

Beginnings of Democracy: The Polish Experience at Jamestown

Purpose: The first years at Jamestown were ones of survival. In order to survive and prosper eight Polish and German craftsmen were recruited to begin a glassworks factory at Jamestown. The introduction of these industrious workers to the colony unintentionally lead to the beginning of democracy and religious freedom in Virginia. This lesson examines the importance of cultural diversity to the establishment of American democratic ideals.

Objectives:

1. Students will examine the experiences of Polish-German immigrants at Jamestown in order to discuss the legacy of immigration to the development of American democracy.
2. Students will analyze current attitudes towards immigration in order to debate the effect of current immigration on American freedom.

Key Words:

immigration

enfranchisement

boycott

Materials:

1. Student handout, *The Bill of Rights*.
2. Student handout, *First Steps to Freedom: The Polish Experience at Jamestown*, Versions A and B.
3. Teacher transparency, *Comparing Immigration in 1608 and Today*.
4. Teacher resource, *Journal Rubric*.

Resources:

Grzelonski, Bogdan. *Poles in the United States of America*. Interpress Publishers: Warsaw, 1976.

Waldo, Arthur L. *Jamestown: True Heroes*. Arthur Waldo: Miami, 1977.

Friedel, Mieczylaw W. *This Polish Blood in America's Veins: Sketches from the Life of Polish Immigrants and their Descendants in America, Illustrating an Unknown Part of American History*. Vantage Press: New York, New York, 1978.

Harrington, J.C. *Glassmaking at Jamestown*. Dietz Press: Richmond, 1952.

Procedure:

1. **Warm Up/Motivation.** Direct students to examine the *Bill of Rights* and to prioritize the two or three that they feel are most important to American citizens today. Review the student responses by placing a transparency of the handout on the overhead and taking a tally. You can also review the responses by displaying

the amendment numbers on the board and having students place post-its or magnets next to their choices. Ask the students who chose the first amendment to describe the reasoning behind their choice.

2. Ask students to brainstorm ways in which citizens can express themselves. Students should identify strategies such as speaking their opinions, writing letters to the editor, publishing literature, voting, etc. Discuss the following questions:
 - ❖ Why is the right to express yourself so important?
 - ❖ How is voting an expression of freedom?
 - ❖ Why might freedom of expression and freedom of religion be guaranteed in the same amendment?
 - ❖ In your opinion, how important are these rights to the lives of Americans?
 - ❖ How did the ideas presented in the Bill of Rights begin to take shape in colonial America?

3. Distribute either version A or B of the student handout, ***First Steps to Freedom: The Polish-German Experience at Jamestown***. Version A is a directed reading activity for middle level learners. Version B is intended for high school level students. Students should read and highlight first amendment freedoms that are described within the reading. They are also asked to complete a graphic organizer that will help students to identify how the actions of the Polish-German craftsmen and workers help to establish first amendment freedoms in Virginia.
 - ❖ Why did Poles immigrate to Virginia?
 - ❖ What skills did they possess that helped them to overcome discrimination by the English?
 - ❖ What actions did Polish immigrants use to guarantee their rights in the colony? What was the result of these actions?
 - ❖ How did their actions affect the entire colony? The development of American democracy?

4. Display the teacher transparency, ***Comparing Immigration in 1608 and Today***. Discuss the questions on the transparency with students. Students should make a connection between the need for Polish immigrants at Jamestown and immigrants today.
 - ❖ Based on the experience of Polish immigrants at Jamestown, what actions might immigrants take to establish freedoms and rights in America?
 - ❖ How are the experiences of today's immigrants similar to those in the seventeenth century? How are they different?

5. Have students research the current debates over immigration by directing the students to research current immigration proposals. Sites that may be helpful include:
 - ❖ National Public Radio (NPR)- www.npr.org
Specifically the special program entitled -
www.npr.org/news/specials/polls/2004/immigration/?sourceCode-gaw

- ❖ National Immigration Forum- Advocates for welcoming immigrants and refugees
www.immigrationforum.org
- ❖ Federation for American Immigration Reform- Advocates for reduction of current immigration levels
www.fairus.org
- ❖ National Conference of State Legislatures- Looks at current immigration reform bills in the Senate
<http://ncsl.org/programs/immig/Immigreformbills0206.htm>
- ❖ National Network for Immigration and Refugee Rights- Immigration proposal comparison charts
www.nnirr.org

6. Place the following statement and continuum line on the board or overhead. Ask the students to copy the statement and line onto notebook paper and make a mark on the line depending on their opinion about immigration. Underneath the continuum line students should write 4 or 5 statements supporting their opinion using information from their research. These statements will be used in the classroom debate.

