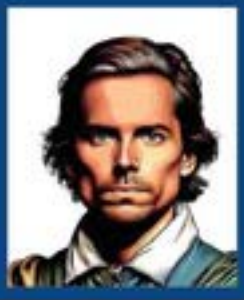
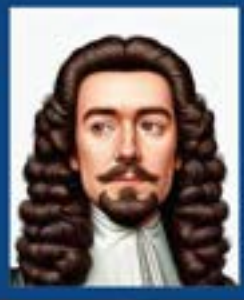
What a Character!

HEROES OF EARLY AMERICA

Notable Lives from History





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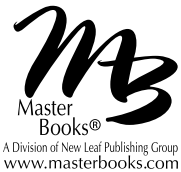

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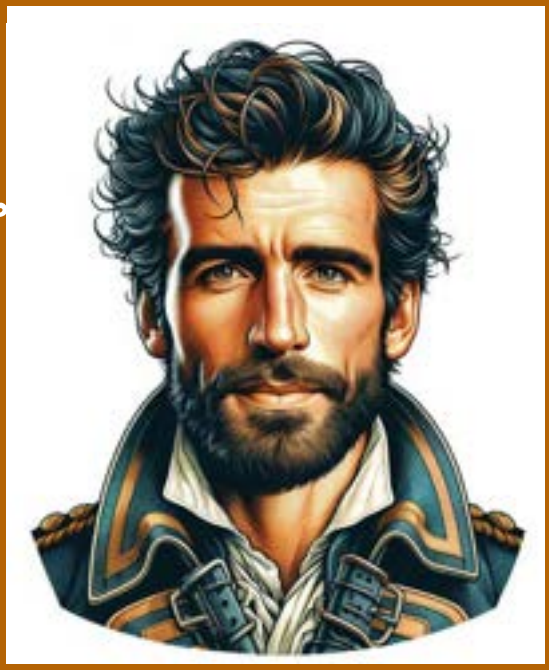
Publisher's note: "Circa" is a Latin word that means *around* or *about*. We use it on certain dates in this book when it is uncertain the exact date on which something happened, but we know it was close to that time.



1

Captain John Smith – Adventurer in the New World

Circa 1580 – June 21, 1631

Who Was Captain John Smith?

John Smith "was a farm boy who grew to be a man who lived a full life of adventure. He conquered enemies, survived storms, suffered injuries, endured slavery, outwitted pirates, defeated rivals, negotiated with American Indians, and played a vital role in the success of Jamestown."[1]

Early Years

John Smith was born in Lincolnshire, England, in 1580. He and his younger brother and sister grew up on a farm his father **leased** from Lord Willoughby. He was privileged to attend the same school as Lord Willoughby's children. John enjoyed exploring the countryside with the Willoughby boys. He did not, however, enjoy school. He was smart, but he had a hard time concentrating. He was dreaming of adventure, and he had a good reason to. He was growing up in a very exciting time in history. Sir Francis Drake had just sailed around the world by ship. John wanted to do something exciting like that, or perhaps be a soldier and become a hero of the battlefield.

leased: Rented

When John was 15 years old, his father **apprenticed** him to a merchant. If he had continued in this trade, he would probably have become wealthy, but it was of no interest to John. He was made to sit and add up endless columns of figures and write endless letters. He was afraid he would be stuck with a life of boredom and unable to create a life of freedom for himself.

Suddenly in the spring of 1596, his brother burst through the door and told him his father had died and his mother needed him. Riding home, though saddened at his father's death, he thought that maybe this would be his chance. He would inherit seven acres of pastureland, three orchards, and most of his father's livestock. Maybe he could sell some of it and make himself a life of freedom.

apprenticed: Sent him to learn a trade from a skilled workman

Soldier John

John and his friend Robert, one of the Willoughby boys, went to France to visit Robert's brother Peregrine, who was studying in Orleans. They had many adventures along the way. When the month was over, John could not stand the thought of going home to his unsatisfying apprenticeship. However, he had used up all the money he had brought. He had to find employment somewhere. He joined up with a group of **mercenaries** who were fighting alongside the French army.

