

The Role and Accomplishments of Polish Pioneers in the Jamestown Colony

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**ARRIVAL OF FIRST POLES
JAMESTOWN 1608**

The number of early immigrants from 17th-century Poland to America was minimal. In fact, Poland served as a destination for immigrants from both Western and Eastern Europe. Other nations in Europe were wasting no time in exploring and colonizing the new lands across the Atlantic Ocean. Spain and Portugal had taken an early lead over Britain and France, but Britain was determined to make up for lost time. Its own society being split along religious lines, Britain had no shortage of individuals looking for a new start and freedom from religious oppression.

On December 1607, the first British settlers arrived in Jamestown in the hope of finding natural resources such as gold, lumber and herbs, carrying with them their

ultimate goal - profit. Sent by the Virginia Company of London, they arrived with large expectations. However, their inability to settle a colony was larger. Two problems immediately beset the colonists. First, some of the colonists were English noblemen with no experience either in the military or in manual labor. Thus, the colony found itself without skilled craftsmen or soldiers; worse, many of the colonists outright refused to engage in work that they felt was beneath them. Second, the physical location chosen for the site of Jamestown proved to be a poor one. The land was swampy (making it a veritable breeding ground of disease), the water supply was poor and relations with the local indigenous Indian tribes were rocky at best. Within less than a year, the colony was in danger of failure. No profits were heading back to England; disease ran rampant due to the lack of fresh water, food supplies were low, and little to no work had been done to establish an industrial base. In fact, much of the time had been spent panning for gold rather unsuccessfully in Virginia's rivers. The Virginia Company of London had nothing to show for its investment and a small prospect for future returns.

To salvage their colony, the Virginia Company hired a group of Poles, known for their reputation and valuable expertise in the lumber and other manufacturing industries. Captain John Smith had first-hand experience dealing with Polish manufacturers through his work with the Virginia Company of London, in addition to his experience traveling through Poland on his return from the Middle East. Before his travels to America, John Smith had been a Turkish prisoner. Poland provided Captain Smith with his first Christian refuge following his escape.

The first Poles who arrived at Jamestown came aboard the British ship *Mary and Margaret* on October 1, 1608 under the command of Captain Christopher Newport. Bringing skilled labor and military experience lacking among the original colonists, the Poles were engaged in the manufacturing of glass, pitch, tar, soap, ash and other products. The English Parliament had restricted the amount of English timber available for cutting, and their experience in this field alone would have made the contributions of the Poles invaluable. In addition, while the British settlers coming to America were mainly social outcasts, some fleeing England for religious freedom, the Poles "[...] were members of the Polish gentry, former country squires, who, besides being of intellectual class, were well acquainted with the

methods of production needed at the time of Jamestown [...]". In other words, the Poles had no hang-ups about doing the important manual labor needed to preserve the survival of the colony.

Among the first Poles who arrived in America were Michael Lowicki, an organizer of industry and business and the leader of the original five; Jan Bogdan, an expert in pitch, tar, and ship building; Zbigniew Stefanski, a specialist in glass production; Jan Mata, a prominent soap producer, and Stanislaw Sadowski a lumber and clapboard production organizer. The colonists viewed the Poles as hard-working and respectful. The Poles first impressions of Jamestown were not very positive. Stefanski observed, "Seldom has one seen such lack of resourcefulness as we found in Virginia. Not even a spoonful of drinking water [...] the people here marveled when we dug a well and presented it to them (...) [...]". That water well provided a regular source of drinking water, stopping the spread of dysentery and other related illnesses and death due to the drinking of swamp water. The Poles also set up sawmills and began cutting up beams and lumber without rest, earning them respect throughout the colony. Stefanski and Bogdan would later go on to save Captain John Smith's life when Smith was attacked by several Indians.

Among major accomplishments of the first Poles was the building of a glass furnace, the first factory in America and the beginning of an industry. The goods produced in these factories became the first "made in America" goods to be exported to England. When the Mary and Margaret was ready to sail back to England, the Polish settlers sent back a full line of glassware samples they were prepared to turn out in commercial quantities as well as a cargo of pitch distilled from Virginia's pine trees.

The colonists respected the Poles for their quality of work and other accomplishments. For instance, the Pole Lawrence (Wawrzyniec) Bohun was the first doctor in Jamestown colony. Moreover, the work done by the original group proved valuable enough to allow them to repay the Virginia Company for their passage to America, and this in turn allowed them to later become free citizens of the colony. Within a few years, there were fifty Poles living in Jamestown. Also important was the example these Poles set for the colonists. As the former President of the College of William and Mary Admiral Alvin Chandler stated in 1953, "It took the example of the Polish glassmakers to demonstrate to the colonists that the treasures of Virginia were in its soil, not in nuggets to be had for picking."

On June 30, 1619, when the Jamestown Legislative Assembly instituted a representative form of government, rules stated that only colonists of English descent would be given the right to vote. This denied Poles the right to governmental representation in a colony they helped to sustain and grow. As a result they organized what became the first labor strike in American history. Their slogan was "No vote. No work".

Facing angry and influential politicians in England, within a few weeks the Jamestown government bowed to the demands of Poles, granting them the same rights given to all workers within the colony. It is important to note that this event was not a strike against unfair employers or work place practices, but a battle for civil rights and inclusion in the political process. As Admiral Chandler stated: "... practically all of the profits realized by the London Company came from the resale of the products of the Polish industries. The Jamestown government quickly realized that if it sent empty ships back to England, the consequences could be very unpleasant". These Polish craftsmen used the economic power they had acquired through their labor to engineer an equal footing as citizens for themselves.

While the history of Jamestown itself proves to be a tragic one in the end, the tradition, practices and actions of these original settlers lives on. Despite early setbacks (in 1610 John Smith left the colony as a result of a grave injury and only 65 colonists survived the next two winters) the colony gave rise to similar establishments and taught valuable lessons. Because of tragic events the Virginia Company lost its charter in 1624, the Pamunkee Indian tribe devastated the colony in 1644 and in 1676 Jamestown was burned to the ground in Bacon's Rebellion, destroying one of America's first great settlements. By 1698, the surviving colonists had moved closer to the land now known as Williamsburg. The

significance of Jamestown lies in its strategic timing and success. As Louis B. Wright, Professor of American History stated, "If Jamestown had failed, Spain and France ultimately might have divided all of North America between them and the United States might never have come into being."

The Polish contribution to Jamestown and the fabric of early America makes it a cornerstone of the American experience. The saving of Jamestown after its first disastrous year was due in large part to the efforts of those original Poles. Fresh water from the well, the beginnings of industry, even the saving of the life of the Jamestown hero Captain John Smith all resulted from the actions of these men. The example they showed by their industrious work ethic and their efforts to gain and retain their own individual freedom provided a model for generations of later colonists and Americans. Their labor strike for political freedom foreshadowed the events of the Revolutionary War, when colonists would unite to stand up for the freedom of a Nation of People.