

## A Colonial First

During the late 1600s and early 1700s, the British king and Parliament were busy tending to affairs in Europe. The colonists in North America were busy, too. They were setting up representative governments and learning how to run their colonies. It was an exciting time in history—new laws and procedures were helping to shape this new land. Individuals were stepping forward to represent their towns and making decisions that changed the course of the colonies. The colony of Virginia was instrumental in establishing a representative government. Let's take a look at what happened in Virginia and learn why the fledgling government in that colony had such an impact on the future country.

The Virginia House of Burgesses was the first elected legislative assembly in the American colonies. A *burgess* was a representative of the people in colonial times. The House of Burgesses was established in 1619. It was authorized in the Great Charter issued by King James I of England to the Virginia Company of London. Under the charter, the Virginia colony would have a governor and a council. In addition, each Virginia county was allowed two representatives. The capital city of Jamestown was allowed one. These burgesses were chosen by popular vote. However, colonial elections were much different from today's election by popular vote. Only adult men who owned a certain amount of property were allowed to vote. After 1643, the governor and his council and the burgesses were separated into two houses. The two houses together were called the General Assembly.

The Virginia House of Burgesses modeled itself after England's Parliament, but it was not equal in power to Parliament. In fact, the House of Burgesses existed only because the king allowed it to. Parliament could revoke any measure passed by the House of Burgesses. Despite this fact, the Virginia House of Burgesses grew in power and importance in the century following its formation. Its members set up procedures and traditions similar to those found in today's legislative bodies, including the U.S. Congress. In addition, important members of colonial society gained valuable governmental experience serving as burgesses, including famous patriot leaders George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry.



Here, Patriot Patrick Henry speaks before the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1765.

## Opening Day

Opening day in the Virginia General Assembly was filled with tradition and strict procedures. Because the governor was the king's representative in the colony, the House of Burgesses could not convene without his summons. That means that the House of Burgesses could not tend to any business without approval from the governor. In addition, the burgesses had to receive the governor's approval at each step of the opening of a session. Because the governor and his council sat in one wing in the capitol and the burgesses sat in another, this required the burgesses to move between the chambers several times on opening day.

The first procedure on opening day was for the burgesses to be sworn in. This happened in the council chamber. The burgesses then returned to their own chamber to await a summons from the governor. The summons sent by a clerk, said, "His Excellency commands the immediate attendance of the house of burgesses upon him." This shows that the governor had more power than the burgesses. In England, a similar summons was issued to begin a legislative



The Virginia House of Burgesses held its first meeting in 1619. Unlike the British Parliament, the duties of the burgesses included both matters of importance to the entire colony and issues that were strictly local.

session. There, however, only the king could "command" the Parliament. Any clerk sent to open a session would merely "desire" that it begin its session.

Soon after the burgesses dutifully reported to the governor in the council chamber, they were sent back to their own chamber to elect a Speaker. This position was one of great importance and power in the Virginia assembly, just as it was in England. In fact, no legislative business could occur if the Speaker was

absent. Once the Speaker was chosen, the burgesses returned again to the council chamber to present their choice. Once the governor approved their choice, the Speaker traditionally approached the governor to request certain privileges for the burgesses. These privileges included freedom of debate, freedom from arrest, and protection for their estates. The governor always granted them.

Next, the governor read a speech to the assembled burgesses. In it, he explained his reasons for calling a session of the legislature. The burgesses listened carefully. The speech outlined the laws the governor wanted them to pass during the session. After the speech, the burgesses returned to their own chamber, where they listened to the speech again. They formally expressed thanks for the governor's direction; however, this did not necessarily mean that they would carry out his wishes. In many cases, the burgesses took their own stands on the issues of the day.

Next, the burgesses elected other officers, including a clerk, a sergeant-at-arms, a chaplain, doorkeepers, a public printer, and clerks of the standing (permanent) committees. After all these steps were completed, the burgesses were finally ready to get to work.

### **The Work of the Burgesses**

The main job of the House of Burgesses was to pass laws and set tax rates for the colony. They performed other duties as well. These included such things as granting patents for inventions and issuing rewards for new discoveries. The burgesses often settled local issues as well.

Only a member of the House of Burgesses could introduce a proposed law, or bill. This was called "delivery into the table." The table was the clerk's table, which stood in the center of the house chamber. Once a bill was introduced, it was read three times. At each reading, it was debated. At the second reading, the bill might be referred to a standing committee, whose job it was to analyze the bill, change it if necessary, and present it again to the whole house for a vote.

The burgesses had five options when presented with a new bill. They could 1) approve the bill at once; 2) refer the bill to a standing committee or a special committee formed for a narrow purpose; 3) order the petition to "lie on the table," meaning it would be available for the members to review; 4) express disapproval by ordering it torn up and "thrown under the table," which happened only on rare occasions; or 5) reject the bill.

The burgesses spent a great deal of time debating all aspects of a proposed bill. They even debated whether they should debate the bill! When a bill could not be agreed upon between the burgesses and the governor and his council, managers from each house worked out a new version of the bill. They did this work in a room that connected the two wings of the capitol.

The governor had the ultimate power in the House of Burgesses. If he delivered a message, all business would stop. The burgesses would wait until his message was read before they could go back to whatever they were doing. Despite this fact, the burgesses had vast influence in the colony. They also were known to send representatives or a petition to London to challenge some action of Parliament with which they disagreed. Although the Virginia House of Burgesses was actually meant to help the colonies work with the government of Britain, it was important for other reasons, as well. This first elected House of Representatives helped set the stage for the future government of the United States.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Which of the following illustrates the power of the governor in the Virginia colony?
  - A. The governor had to wait for approval from the king to do anything.
  - B. All business would stop if a message from the governor was delivered.
  - C. The governor could not start business without a summons from the burgesses.
  - D. The burgesses could pass laws without his approval.
2. The main duty of the House of Burgesses was to
  - A. oversee the governor.
  - B. choose the governor's council.
  - C. swear in members of the House.
  - D. pass laws for the colony.
3. After the burgesses elected a Speaker, the next step in opening day procedure was for the
  - A. members to be sworn in.
  - B. governor to summon the burgesses.
  - C. burgesses to elect the clerk and other officers.
  - D. governor to approve their choice.
4. Think about what you have learned about the Virginia House of Burgesses. Write a short paragraph in which you describe the relationship between the Virginia House of Burgesses and the colonial governor. Use details from the reading passage to support your answer.