

# Polish artisans strike for the right to vote, Jamestown, Virginia, 1619

A short history of the strike of Polish artisan workers in English colonial North America, for the same right to vote as English people.

On 10 April 1606, King James I of England approved a royal charter establishing the Virginia Company of London. The aim of the company was to found North American colonial settlements with the purpose of providing a profit for its English investors. The next year, an expedition funded by the company established Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America.

As a joint stock company, the Virginia Company's objective was to maximize profits for its shareholders and minimize worker costs and compensation. To that end, the company heeded the advice of men like Richard Hakluyt, who, in 1586, described the type of men needed for a lucrative colony: "Men skillful in burning of Sope ashes, and inmaking of Pitch, and Tarre, and Rozen, to be fetched out of Prussia and Poland, which are thence to be had for small wages, being there in manner of slaves." It was hoped that artisans from Central and Eastern Europe, skilled in producing pitch, tar, resin, soap ashes, glass, and other commercial commodities in high demand in England, could make the burgeoning settlements profitable.

By 1608, just a year after the founding of Jamestown, German and Polish skilled artisans were sent by the Virginia Company to become the first non-English settlers in the new colony. According to contemporary records, it seems that these artisans and those that followed played a significant role in Jamestown's economic viability. When Captain John Smith was lamenting the poor work ethic of the early colonists, he specifically exempted the German and Polish artisans from his condemnation. In fact, it has been suggested that, early on, nearly all the profits generated by Jamestown for the Virginia Company derived from the export of the German and Polish manufactured goods. By 1619, even more Poles were sought in order to take advantage of Virginia's vast timber resources by manufacturing tar, pitch, resin, turpentine, masts, and yards for shipbuilding. That year also marked the beginning of two defining strands of American history, one lauded, the other castigated. 1619 was the first year of America's famous legacy of representative government, and the first year of America's infamous legacy of African servitude. But 1619 inaugurated another significant thread, as well, because Polish workers conducted the first recorded strike in American history that year.

In 1619, the Governor of Virginia, Sir George Yeardley, returned from England with instructions to form the first elected legislative body in colonial America. The new assembly was meant to give "free liberty" to all men through "freely elected" representatives that would make laws for the land.

Except suffrage was not extended to all of the colonists, not even all of the men, not even all of the white men, but only English, landowning men above the age of sixteen.

Though the specifics of what occurred next may be lost to history, Virginia Company records suggest that Polish workers went on strike demanding suffrage. 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 country) that they shall be enfranchized, and made as free as any inhabitant there whatsoever: And because their skill in making pitch & tarr and soap-ashes shall not dye with them, it is agreed that some young men, shall be put unto them to learne their skill & knowledge therein for the benefitt of the Country hereafter."

A subsequent account, written on 21 May 1620, but referring to 1619, entered "Pitch and tar: potashes and soap ashes, for the making whereof the Polackers are returned to their work." And in a separate volume of Virginia Company records, an entry under the same date reads: "For pitch and tar, we advise and require that the Polackers be returned in part to these their works, with such other assistance as shall be necessary. The like we shall desire for Pot-ashes and Soap-ashes, when there shall be fit store of hand to assist them: Requiring in the meane time, the care be general taken, that Servants and Apprentices be so trained up in these works, as that the skill doe not perish with the Masters."

These entries would seem to indicate that the Polish were initially deprived of the new political rights being granted to the English settlers, notably the right to vote, and as a consequence the Polish artisans organized a work stoppage. Presumably fearful of the economic impact of this strike, the English decided to extend the franchise to the Polish workers and make them "as free as any inhabitant there whatsoever," likely referring to the extension of all political and civil rights afforded to the English. In exchange, the Polish artisans agreed to teach their craft to others in the colony.

Nine days after the dispute was resolved, 30 July 1619, the first elected legislature in the colonies, the Virginia House of Burgesses, convened for its inaugural meeting.

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*Research by Thomas Fortuna, 08/12/2011*

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