

# The First Poles in America

By Nancy Day

As the English made plans to colonize Virginia in the late 1500s, they realized that the area's natural resources could be used to produce pitch, tar, and other products used in England's shipbuilding industry. But the colony would need people who knew how to make these substances from the New World's raw materials. As early as 1585, Richard Hakluyt, an English geographer experienced in overseas trade, looked to Poland as a source of skilled labor for these purposes.

The first Polish immigrants to the New World--known as Poles, Polanders, or Polonians--arrived in Jamestown in October 1608. The Poles immediately went to work making pitch, tar, and soap ashes for export.

The skills the Poles brought with them were so important to the success of the Jamestown settlement that the Virginia Company of London countries, such as Spain and Portugal, made sure that these workers trained apprentices. The company's records explained, "... because their skill in making pitch and tarr and sope-ashes shall not dye with them, it is agreed that some young men, shalbe put unto them to learn their skill and knowledge therein for the benefit of the Country hereafter."

In 1619, the Poles objected to the colony's law that only natives of England were allowed to vote. The records of the Virginia Company from July 21, 1619, show that their protest was successful: "Upon some dispute of the Polonians resident in Virginia, it was now agreed (notwithstanding any former order to the contrary) that they shall be enfranchised, and made as free as any inhabitant there whatsoever."

Thus, the first Poles in America are remembered for the qualities in which Americans always have taken great pride: hard work, helping others, and exercising a basic right of all citizens--the right to vote.

**Question #1: Based on evidence in this article, how do you think the author feels about the Polish people who came to Jamestown?**