Immigration
Hinders the
Growth of a democracy

Immigration
has no effect
on democracy

Immigration
Increases the
growth of democracy

7. Divide the students into groups depending on their placement on the continuum line. Students who fall in the middle should work with the group with whom they more closely side. In their groups students should:
- ❖ Write an opening statement and decide who will give it.
 - ❖ Develop talking points or arguments that they will use to present their case and decide who will present each one.
 - ❖ Assign a secretary to take notes on the other group's arguments for use in the closing statement.
8. Run the debate by allowing each group to make a two minute opening statement. Each group should then present an argument in defense of their opinion allowing the opposite group time to respond. The presentations and responses should be limited to one minute. When each group has presented/argued their position allow each group five minutes to develop a closing statement. Have each group present its closing statement.
9. As a summary of the lesson ask the students to create a journal entry based on the following statement:

America has often been called a nation of immigrants. The Polish immigrants at Jamestown exemplify the contributions of immigrants to this country.

Based on what you have learned in this lesson, do you believe that immigration benefits or harms a democracy? Support your opinion with information from your readings and class debate.

- ❖ Instead of a journal students could create a poster, write a song or skit that addresses the same question.
- ❖ Use the teacher resource, *Journal Rubric* to assess student achievement.

The Bill of Rights

Directions: Carefully read each of the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution and prioritize them from least important (10) to most important (1). In the space provided identify the rights protected by each amendment and write a statement that justifies your decision.

Amendment 1. Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 2. A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 3. No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 4. The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons of things to be seized.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 5. NO persons shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, not be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 6. In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed; which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 7. In Suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury shall be otherwise reexamined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of common law.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 8. Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 9. The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be constructed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

Amendment 10. The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.

Rights protected:

Rank: _____ **Justification:**

First Steps to Freedom: The Polish Experience at Jamestown Version A



www.polishamericancenter.org/FirstSettlers.html

The Virginia Company was an economic organization that was looking to use colonization in America as a means for securing wealth for its shareholders and for the English government. It was hoped that gold and other natural resources would be found that would sustain and promote the English economy. Rise in demand combined with depleted resources in England created a need for colonies to not only fuel manufacturing in England but to create new markets for the finished products.

Glassmaking was perceived to be a practical and economically rewarding endeavor for the new colony. The demand for glass containers was growing and the necessary materials were in abundance in Jamestown. Most glass in England was imported since there were few English craftsmen trained in the art. This meant that the price for glass was high. The Virginia Company believed that starting a glasshouse in Jamestown would help them to make a profit on their investment.

Although an abundance of natural resources was available for making glass the labor necessary to do so was not. The few Englishmen who were trained in the craft were not interested in traveling to Virginia. A flourishing trade in glass provided little incentive for glassmakers to risk almost certain death in Jamestown. For these reasons the Virginia Company had to look outside of England to pursue its glassmaking endeavor.

To that end, the company enlisted the labors of eight Dutchmen and Poles. (The Dutchmen are assumed to be Germans) According to John Smith, the London Company had sent to Germany and Poland for “glasse-men and the rest,” “the rest”: referring to the makers of pitch tar, soap ashes and clapboard. * The hiring of Poles was in conflict with the idea of limiting the colony to English residents of Anglican faith but necessary to enable the young colony to survive and become prosperous.

In 1608 eight Dutchmen and Poles arrived at Jamestown. Their desire to work and diligence in completing tasks was noted by Captain John Smith. Smith is noted as saying, “there are no better workers than the Poles.” ** In 1610 the only foreigners welcomed in Jamestown were the Poles despite their lack of English citizenship and differing religious beliefs. On his return to England in 1609, Christopher Newport took with him to England, “tryals of Pitch, Tarre, Glasse, Franckincense, Sope Ashes, with that Waynscot

that could be provided.”*** These goods were secured by the help of the Polish immigrants who had arrived with Smith in 1608. In addition to producing materials that could be used by the mother country, the Polish immigrants dedicated time to instructing the English about the creation of glass and other products thus creating some hope of economic success in Virginia.

In 1619 citizens of Jamestown were given the opportunity to vote for representatives to the Virginia assembly. The Polish residents were initially denied this right despite their importance to the economic viability of the colony. The result of this injustice was the first documented case of civil disobedience in America. The slogan adopted to accompany this action was, “No vote, no work.” Polish workers refused to work until given the right to participate in assembly elections.

“In June 1619, as foreigners, they were denied the right to vote in America’s first assembly. To protest this injustice, they walked out on their jobs suspending the production of goods which were in great demand in the mother country.”

