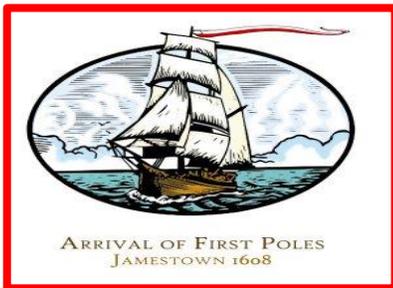


AMERICA'S FIRST CIVIL RIGHTS ACTION FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE

John Smith was a British soldier who was a founder of the American colony of Jamestown in the early 1600s. He was born in England and decided on a life of combat and served with the English Army abroad. He was captured and enslaved by the Turks but escaped traveling through Poland. In the book he later wrote, titled "The True Travels", he describes how he crossed Poland, aided by people, he described as having, "Respect, Mirth, Content and Entertainment."



In addition to the hospitality John Smith observed their personal industriousness and skill at various trades which would be useful in a pioneering environment. When Smith was made part of a multi-person council that would govern the new colony he invited the Polish craftsmen to establish profitable industries for the colony. On October 1, 1608 the second supply ship from London the "Mary & Margaret" arrived in Jamestown. On the ship were the first non-English craftsmen and industry specialists, designated as eight "Dutch-men and Poles".

These artisans soon began making soap-ash, glass and lumber milling such as wainscot, clapboard and pine planks. They also produced the pitch, turpentine and tar that were essential for naval enterprises, and they explored for mining locations. The original colony investors were expecting to mine gold to make the Colony profitable, but as A.C. Chandler, who served as president of the College of William & Mary from 1919 to 1934 remarked, "the colony's only profitable industries were those operated by Polish settlers."



Sir George Yeardley, the Virginia Colony's governor, returned from England in 1619 with instructions to form the first elected legislative body in Colonial America. Yeardley led the first representative Virginia General Assembly, the legislative House of Burgesses, to meet on American soil on July 30, 1619. This assembly would give "free liberty" to all men through "freely elected" representatives charged with making laws for the land. Suffrage, however, was only extended to Englishmen.

When the Poles learned they would not have the right to vote, the Polish craftsmen caused a civil rights action in the form of a work stoppage demanding suffrage. Though the specifics of what occurred next may be lost to history, the Virginia Company records indicate that according to court records dated 21 July 1619: "Upon some dispute of the Polonians resident in Virginia, it was now agreed (notwithstanding any former order to the contrary) that they shall be enfranchized, and made as free as any inhabitant there whatsoever". This court ruling granted the Polish craftsmen the right to vote nine days prior to the first meeting of the Virginia House of Burgesses.