Protestant King Henry IV of France was in a struggle against Catholic King Philip II of Spain. They were fighting for the future of France. John discovered that mercenaries received no actual wage but made their money by **looting** the homes of **traitors**. He was given food, a helmet, and a uniform. If he wanted a blanket to stay warm at night, he had to find one after a battle. He arrived after a battle had occurred, went into a stable, and found himself a horse, a saddle, a woolen cloak, and a new sword. However, he soon realized his heart was not in this cause. He decided to move on to another adventure.

mercenaries: Hired professional soldiers

looting: Confiscating goods in a war

traitors: Those who betray their country

Training

John returned to England. He was 19 years old and did not know what he wanted to do with his life. Not long after his return, he met an Italian man who was a famous horseman. He taught John how to ride at top speed and skillfully use his weapon while riding. He told John incredible stories of the Crusades — battles occurring in Eastern Europe against the Turks who were trying to take over Europe and force their religion on Christians. The Christians were fighting to defend their lands. John thought this was something he could fight for. He read books about warfare. He trained for a year with his Italian friend to learn **strategies** for fighting, horsemanship, and hunting. What he learned during this time would help prepare him for his time in America.

strategies: Plans to achieve military successes

Headed for the Crusades

John boarded a ship to sail to France. He realized that most of the passengers were Catholics. John stood out as an Englishman and therefore, a Protestant. When a fierce storm began, one of the passengers hollered, "All Englishmen are pirates!" That started a riot

and the passengers tossed John overboard. They claimed that the storm was sent because God was angry that John was on board.

John fought the waves, almost drowning, but eventually, he saw an island in the moonlight. He swam toward it and, using all his energy, managed to drag himself to the edge of the shore. He was too exhausted to even pull himself totally out of the water. He lay face down in the sand. When morning came, he slowly arose and walked on the beach for about a mile. There was no sign of life anywhere. Then he spotted a ship and waved wildly to flag it down.

The ship came to pick him up. It was owned by a group of Bretons, residents from Brittany in France. John told his sad story to the captain, and the captain asked him to join his group of **privateers**. John didn't have much choice. He could either join them or be **marooned** on a deserted island. So for the next six months, he sailed all over the Mediterranean seeing places he'd never dreamed of. Along the way, the ship attacked and **plundered** smaller ships. During this time, John learned much about sailing and seamanship.

privateers: Privately owned, armed vessels hired to attack enemy ships

marooned: Stranded

plundered: Took goods as an act of war

When John walked off the ship in Naples, Italy, he had 225 **pounds** in his pocket. He purchased a new **suit of armor** and a horse.

Hero John

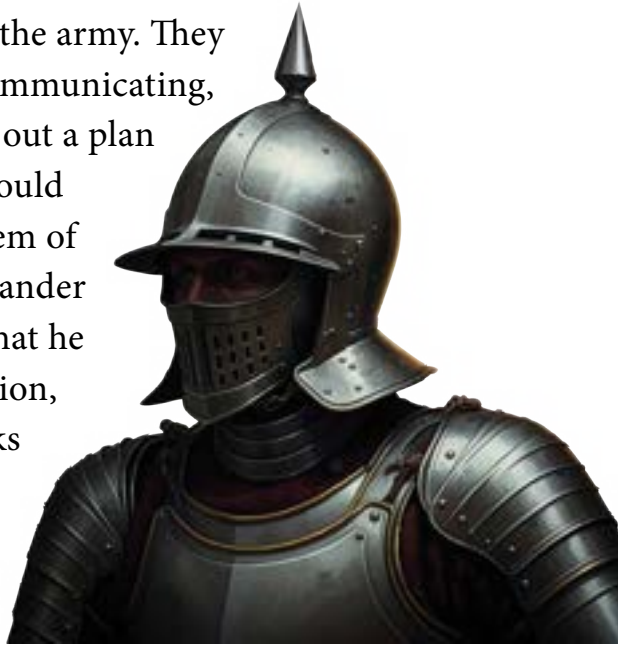
At last, he met up with the army of **Archduke Ferdinand**, which was fighting the Turks. John fit right in with the different cultures represented by the soldiers. With his language skills, he could communicate with more of the men than anyone else in the regiment. This brought him to the attention of his commander. This officer asked if John had any ideas about how to relieve a Hungarian town that was under siege by the Turks.

