

## Polish Craftsmen

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, Lawrence (Wawrzyniec) Bohun, Polish, 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 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 to the colonists. As former President of the College of William and Mary Admiral Alvin Chandler stated in 1953, "It took the example of the Polish glass-makers to demonstrate to the colonists that the treasures of Virginia were in its soil, not in nuggets to be had for picking."

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Photo: Greater Williamsburg Chamber & Tourism Alliance



JAMESTOWN · 1608  
the birth of american polonia

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## Birth of American Polonia



JAMESTOWN  
1608—2008

## The Role and Accomplishments of Polish Pioneers in the Jamestown Colony

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On December 1607, the first British settlers arrived in Jamestown in hope to find 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 they felt 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 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.

The first Poles who arrived at Jamestown 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,



Michael Lowicki



Jan Bogdan



Zbigniew Stefanski



Stanislaw Sadowski



Jan Mata

pitch, tar, soap, ashes and other products. 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 the outcasts of social society, 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.

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 James-

town 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 equal footing for themselves.

The Polish contribution to Jamestown and the fabric of early America cannot be understated.

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 leadership to 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.

