

COMPREHENDING HISTORY THROUGH BIAS: ANALYZING THE LEGEND OF POCAHONTAS THROUGH SOURCES

LEVEL

Upper Elementary, Secondary

GUIDING QUESTION

Using the example of Pocahontas, how does bias affect how we understand historical events?

VIRGINIA STANDARDS AND HISTORICAL SKILLS

SOL: VS.3g; USI.1, USI.3; VUS.1a, VUS.1d, VUS.2d

Analyzing and interpreting primary and secondary sources; questioning and using critical thinking skills; demonstrating comprehension.

LESSON OVERVIEW

When the English arrived and settled at Jamestown in 1607, Pocahontas was about 11 years old. Although she has since become a cultural icon in America, very little is known about her, and what we do know was written by others. She has been depicted as both the savior of Jamestown and a symbol of American promise. She has always been what the author wants her to be. In this lesson, students will analyze sets of primary sources and organize a written response to the compelling question, “How does bias affect how we understand historical events?,” through the example of Pocahontas’s life and legend.

MATERIALS

- 3 Primary source collections (it is recommended that the 3 different collections be printed on different colored paper)
 - A. [Historical images of Pocahontas](#)
 - B. [Primary source recording of John Smith’s *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* with transcript](#)
 - C. [Commercial images of Pocahontas](#)
- Laptop or BYOD device (for Group B to play primary source recording)
- [Student Worksheet: Document Analysis](#)
- YouTube clip of Pocahontas and John Smith from Disney’s *Pocahontas*

PROCEDURE

Warmup/Staging the Question

1. Show students a video clip from Disney's *Pocahontas* that illustrates her relationship with John Smith, similar to [this one](#). Have students record 2-3 observations or questions as they watch.
2. As a class, discuss their observations and raise the following questions with students:
 - Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of the event? Why or why not?
 - Why do you think Disney inaccurately portrayed this event?

Main Activity

1. Divide the class into groups of at least six students, then divide each group into three subgroups—
 - a. [Historical images of Pocahontas](#)
 - b. [Primary source recording of John Smith's *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*](#) with [transcript](#)
 - c. [Commercial images of Pocahontas](#)
2. Each subgroup should analyze its resource(s) while completing the [document analysis worksheet](#).
3. After subgroups complete the document analysis worksheet, each subgroup should come together to share their findings with their original group members.
4. Have students complete a 1-2 paragraph reflection on the compelling question, "How does bias affect how we understand historical events?," using the example of Pocahontas. In crafting their argument, students should draw from their own primary source collection, as well as sources from at least one other group. Alternatively, have students agree or disagree with the following quote, using their source collections to support their argument:

"Though a simple Indian maid, her life and actions are closely associated with events, which, in their consequences, have assumed a magnitude that fully entitles her to be placed among those who exercised an extensive influence in the destinies of states and in the course of human events." John Gadsby Chapman, 1836

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

NAME(S):

GROUP:

Objective: Answer the Compelling Question after analyzing primary sources and then discussing findings with your group.

Compelling Question: Using the example of Pocahontas, how does bias affect how we understand historical events?

Directions: Using the guiding questions below, analyze the images in your source set.

1. What's the title of the source, and when was it published?
2. Who is the intended audience of the source?
3. What are the three most important or interesting things you notice about the source?
4. Does the source make an argument or assertion? If so, what is it?

SOURCE	
SOURCE	
SOURCE	

SET A: HISTORICAL IMAGES OF POCAHONTAS



Van de Passe, Simon, "Matoaka als Rebecka daughter to the mighty Prince Powhatan" (1616). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

SET A: HISTORICAL IMAGES OF POCAHONTAS



Chapman, J.G., "Baptism of Pocahontas [at Jamestown, Virginia, 1613]" (c. 1904). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

SET A: HISTORICAL IMAGES OF POCAHONTAS



"Portrait of Pocahontas, from painting by Wm. Sheppard" (c. 1900-1920). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

SET B: JOHN SMITH'S *THE GENERAL HISTORY OF VIRGINIA, NEW ENGLAND, AND THE SUMMER ISLES (1624)*

In 1624, John Smith published The General History of Virginia, one of the earliest histories of the English colonies. Smith's General History includes an account of the famous rescue of Smith by Pocahontas, an event that has forever linked the fate of the two historical figures in American culture. According to Smith, he was brought in front of Chief Powhatan and forced to lie his head in between two large stones, and a warrior raised a club to beat him over the head. Before this could happen, Pocahontas rushed in and placed her head upon his, which stopped the execution. Whether this event actually happened or not has been debated for centuries.

“At last they brought him to Werowocomoco, where was Powhatan, their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim courtiers stood wondering at him, as [if] he had been a monster, till Powhatan and his train had put themselves in their greatest braveries. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe made of raccoon skins and all the tails hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench [young, unmarried girl] of sixteen or eighteen years and along each side [of] the house, two rows of men and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red, many of their heads bedecked with the white down of birds, but every one with something, and a great chain of white beads around their necks.

“At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queen of Appomattoc was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, instead of a towel, 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 could, laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head and being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms and laid her own upon his to save him from death, whereat the Emperor was contended he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper, for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselves. For the King himself will make his own robes, shoes, bows, arrows, pots; plant, hunt, or do anything so well as the rest.