pounds: British money

suit of armor: Protective clothing made of metal

Archduke Ferdinand: Ruler of Austria

It so happened that John had met the commander of the besieged soldiers when he first joined the army. They had spoken about a new method of communicating, using lights and torches. John worked out a plan and hoped the trapped commander would remember their talk. They used a system of fireworks to communicate. The commander responded with lights that indicated that he remembered. John set the plan in motion, which allowed them to attack the Turks from the rear and liberate the town of Oberlimbach. John's commanding officer was so impressed with



John that he promoted him and gave him command of a unit of 250 **cavalry** soldiers.

Now the officer gave John another problem to solve. Alba Regalis was a city that had been held by the Turks for 60 years. Once again, John devised a plan for **liberation**. He filled earthen pots with gunpowder and covered them in pitch and turpentine. Musket balls were placed in the pitch and the unit was covered with canvas. A linseed-soaked wick was placed in each pot. John called these pots his "fiery dragons." **Catapults** were put in place and aimed at Alba Regalis. The attack began at midnight. The wicks were lit, the "dragons" were catapulted into the city, and they exploded, setting fire to the buildings. Musket balls were sent flying in all directions. After 60 years, Alba Regalis was finally free. John was once again known as a hero and his **exploits** became known throughout the Austrian and Hungarian armies.

cavalry: Soldiers on horseback

liberation: Freeing them

catapults: Launchers

exploits: Daring feats

Jousting Victories

In the spring of 1602, John and his troops were getting ready to attack a **fortified** city in Hungary. Before the battle could begin, the lord of the city challenged any English officer to **joust** to the death. John had been well trained by his Italian friend. He accepted the challenge. He knew the **visor** was the weakest part of any armor, so he aimed for the visor and was victorious. The man's friend challenged John to another jousting match first with lances and then pistols. Again, John was the victor. He won a third time as well. The commander of his regiment was impressed with John's performance. He gave him a generous reward, a coat of arms, a portrait of gold, and money. The motto on the coat of arms was, "To Conquer Is to Live." Later, John was engaged in another battle in which his men lost, and he was injured, taken prisoner, and sold as a slave. In a narrow escape, John took off on horseback and was free.

fortified: Protected

joust: Contest with lances

visor: Armor covering the face

Return to England

John returned to England in 1604. He found things very different from when he had left more than three

years earlier. Queen Elizabeth I had died and King James had taken the throne. The king wanted to conquer more lands around the world. John met a man named Bartholomew Gosnold. He had been to America and thought it was an **opportune** time for some Englishmen to start a colony. He realized John had many talents and skills that would be valuable and invited him to join his team. Always up for adventure, John agreed.

There was much involved in planning for a trip of over 5,000 miles. First, they had to convince others to brave the difficult journey. Second, they had to raise the funds needed for food and supplies. Supplies were needed for the five-month journey and there had to be enough to last while they were building the new colony. Lastly, they needed to convince King James of the **merit** of such an undertaking. John began learning the native languages he would need to communicate with Native Americans in Virginia. He also studied how to create maps. It took two years of preparations. They were able to convince the "Virginia Company of London" to finance the trip. The Virginia Company was a group of men wanting to invest in the New World. In return, the investors wanted gold or furs.

opportune: Favorable

merit: Advantage

Off for America

Captain Christopher Newport was chosen to command the expedition. He had fought with Sir Francis Drake and was familiar with the area around Virginia. Three ships made the journey. On New Year's Day 1607, all 144 passengers and the Virginia Company of London gathered for prayer. A sermon was preached by Reverend Robert Hunt, who had been selected as the expedition's chaplain. Sealed boxes were given to each captain of the three ships. Upon arrival in Virginia, the boxes were to be opened, revealing the names of men selected to govern the new colony. John was assigned to the *Susan Constant*. The next day, on John's 27th birthday, they set sail for America. The seas were rough, and many were frightfully seasick. The ships were terribly crowded, and conditions were very uncomfortable. John passed the time telling about his many adventures. The crew admired him. The trip lasted four and a half months.

