

## LESSON PLAN

### General Assembly Role Play

**Level:**

Upper Elementary, Middle

**Objective:**

Students will gain understanding of the beginnings of representative government in English North America by making decisions similar to those faced by the first General Assembly in 1619.

**Standards of Learning:**

Virginia SOLs: VS.1a, b, d, g, h, VS.3c, d, USI.1d, e

National Standards for History: Historical Analysis and Comprehension, Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-making

**Materials Needed for Activity:**

*Participants in the First General Assembly* sheet

*Decisions for the First General Assembly* sheet

*Results of the First General Assembly* sheet

Nametags for the burgesses (optional)

**Additional background readings for the teacher:**

Essay – *The ‘Great Charter’ and the First General Assembly*

**Additional teacher resources at [www.historyisfun.org](http://www.historyisfun.org):**

Essays and lesson plans: *Life at Jamestown*

Quadricentennial Minute: *Representative Government at Jamestown*

**Teacher Background:**

By 1619 there were seven plantations and four towns in Virginia, all engaged in the production of tobacco. The harsh martial (military) laws implemented in 1610 to bring order to the young colony were still in effect. In England, the leadership of the Virginia Company changed hands and, following the death of Lord de la Warr, a new governor with new instructions was sent to Virginia. These instructions, known as the Great Charter, gave him the authority to dissolve martial laws and call for an assembly at Jamestown. This assembly consisted of two men from each of the eleven settlements, Governor Yeardley and his Council of State, who were appointed officials. The Virginia Company hoped that returning the colony to English common law and allowing local participation in governance would create a more favorable environment for the residents. This new assembly met for the first time from July 30 to August 4, 1619 in the church at Jamestown.

Before beginning deliberations the representatives, or “burgesses” from the towns and plantations, were required to take an oath of allegiance and be accepted by the Governor and his council. Burgesses from two plantations were challenged. Captain Ward, a well-

respected neighbor who had shared a large supply of fish with other settlements, had established a plantation without authority or commission from the Virginia Company. The General Assembly decided to allow Captain Ward and his Lieutenant to sit as long as they got a commission from the Company before the next meeting of the General Assembly. Captain Martin had a clause in his patent (official land grant) exempting his plantation from the laws of the Virginia Company. He was “free from any command of the Colony, except it be in aiding and assisting the same against any foreign or domestic enemy.” Martin’s burgesses were asked to withdraw until Captain Martin appeared in person before the General Assembly to renounce that clause in his patent. Martin refused to change that clause and his representatives did not take their seats, reducing the number of burgesses to twenty.

Over the course of five days the General Assembly assigned committees to carefully study the instructions in the Great Charter, made laws to uphold the instructions and judged cases of wrongdoing in the colony.

**Procedure:**

**Step 1:** Begin a discussion of how the student council operates in your school.

What is its purpose? How are the councilors chosen? What responsibilities do they have? What limitations do they have in making decisions? Establish that a student council is an example of representative government on a small scale. How does this benefit the students? How does this benefit the school administration?

**Step 2:** Print the *Participants in the First General Assembly*, *Decisions for the First General Assembly* and the *Results of the First General Assembly* sheets. Review the background of the creation of a General Assembly in Virginia with the students. Tell them that they are going to reenact making some of the same decisions that faced the first General Assembly in 1619.

**Step 3:** Assign students to roles.

One student to be **Sir George Yeardley, Governor** – give him/her the *Participants in the First General Assembly* sheet and the *Results of the 1619 General Assembly* sheet

One student to be **Speaker**- give him/her the *Decisions for the First General Assembly* sheet

Seat them in chairs at the front of the room.

Divide the remaining students into teams of 2 **burgesses**- they remain at their desks. You may want to make nametags for the 11 settlements they are representing as follows: James City, Charles City, City of Henricus, Kiccowtan, Martin’s Brandon, Smythe’s Hundred, Martins Hundred, Argall’s Guifte, Flowerdieu Hundred, Captain Lawnes plantation, Captain Ward’s plantation

If you have more than 24 students, have the extra students move up to become councilors to the Governor, as there were originally six sitting with the Governor.

**Step 4:** Ask the **Governor** to call the General Assembly to order and ask the burgesses to state what town or plantation they are representing.

Have the **Speaker** read Case 1 from *Decisions for the First General Assembly* to the group.

- This involves the challenge to the Martin’s Brandon Plantation burgesses. Have the **Speaker** ask the group the questions relating to the case, with the **Governor** calling on different **burgesses** to get their opinion on the problem.
- Have the **Governor** call for a vote: “all in favor raise your hand” and “all opposed raise your hand.” Have the **Speaker** record the number for and against. Have the **Speaker** announce the decision based on the majority vote.
- Have the **Governor** (or one of his council) read the *Results of the First General Assembly* for the case. (The Martin’s Brandon burgesses will not be allowed to vote from here on).

Continue with the **Speaker** reading cases and the questions, with the **Governor** asking for input from the **burgesses** and then a vote recorded by the **Speaker**. The **Governor** (or a councilor) can continue to read the *Results of the First General Assembly* to compare with decisions made 400 years ago.

**Summary Activity:**

Based on the cases they just heard, ask the students to identify some of the problems and challenges still faced by the colony to make it a successful establishment. Ask the students how they think continuing to have representatives from the towns and plantations participate in government will benefit the colony.