House of Burgesses (1619)

The Virginia House of Burgesses was the colony’s first elected legislative body. It held its first meeting on July 30th, 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia. The legislative assembly consisted of a total of 22 members.

To be eligible to vote for the legislative assembly, the voter had to be a white man, 17 or older, who owned a specific amount of land. The elected officials were to meet once a year to enact laws and determine the amount of taxation for the colony. These laws and taxes could be vetoed by the governor, the counsel members, or company officials in London.

The original reason for this change from martial law to an elected legislature was an attempt by Virginia to make the colony more profitable and to encourage more people to settle in the new colony. Although in 1624 the colony of Virginia became a royal colony and the power of the House of Burgesses diminished, the drive for independence was still there. This drive gave birth to what now America refers to as its greatest leaders; George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry.

“It [the House of Burgesses] was the first elected legislative assembly in America.” (Boorstin, Kelley 38)

“The Virginia Tobacco Company dispensed with martial law, allowing the planters to elect a representative assembly, which, along with a governor and an advisory council appointed by the company, had the authority to make laws for the colony. The House of Burgesses met for the first time in 1619, commencing what would become a strong tradition of representative government in the English colonies.” (West et. al. 50)

“It’s [the House of Burgesses] first meeting took place in late July 1619, a cornerstone gathering pointing toward governments with a popular voice in England’s North American colonies.” (Martin, Roberts, Mintz, McCurry, Jones 41)

“As a representative assembly, the House of Burgesses was part of an English tradition of limiting royal authority and increasing citizens’ role in government… the House of Burgesses, as the first representative assembly in the New World, established a pattern of government that other colonies would follow.” (Davidson, Lytle 41- 42)

“On May 30, 1765, Virginia’s House of Burgesses had resolved that it had ‘the only and sole exclusive right and power to lay taxes… upon the inhabitants of this colony [who were] not bound to yield obedience to any law’ coming from Parliament that sought to tax them. This bold stand by the largest and most venerable of the colonies encouraged the others to follow suit.” (Kelley 92)
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