

Colonial Virginia

During the 1610s, the small English colony at Jamestown was essentially a failure. Fearful of losing their investment, the officers of the Virginia Company of London embarked upon a series of reforms designed to attract more people to the troubled settlement. They began by ending the company monopoly on land ownership, believing that the colonists would display greater initiative if they had an ownership position in the venture. Company officials also made justice in Virginia more predictable by adopting English common law as the basis of their system, which replaced the whims of the governor as the final voice on legal matters. In 1620 the company dispatched a boatload of marriageable women to the colony in an effort to create a more stable society. The going rate was 120 pounds of tobacco for each bride.

An additional inducement was provided by the company's effort to make local government in Virginia more responsive to the colonists. In July 1619, a meeting of the House of Burgesses was held in Jamestown, the first such assembly in the Americas. The initial session accomplished little, however. It was cut short by an outbreak of malaria. The assembly comprised 22 members who represented the following constituencies:

- The governor, who was appointed to his position by the company officials in London
- The governor's council, six prominent citizens selected by the governor
- The burgesses (representatives) from various locales, initially the larger plantations and later in Virginia history from the counties.

The House of Burgesses was empowered to enact legislation for the colony, but its actions were subject to veto by the governor, council, and ultimately by the directors in London. Nevertheless, such a legislative body would have been unthinkable in the Spanish or French colonies of that day, which highlights the degree to which the concept of a limited monarchy had become accepted by the English people.

Voting for the burgesses was limited to landowning males, 17 years of age or older.

In 1624, Virginia became a royal colony. The House of Burgesses continued to meet, but its influence became severely restricted. Despite limitations on its actions, the assembly listed within its later ranks such notables as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry, and would assume a major leadership role in the movement toward independence.

The House of Burgesses

The first legislature anywhere in the English colonies in America was in Virginia. This was the House of Burgesses, and it first met on July 30, 1619, at a church in Jamestown.

Its first order of business was to set a minimum price for the sale of tobacco. Although the first session was cut short because of an outbreak of malaria, the House of Burgesses soon became a symbol of representative government. The 22 members of the House of Burgesses were elected by the colony as a whole, or actually men over 17 who also owned land. Royally appointed councillors (of which there were usually six) and governor rounded out the legislature. The governor was originally appointed by the Virginia Colony and later by the Crown.

The House of Burgesses, which met at first only once a year, could make laws, which could be vetoed by the governor or the directors of the Virginia Company. This continued to be the standard until 1624, when Virginia became a royal colony. At this time, England took much more control of things in Virginia, restricting the powers of the House of Burgesses.

Through the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, many leaders of the move toward independence made their names in the House of Burgesses. Patrick Henry introduced seven resolutions against the Stamp Act there in 1765.

The fact that the burgesses could make their own laws was very much on the mind of many people in the American colonies, especially when Great Britain continued to pass harsh laws that the colonists viewed as "taxation without representation."

Famous burgesses also included George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.