things  
Which to the world impossible would seem  
But that the truth is held in more esteem.

EXCERPT FROM THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
APPROVED STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PROPOSED  
CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH CHESAPEAKE NATIONAL HISTORIC WATER TRAIL



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If Smith's claim to be the father of Virginia and New England seems farfetched, it is also difficult to imagine who might have a better claim to the title. He was not the prime mover of the colonies' settlement, but through his maps and writings he enticed many thousands of adventurous souls to follow in his wake. He helped establish English primacy on America's East Coast. He understood early that the colonies would not be successful without allowing the settlers to work for themselves instead of for a faceless company across the sea. He knew that the corporate model had to change or else it would fail. The London Company did collapse, and the Virginia colony was taken over by the Crown, but not before his vision of small private landholdings had been adopted. This, and his understanding that the wealth of America lay in its natural resources, not merely in precious metals or as an imagined trade route to the East, make him as much a father to colonial success as anyone might have a right to claim.

Smith remains for Americans today a fascinating, contradictory character, perhaps because he seems to personify so many traits that have come to be regarded as quintessentially American. He was bold and brave and blustery; he was certain of his own rectitude; he was not reluctant to lead; he was not the best of followers; he was cool in times of crisis; he was opportunistic, pragmatic, and ambitious. He rose from modest means to become a figure of heroic proportions—according to his account—largely through his own wit and skill. His relentless self-promotion was typical of his time (and ours), not an aberration. And it was largely based on real accomplishments, most notably his voyages of exploration and “discovery” on the Chesapeake Bay. With crews of sometimes ill and frightened amateurs, in the heat of the summer, he sailed and rowed hundreds of miles, seeing and recording new things every day. The maps and books he produced from these and other adventures bore consequences for the native peoples as well as for new settlers for many years to come. His voyages were magnificent achievements not surpassed, perhaps, until the Lewis and Clark expedition almost two centuries later.