



**Primary Source and “Translation”:
Excerpts from John Smith’s *The Generall Historie of Virginia...***

Note: in class, this excerpt is provided as part of a reading about the early days of Jamestown. Here, it lacks some context; take it just as an example of what I mean when I talk about “translating” historical documents that were already written in English. By the time that the students read this, we’ve already practiced collaborative analysis and rewriting of primary sources together in class. Allowing the students to decide how to approach it—to translate the original themselves, read both side-by-side, or just go straight to the translation—makes the primary sources accessible to a variety of ages, reading levels, and ambitions.

If you just want to see the translation, skip to the end.

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... The following is Smith’s own account of the situation soon after he was put in charge, and how he handled it. This is a great opportunity to “translate” a primary source, if you’d like the challenge. (See “Guide to Primary Sources” for some tips on how to do so.) Once you do—or if you’d just rather read a modernized version right now—you can look to the last page of this document for my own “translation.” (Two things to watch out for, if you do tackle it on your own: “u” and “v” were used somewhat interchangeably at this time, and Smith often refers to himself in the third person in his own book.)

Excerpt from Chapter X of “The Generall Historie of Virginia...” by John Smith

When the Ships departed, all the provision of the Store (but that the President had gotten) was so rotten with the last Summers rayne, and eaten with Rats and Wormes, as the Hogges would scarcely eate it. Yet it was the Souldiers dyet till our returnes, so that we found nothing done, but our victuals spent, and the most part of our tooles, and a good part of our Armes conveyed to the Salvages. But now casting vp the Store, and finding sufficient till the next harvest, the feare of starving was abandoned, and the company divided into tens, fiftens, or as the businesse required; six houres each day was spent in worke, the rest in Pastime and merry exercises, but the vntowardnesse of the greatest number caused the President advise as followeth

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The Presidents advice to the Company.

Countrymen, the long experience of our late miseries, I hope is sufficient to perswade every one to a present correction of himselfe, and thinke not that either my pains, nor the Adventurers purses, will ever maintaine you in idlenesse and sloath. I speake not this to you all, for divers of you I know



deserue both honour and reward, better then is yet here to be had: but the greater part must be more industrious, or starue, how euer you haue beene heretofore tollerated by the authoritie of the Councell, from that I haue often commanded you. You see now that power resteth wholly in my selfe: you must obey this now for a Law, that he that will not worke shall not eate (except by sicknesse he be disabled:) for the labours of thirtie or fortie honest and industrious men shall not be consumed to maintaine an hundred and fiftie idle loyterers. And though you presume the authoritie here is but a shadow, and that I dare not touch the liues of any but my owne must answer it: the Letters patents shall each weeke be read to you, whose Contents will tell you the contrary. I would wish you therefore without contempt seeke to obserue these orders set downe, for there are now no more Counsellors to protect you, nor curbe my endeavours. Therefore he that offendeth, let him assuredly expect his due punishment.

He made also a Table, as a publicke memoriall of every mans deserts, to incourage the good, and with shame to spurre on the rest to amendment. By this many became very industrious, yet more by punishment performed their businesse, for all were so tasked, that there was no excuse could prevaile to deceiue him...

[from <https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/smith/smith.html#p84>]



“Translation” of first excerpt from The Generall Historie of Virginia¹

When the ships left, all the stored food (except what Smith had gotten) was so rotten from the last summer’s rain, and eaten by rats and worms, that the pigs would barely eat it. But that was the soldiers’ diet until our return, when we found nothing had been done, but our food was gone and most of our tools and many of our weapons had been given to the natives. After we inventoried the supplies and found that we had enough to last until the next harvest, people no longer feared starvation, and they divided into groups of ten, fifteen, or whatever the work needed; they spent six hours a day in work, the rest relaxing and enjoying themselves, but the poor attitude of most people caused Smith to give this advice:

Smith’s advice to the settlers

I hope our recent miseries are enough to convince everyone here to improve their behavior, and not to think that my work nor the money of the Virginia Company’s investors will allow you to sit around and be lazy. I’m not talking to all of you, since many of you have been honorable and deserve more reward than we can give you; but most of you either need to work harder or you’ll starve, regardless of how the Council has put up with your laziness in the past. I’m in charge now, and you must obey this law: unless you are too sick to work, you must work or you will not eat. The product of 30-40 honest men’s work won’t be given to 150 lazy people who won’t raise a finger. And if you think I don’t have the power to require this, or if you think I won’t punish someone because I’ll fear for my life, I’ll read you the letters of patent [from King James I, establishing authority in the colony] every week to remind you that you’re wrong. I ask you to follow these rules without argument, because there are no more council members to protect you or get in my way. Therefore: anyone who breaks this rule can expect punishment.

Smith also made a public list of who was working hard and who wasn’t, in order to praise those who did and shame those who didn’t into changing their behavior. This caused people to work harder, though mostly for fear of punishment, because everyone was told what work to do and so they couldn’t deceive him with excuses.

¹ This is not the full title of the book. Why did I shorten it? Because the full title of the book is “The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles: With the Names of the Adventurers, Planters, and Governours from Their First Beginning, Ano: 1584. To This Present 1624. With the Proceedings of Those Seuerall Colonies and the Accidents That Befell Them in All Their Journyes and Discoveries. Also the Maps and Descriptions of All Those Countreyes, Their Commodities, People, Government, Customes, and Religion Yet Knowne. Divided into Sixe Bookes. By Captaine Iohn Smith, Sometymes Governour in Those Countreyes & Admirall of New England,” and that would be a crazy thing to put at the top of a page.