Grzelonski, Bogdan. *Poles in the United States of America*. Interpress Publishers: Warsaw, 1976. p.9.

The result of this labor strike was economic chaos in the colony. London immediately reacted and responded with the following entry found in the Virginia Court Book of July 21, 1619 that extended the right to vote to the Polish immigrants:

They shall be enfranchised, and made as free as any inhabitant there whatsoever: And because their skill in making pitch and tarr and sopeashees shall not dye with them, it is agreed that some young men, shalbe put unto them to learne their skill and knowledge therein for the benefit of the Country hereafter.

Ibid, p.9

Further evidence that the Polish immigrants were highly skilled and desired at Jamestown is that they were brought to the colony despite objections about their religious beliefs. Jamestown was intended to be a colony guided by the teachings of the Church of England. In the early days of the colony attendance at services was required and failure to comply with the Anglican Church could lead to punishment. The following statement reflects English attitudes towards the invitation of Catholic immigrants to the colony:

In choice of all artisans for the voyage, this general rule must be observed, That no man be chosen who is known to be a Papiste (Catholic), for the Special inclination they have of favor to the King of Spain.

-Richard Hakluyt

Waldo, Arthur. *Jamestown: True Heroes*. Arthur Waldo: Miami, p.134.

The Polish craftsmen were exempt from this rule regarding religion due to the superiority of their skills and productivity. Polish immigrants played a role in establishing the beginnings of freedom of religion in America by proving invaluable to the economic survival of the colony.

The experiences of Polish immigrants to Jamestown serve as a lesson about the ability of immigrants to enrich our nation and expand American democracy. Their decision to protest injustice began a tradition of civil disobedience continued by the likes of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr. This example of civic engagement should be remembered as one of the building blocks of American democracy.

*Harrington, J.C. *Glassmaking at Jamestown*. Dietz Press: Richmond, 1952. p6.

**Waldo, Arthur. *Jamestown: True Heroes*. Arthur Waldo: Miami, 1977. p82.

*** Harrington, p8.

Guide Questions:

- ❖ Why did the English need the assistance of Polish craftsmen?
- ❖ What skills and characteristics did Polish immigrants bring to Jamestown?
- ❖ Describe English views towards non-English immigrants?
- ❖ How did the Polish overcome these views in Jamestown?
- ❖ What actions did the Poles take that promoted democracy in Jamestown?

First Amendment Guarantee	Action by Poles that promoted democratic ideals	Result
The right to express yourself through voting.		
	Polish workers came to Jamestown despite being of a different religious faith from the English.	
The right to peaceably petition the government for a redress of grievances.		

First Steps to Freedom: The Polish Experience at Jamestown Version B



www.polishamericancenter.org/FirstSettlers.html

At the beginning of the seventeenth century Europeans wanted to start colonies in America. A colony is a place that is ruled by a distant country. To begin this colony they established the Virginia Company. This company was made of up investors whose wealth supported the establishment of the colony. The English wanted to start a colony in Virginia because they wanted gold and other natural resources that might be found there. They wanted these resources in order to become richer than their European competitors such as Spain.

One natural resource found at Jamestown was sand that could be used for making glass. Making glass was inexpensive in Virginia and the demand for it in England was great. Most glass in England was bought from other European countries which made it very expensive. If the Virginia Company could make glass in Virginia it would help them to make money from their investment.

Although there was plenty of sand and other natural resources available for making glass the labor necessary to do so was not. The few Englishmen who could make glass were not interested in traveling to Virginia. Life in Virginia was dangerous and they made a good living in England. For these reasons the Virginia Company had to look outside of England for glassmakers to run the glasshouse.

The company hired the labors of eight Dutchmen (Germans) and Poles. According to John Smith, the London Company had sent to Germany and Poland for “glasse-men and the rest,” “the rest”: referring to the makers of pitch tar, soap ashes and clapboard. * These goods were important to the survival of the colony. Because these goods were so important the Virginia Company had to allow non-English workers to move to Jamestown. Prior to the arrival of these German and Polish workers the colony had only allowed Englishmen at Jamestown.

In 1608 the eight Dutchmen and Poles arrived at Jamestown. They were hard workers. John Smith is noted as saying, “there are no better workers than the Poles.” ** In 1610 the Polish workers were the only ‘foreigners’ welcomed into the colony. Their work ethic allowed the English to overlook their different culture and beliefs.

On his return to England in 1609, Christopher Newport took with him to England, “tryals of Pitch, Tarre, Glasse, Franckincense, Sope Ashes, with that Waynscot that could be provided.”**** These goods were available because of the hard working Poles. In addition to producing materials that could be used by the mother country, the Polish immigrants dedicated time to instructing the English about the creation of glass and other products. This helped the colony to become more productive.

