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House of Burgesses – Part II

Lead: In 1619 the Virginia General Assembly first met in the Jamestown Church. Despite war, privation, and a name change, this institution has continued to provide the Commonwealth with representative and often wise governance.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Before Jamestown became a royal colony in 1624, it was owned by a royal stock enterprise, chartered by King James I, The Virginia Company of London.

Finding neither instant riches nor the hoped for Northwest Passage to China, the hapless colonists barely survived the struggles of the early years. In 1619, however, in an effort to transform the colony into a more profitable enterprise, a series of reforms was instituted to improve stability and profitability. One of the reforms permitted the colonists to elect a representative body. This body, modeled after English Parliament, was called the House of Burgesses. A Burgess was an elected citizen representative from a particular borough or settlement.

The Assembly consisted of twenty-two members, two from each of the eleven Virginia boroughs (or

settlements), plus the Governor and his Council. Governor Yeardley called the first meeting at the Jamestown Church, the only structure that could accommodate the assembly. They met for six days between July 30 and August 4, 1619. Because of the threat of malaria and the oppressive heat and humidity to which one Burgess succumbed, the meeting was cut short, but not before the assembly engaged in the business of business. They ruled that “tobacco shall not be sold for under three shillings per pound.” Other measures involved settlement of land tenure, Indian affairs, and the personal lives of the colonists, measures against drunkenness, idleness, and gambling and in favor of compulsory church

attendance.

On the final day, the Assembly approved its first tax law – a poll tax requiring the colonist to pay one pound of tobacco to the members of the assembly in gratitude for their services during the hot summer. Although the power of the Assembly was quite limited – the House could not override a governor’s veto – the Assembly was the first legislative assembly in the New World and helped establish representative government of a new nation that would emerge in the next century. The House of Burgesses did not meet as a separate body until the 1640s when the Assembly began evolving into a bi-cameral legislature. It

continues today as The House of Delegates in the Virginia General Assembly.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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