Despite conflicts among the crew, on April 26, 1607, they arrived in Virginia. The settlement was named Jamestown, in honor of King James. When the secret box was opened, it revealed that John Smith was one of the six men chosen to serve on the Governing Council.

Powhatan and Pocahontas

While on an exploration trip, John Smith and his men were captured by a band of 200 Native Americans. The men were all killed, but John fought so bravely that the braves decided to take him to their chief. John pulled a compass from his pocket and showed the leader, Opechancauough. He was fascinated by it. In a few weeks, he was taken to see the head chief of the Powhatan tribe. The chief asked John many questions and John knew enough Algonquian words from his studies to communicate. Then without warning, Chief Powhatan called his braves to him. They came nearer with large clubs and forced John to lie down with his head on a large stone. He closed his eyes, knowing he was about to die.

Surprisingly, he heard a girl's voice pleading with Chief Powhatan. It was Powhatan's 10-year-old daughter Pocahontas. She begged her father to spare John's life. He refused, but suddenly she threw herself down, laying her head on top of John's to protect him. Pocahontas was the chief's favorite daughter. He could not resist her pleas and spared John's life. He turned to his men and said, "There will be no killing today. Pocahontas shall have her way."[2] Chief Powhatan then said, "We are friends now. I will think of you like a son. You may return to your people. I will send men to escort you."[3] John was permitted to return to the settlement. He had been gone nearly a month and the settlers had thought he was dead.

John's Usefulness

John's life was full of more adventures, too many to tell. He led an expedition to the Chesapeake Bay. During the expedition, John was stung by a deadly stingray. He again thought he was going to die, but the doctor used special oils and his arm was healed. He created a map of the Chesapeake Bay area. This map was so accurate it was used for the next 300 years. He was eventually elected President of Jamestown. During his time here he managed through his kindness and strength to win the respect of all the surrounding Native American tribes.

Some of the wealthy settlers **shunned** physical work. So John made a rule, taken from the Bible: "He that will not work shall not eat" (II Thessalonians 3:10). John worked alongside his men. There was no task too **menial** for him to tackle. In a month, they managed to build 20 new houses in the fort, and they dug a well. They also cleared 40 acres of land. John trained the men in the fighting skills he had learned during the Crusades. He established trade with the Native American tribes, which helped supply the colony with food. More settlers came. Chief Powhatan realized that the white men would soon outnumber his people. He knew that John Smith was the reason they were successful. He planned again to kill him. Pocahontas heard of the plot and warned John, once more saving his life.

shunned: Avoided

menial: Lowly

Final Return to England

Unfortunately, John had an accident when a spark from his flintlock gun landed on gunpowder. He was badly burned from his waist to his thighs and was in terrible pain. Of necessity, he gave up his presidency to return to England in order to get medical treatment. On October 4, 1609, John left his beloved Jamestown. He spent the rest of his life trying to return. Things fell apart at Jamestown without his leadership and resourcefulness. The next winter was called "The Starving Time." In eight short months after John left, the fort lay in ruins and 90% of the colonists had died.

While he was recovering, John spent the next several years writing books about his experiences in Virginia. He attempted to return once he was healed, but he was captured by pirates and held prisoner. The pirate ship sank in a storm, and John was able to reach a small island. He was near death when he was found by some hunters. He spent the rest of his days writing books telling of all his many adventures. John never lost his love for America.

Captain John Smith died on June 21, 1631, when he was 51 years old. Although he never made it back to America, he encouraged many others to go there. John's love for adventure, his determination, and his skill in managing others led to Jamestown becoming the first permanent English settlement in the New World.