

John Smith - An American Dreamer?
By Christina Willard

It is human nature for people to want more than they have attained, and America has always been viewed as a place where anything is possible. It is perceived as the land of opportunities, where everybody's dreams of wealth and power are at their fingertips. In the early 1600's, John Smith wrote to attract settlers to New England, "Who can desire more content, that hath small means or but only his merit to advance his fortune, than to tread and plant that ground he hath purchased by the hazard of his life? If he have but the taste of virtue and magnanimity, what to such a mind can be more pleasant than planting and building a foundation for his posterity got from the rude earth by God's blessing and his own industry without prejudice to any?" ("On the Advantages of New England"). In asking these questions, Smith is pointing out the aspirations of many lower class people-aspirations that were evident in the 15th century and remain in today's society. People who have "small means" are always looking for ways in which to improve their lives, and America, with its abundance of wealth and resources, is the perfect place for these people to come a step closer to attaining their personal dreams. Whether the original dreams are reached or not, these people seized the opportunity to gain more wealth, success, or power; they stepped into this land and became American Dreamers.

In another work, John Smith addresses a potential concern for American Dreamers: the American Indians. He views these tribes of people as an inferior species, not capable of the same standards of civilization as white men. In addition to calling the Native Americans savages, Smith degrades them, having acquired a false perception of these Native Americans: "That night they quartered in the woods, he still expecting (as he had done all this long time of his imprisonment) every hour to be put to one death or other, for all their feasting" (*The General History of Virginia*) Smith has no faith that the "savages" will behave as civilized white men, but instead fears for his life. He has, through whatever literature and accounts he has come across, been given the impression that the Native Americans are barbaric, crude people, and he is staying true to this false perception throughout his interactions with them. He presumes he will be faced with the worst case scenario, death, and in this belief, belittles the Indians and their society. John Smith sees them as standing in the way between him and his dream of unlimited prosperity for people in this new land.

On a separate sheet of paper, please answer the following questions.

- According to the author, how did John Smith view America?
- How did he view the American Indians?
- The author, in the last line, has underlined the word "new." Why do you think she has done this?
- How would you describe John Smith's "American Dream?" What would it look like?
- Did your reading of John Smith's values match up with the perspective presented in the preceding text? Please explain why or why not.

Works Cited:

John Smith, "On the Advantages of New England; With Historical Reflections", 1616
John Smith, *The General History of Virginia*, 1624