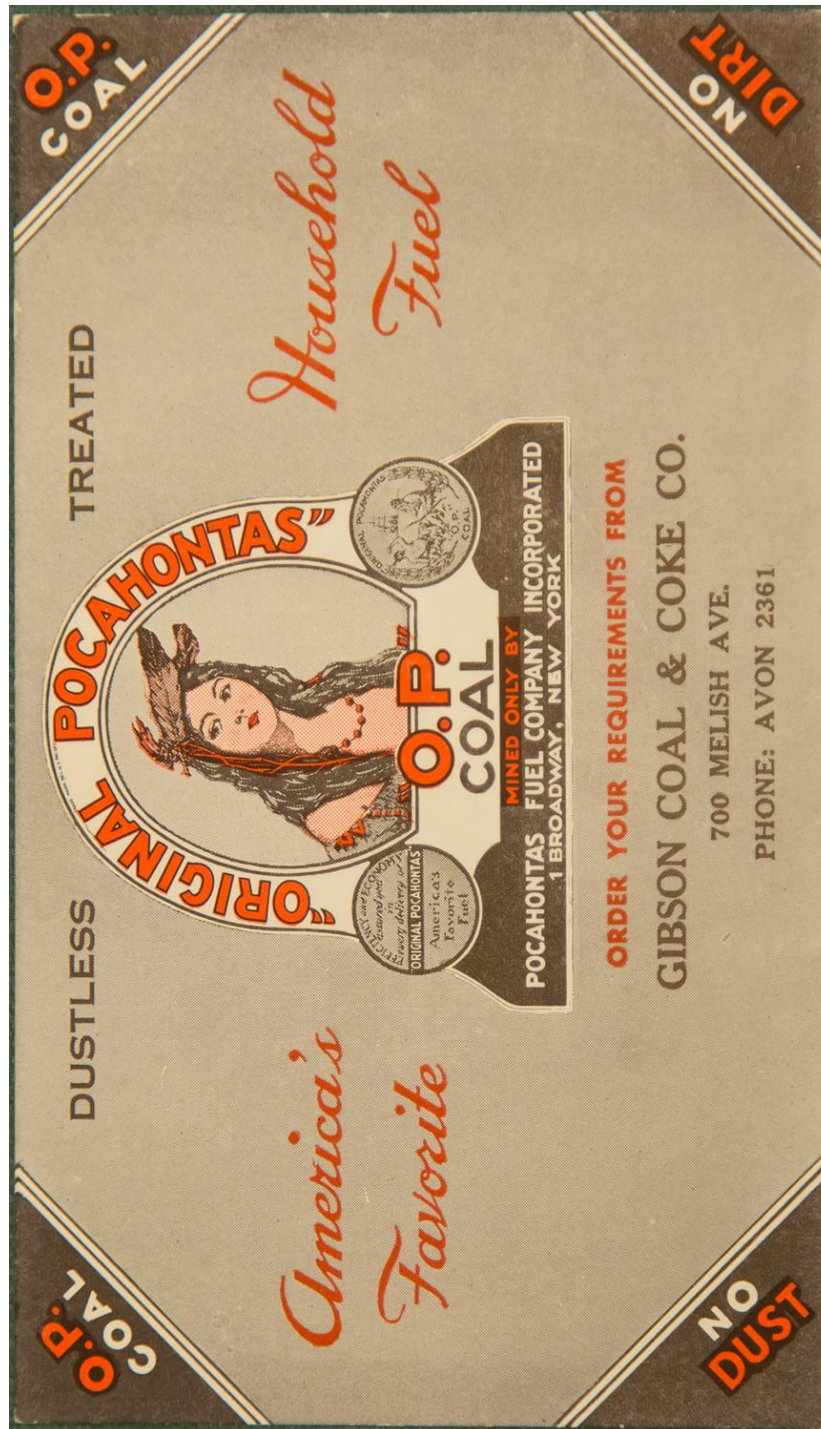
“Two days after, Powhatan, having disguised himself in the most fearfulest manner he could, caused Captain Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. Not long after, from behind a mat that divided the house, was made the most dolefullest noise he ever heard; then Powhatan more like a devil than a man, with some two hundred more as black as himself, came unto him and told him now that they were friends, and presently he should go

to Jamestown to send him two great guns and a grindstone for which he would give him the country of Capahowasic and forever esteem him as his son Nantaquoud.

“So to Jamestown with twelve guides Powhatan sent him. 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. But almighty God (by His divine providence) had mollified the hearts of those stern barbarians with compassion....[A]t last we regained some conference with them and gave them such toys and sent to Powhatan, his women, and children such presents as gave them in general full content.”

Smith, John, The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles (1624).

SET C: COMMERCIAL IMAGES OF POCAHONTAS



Original Pocahontas O.P. Coal Ad, Pocahontas Fuel Company, Inc., New York, NY (c. 1920). Courtesy of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

SET C: COMMERCIAL IMAGES OF POCAHONTAS



California Fruit Growers Exchange, Los Angeles, CA (c. 1940s). Courtesy of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.

SET C: COMMERCIAL IMAGES OF POCAHONTAS



Five-Cent Stamp, The Bureau of Engraving and Printing, Washington, D.C. (1907). Courtesy of the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation.