

THE FIRST MEETING OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA, 1619

LEVEL

Upper Elementary, Secondary

GUIDING QUESTION

What were the problems and priorities of early settlers in Virginia, as exemplified by the first General Assembly meeting in 1619?

VIRGINIA STANDARDS AND HISTORICAL SKILLS

SOL: US1.5a,b; VUS.2a,b

Analyzing and interpreting primary sources; organization information; questioning and using critical thinking skills; comparing and contrasting.

LESSON OVERVIEW

1619 was a year of many firsts for the Virginia colony, including the first legislative assembly held in English North America. This initial meeting of the General Assembly convened in the choir of the Jamestown church and consisted of the governor, his Council, and elected representatives from all of the settled areas of Virginia. The assembly marked the beginning of representative government, based on English law and political institutions, in what is now the United States of America and is the antecedent of today's Virginia General Assembly, the oldest legislative body in English America. In this lesson, students will analyze the context and legacies of the laws created by the General Assembly of Virginia in 1619, to better understand the problems and priorities of the colony as it entered its second decade.

MATERIALS

- [Recording of the "Laws Enacted by the General Assembly" \(1619\) with transcript](#)
- [Student Worksheet: "Laws Enacted by the General Assembly" Analysis Sheet](#)
- Poster Paper

PROCEDURE

Warmup/Staging the Question

1. Provide each student with a [transcript of the “Laws Enacted by the General Assembly.”](#) Play the [recording of the “Laws Enacted by the General Assembly”](#) while students read along. Instruct students to highlight or note the law(s) that stick out to them the most. As an extension, students could use highlighters to group the laws into 3-4 categories (for example, policing behavior, relations with the Indians, economy, gender, etc.).
2. Have students reflect in writing on 1-2 of the laws of their choosing. Explain what the law(s) means and how that law(s) demonstrated the priorities of the colonists in 1619.
3. Have students share their reflections with the class.

Main Activity

1. Divide students into eight groups. The group size will depend on the size of the class. Assign each group one of the eight numbered topics found in the primary source reading. Instruct students to read the primary source background and their assigned section of law.
2. Provide each group with a large piece of paper or poster board. The students will be responsible for creating a visual mind map that has the following information:
 - Appropriate title
 - Visual(s) that illustrates the concepts of the assigned law
 - Written context that explains possible reasons why the law was created
3. Each group will place their posters around the room to create a gallery that illustrates the primary source. The groups will rotate through the stations, recording the findings of each poster on the provided [graphic organizer](#).
4. At the end of the gallery walk, students should have the context and summary columns of their organizer completed for each of the eight laws.
5. Students will work individually to complete the last column of their organizer on the legacies of these laws. For each law, they must provide an example of how the topic has changed over time.
6. As an informal assessment, have students complete a response to the lesson’s compelling question, drawing from the primary source: “What were the problems and priorities of early settlers in Virginia, as exemplified by the first General Assembly meeting in 1619?”

Extension Activity

Students could create a visual timeline using Sutori or another digital timeline creator. They will choose one of the topics found in the primary source, such as marriage, theft, church, or gambling. They will then research the development of the topic over time, and create a visual timeline that illustrates how laws regarding the topic have changed since the 1619 General Assembly meeting.

LAWS ENACTED BY THE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF VIRGINIA, 1619

The first representative assembly in English America met in the church at Jamestown, Virginia, on July 30, 1619. This General Assembly consisted of the Governor, his council, and 22 representatives serving as burgesses, elected by the inhabitants of these towns. The burgesses served from each of the following areas: James City, Charles City, City of Henricus, Kiccowtan, Martin Brandon, Smythe's Hundred, Martin's Hundred, Argall's Quiffe, Flowerdew Hundred, Captain Lawne's Plantation, and Captain Warde's Plantation. While the Governor still had veto power, the representatives were allowed to pass laws. The authority that this self-governing body possessed evolved through the 17th century aided by some of the royal governors, who convened the Assembly once a year. It became an essential component of the colony's government. The General Assembly continued to meet at Jamestown until 1699 when Middle Plantation, later Williamsburg, became the capital of the colony.

By this present General Assembly be it enacted that no injury or oppression be wrought by the English against the Indians whereby the present peace might be distributed and ancient quarrels might be revived...

Against idleness, gaming, drunkenness, and excess in apparel the assembly has enacted as follows.

1. First, in detestation of idlers, be it enacted that if any man be found to live as an idler or renegade, though a freed man, it shall be lawful for that incorporation or plantation to which he belongs to appoint him a master to serve for wages till he shows apparent signs of amendment.
2. Against gaming at dice and cards be it ordained by this present assembly that the winner or winners shall lose all his or their winnings and both winners and losers shall forfeit ten shillings a man, one ten shillings whereof to go to the discoverer and the rest to charitable and pious uses in the incorporation where the faults are committed.
3. Against drunkenness be it also decreed that if any private persons be found culpable thereof, for the first time he is to be reprov'd privately by the minister, the second time publicly, the third time to lie in the bolts 12 hours in the house of the provost marshal and to pay his fees, and if he still continue in that vice to undergo such severe punishment as the Governor and the Council of Estate shall think fit to be inflicted on him..."

4. As touching the business of planting corn, this present assembly does ordain that, year by year, all and every householder and householders have in store for every servant he or they shall keep, and also for his or their own persons, [...] one spare barrel of corn to be delivered out yearly either upon sale or exchange, as need shall require....

About the plantation of mulberry trees, be it enacted that every man, as he is seated upon his division does, for seven years together, every year plant and maintain in growth six mulberry trees at the least and as many more as he shall think convenient and as his virtue and industry shall move him to plant...

5. It shall be free for every man to trade with the Indians, servants only excepted, upon pain of whipping unless the master redeem it...

That no man do sell or give any Indians any piece, shot, or powder, or any other arms offensive or defensive, upon pain of being held a traitor to the colony and of being hanged as soon as the fact is proved, without all redemption.

That no man shall purposely go to any Indian towns, habitation, or places of resort without leave from the Governor or commander of that place where he lives, upon pain of paying 40 shillings to public uses as aforesaid.

6. Whosoever shall take any of his neighbors' boats, oars, or canoes without leave from the owner shall be held and esteemed as a felon and so proceeded against. Also, he that shall take away by violence or steals any canoes or other things from the Indians shall make valuable restitution to the said Indians and shall forfeit, if he be a freeholder, five pounds, if a servant 40 shillings, or endure a whipping; and anything under the value of 13 pence shall be accounted petty larceny.

7. All persons whatsoever, upon Sabbath days, shall frequent divine service and sermons both forenoon and afternoon and all such as bear arms shall bring their pieces, swords, powder and shot. And every one that shall transgress this law shall forfeit three shillings a time to the use of the church...

8. No maid or woman servant, either now resident in the colony or hereafter to come, shall contract herself in marriage without either the consent of her parents or her master or masters or of the magistrate and minister of the place both together. And whatsoever minister shall marry or contract any such persons without some of the aforesaid consents shall be subject to the severe censure of the Governor and the Council of Estate.

Source: Kingsbury, Susan, ed., The Records of the Virginia Company of London (1906).

“LAWS ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY” ANALYSIS SHEET

	CONTEXT WHAT REASONS LIE BEHIND THE EXISTENCE OF EACH LAW?	SUMMARY HOW CAN EACH LAW BE SUMMARIZED IN PLAIN ENGLISH?	LEGACIES HOW DID THE CONCEPTS BEHIND EACH LAW DEVELOP OVER TIME?
1. IDLENESS			
2. GAMBLING			
3. DRINKING			
4. COLONIAL ECONOMY			

5. VIRGINIA INDIANS			
6. THEFT			
7. CHURCH			
8. MARRIAGE			