In 1619 citizens of Jamestown were given the opportunity to vote for representatives to the Virginia assembly. This assembly would help to make the laws for the colony. This assembly was the first opportunity the colonists had to make decisions at Jamestown. The Polish residents were initially denied the right to participate. The Polish workers were upset because their hard work had allowed the colony to survive. The result of this injustice was the first documented case of civil disobedience in America. Polish workers refused to work until given the right to participate in assembly elections. The slogan adopted to accompany this action was, “No vote, no work.”

“In June 1619, as foreigners, they were denied the right to vote in America’s first assembly. To protest this injustice, they walked out on their jobs suspending the production of goods which were in great demand in the mother country.”

Grzelonski, Bogdan. *Poles in the United States of America*. Interpress Publishers: Warsaw, 1976. p.9.

The result of this labor strike was economic chaos in the colony. London immediately reacted and responded with the following entry found in the Virginia Court Book of July 21, 1619 that extended the right to vote to the Polish immigrants:

They shall be enfranchised, and made as free as any inhabitant there whatsoever: And because their skill in making pitch and tarr and sopeashees shall not dye with them, it is agreed that some young men, shalbe put unto them to learne their skill and knowledge therein for the benefit of the Country hereafter.

Ibid, p.9

Polish immigrants had different religious beliefs from the English. Jamestown was intended to be a colony guided by the teachings of the Church of England. In the early days of the colony attendance at services was required and failure to comply with the Anglican Church could lead to punishment. The following statement reflects English attitudes towards the invitation of Catholic immigrants to the colony:

In choice of all artisans for the voyage, this general rule must be observed, That no man be chosen who is known to be a Papiste (Catholic), for the Special inclination they have of favor to the King of Spain.

-Richard Hakluyt

Waldo, Arthur. *Jamestown: True Heroes*. Arthur Waldo: Miami, p.134.

The Polish craftsmen were exempt from this rule regarding religion due to the superiority of their skills and productivity. Polish immigrants played a role in establishing the beginnings of freedom of religion in America because of their hard work.

The experiences of Polish immigrants to Jamestown serve as a lesson about the ability of immigrants to enrich the nation and expand American democracy. Their decision to protest injustice began a tradition of civil disobedience continued by the likes of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr. This example of civic engagement should be remembered as one of the building blocks of American democracy.

*Harrington, J.C. *Glassmaking at Jamestown*. Dietz Press: Richmond, 1952. p6.

**Waldo, Arthur. *Jamestown: True Heroes*. Arthur Waldo: Miami, 1977. p82.

*** Harrington, p8.

Guide Questions:

- ❖ Why did the English need the assistance of Polish craftsmen?
- ❖ What skills and characteristics did Polish immigrants bring to Jamestown?
- ❖ Describe English views towards non-English immigrants?
- ❖ How did the Polish overcome these views in Jamestown?
- ❖ What actions did the Poles take that promoted democracy in Jamestown?

First Amendment Guarantee	Action by Poles that promoted democratic ideals	Result
The right to express yourself through voting .		
	Polish workers came to Jamestown despite being of a different religious faith from the English.	
The right to peaceably petition the government for a redress of grievances.		

Comparing Immigration in 1608 and Today



- ❖ What is going on in the cartoon?
- ❖ Why are the congressmen building a wall?
- ❖ Who do they need to help them to do it?
- ❖ Why is this ironic?
- ❖ What point is the artist trying to make about immigration policy in the United States?
- ❖ How is this similar to the situation at Jamestown in 1608?

Journal Rubric

4 POINTS

Student clearly stated that immigration benefited/harmed a democracy
Student provided ample evidence to support that belief
Student cited examples from class discussion/research to justify opinion
Student had in depth understanding how the process of immigration strengthened or weakened democratic processes.

3 POINTS

Student clearly stated that immigration benefited/harmed a democracy
Student provided some evidence to support that belief
Students cited at least one example from class discussion/research to justify opinion
Student had a fair amount of understanding about how the process of immigration strengthened or weakened democratic processes.

2 POINTS

Student stated that immigration benefited/harmed a democracy
Student provided some evidence to support that belief
Student cited at least one example from class discussion/research to justify opinion
Student had little understanding about how the process of immigration strengthened or weakened democratic processes

1 POINT

Student stated that immigration benefited/harmed a democracy
Student provided little evidence to support that belief
Student did not cite any examples from class discussion/research to justify opinion
Student did not demonstrate understanding about how the process of immigration strengthened or weakened democratic processes.