

The Polegreen Meeting House: A Social Foundation for the Statute for Religious Freedom in Virginia

"The constitutional freedom of religion is the most
inalienable and sacred of all human rights."

-- Thomas Jefferson

Grade Level: 4th—8th Grade

National Standards:

- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environment
- Power, Authority, and Governance

Virginia State Standards of Learning:

- The student will demonstrate knowledge of the role of Virginia in the establishment of the new American nation by identifying the ideas of George Mason and Thomas Jefferson as expressed in the Virginia Declaration of Rights and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. [VS.6b]
- The student will demonstrate knowledge of the foundations of American constitutional government by explaining the significance of the charters of the VA Company of London, the VA Declaration of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the VA Statute for Religious Freedom, and the Constitution of the United States, including the Bill of Rights. [CE.2b]

Time required: 45 minutes or more

Overview: As the country fought for rights of representation and fair taxation during the American Revolution, another fight with Great Britain had already begun. Great Britain controlled far more than just taxes and colonial governors. The fight to break free from Great Britain also meant a fight for one's individual rights, including the right to religious freedom. Since Great Britain designated the Anglican Church (otherwise known as the Church of England) as the only sanctioned church in the colonies, many were encouraged when fighting began. If the colonies were free and independent from Great Britain, then perhaps the colonists would truly be free to practice religion as they wished. It was Thomas Jefferson who wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom that made Virginia the first state in the country to celebrate the separation of church and government. What started out in meeting houses as dissenters gathered to worship as they chose would eventually receive validation—first with the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and then with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Learning Objectives:

- To describe the struggle between the established Anglican Church and the Hanover dissenter movement
- To identify that the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson, states that all people should be free to worship as they please. This document was the basis for the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, the amendment that protects religious freedom.
- To identify the common theme of religious liberty and the cause and effect relationship between the two events

Materials needed:

- Copies of [Time Traveler Activity](#), one for each student
- Copy of [Time Traveler Activity What Really Happened](#)
- Map of Virginia, 1755 <http://www.libs.uga.edu/darchive/hargrett/maps/1755v5.jpg>

Learning Activities:

1. Introduction:

- a. Ask students what is really important to them and focus on things that they really value. Quickly decide on five of the most popular items (try to decide on categories) and write them on the board. Students may suggest things like family, friends, religion, electronics, sports, hobbies, and so on. Give each student three small strips of paper. From the list on the board, ask them to choose three different things that are most important to them and write a different one on each different strip.
- b. For the next part of the activity, have students pretend that Virginia has a new leader. The leader has decided that the state needs changing. Tell the students that if they put any of the following on their strips, they must surrender their strips to you: (at this point, guide the activity so that you pick up any strips that say things like church, electronics, sports, hobbies and the like—focusing on items where the students were allowed to make choices).
- c. Tell them the reason they must give up those strips is that from now on Virginia's new leader has new rules for what students choices will be and what they are allowed to participate in. This new leader feels that students have too many choices and these choices have caused the youth of this state to make poor decisions. Therefore, from now on, they will only be allowed to have one religion, not have any electronics, and the only additional activities beyond school will be to attend a class in manners. Any student who does not abide by such requirements will be subject to harsh punishments such as solitary confinement.

- d. After the strips have been collected, have a discussion. Ask the students: How did you feel having the important things in your life taken away from the new leader? Why did you feel that way? Does being able to choose matter to you? What would you be willing to do to get your choices back?
2. Pass out copies of the Time Travel Activity. This activity will get the students thinking about decisions that were made in Virginia in the 1700s. Provide access to the colonial map of Virginia as well. Encourage students to look at the map so that they can really transport their minds back to that time period. Have them find on the map the area that is east of the Blue Ridge and west of the Chesapeake Bay. After students have a chance to respond in writing and in class discussion, share the "Time Travel Activity What Really Happened" with them. Ask some debriefing questions: How did you feel making decisions about life in Virginia in the 1700s? Was it hard/easy and why? Now that you know what really happened, were you close with your prediction? If your prediction was different, would you still like to see your decision happen or the one that really happened?
3. Jefferson believed that government supported religion was an infringement of liberty on someone's mind.

Jefferson wrote "that Almighty God hath created the mind free";
therefore, government should not influence religion.

Government, according to Jefferson, should support a person's natural right to freedom of religion. Have students write a letter to Jefferson agreeing or disagreeing with the above statement. If time permits, have students share their letters.

4. Other activities to consider:
 - a. Polegreen Meeting House Flyer. Using a piece of paper, students are to create a poster advertising the meeting at the Polegreen House. Students should consider the poster as a way to encourage people to attend the meeting at a time when it was risky to go against the established Church of England.
 - b. Provide students with a copy of the transcript of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom
<http://classroom.monticello.org/teachers/gallery/imagepdf/275/Statute-of-Virginia-for-Religious-Freedom/> while listening to an audio version, <http://classroom.monticello.org/teachers/resources/download/26/Audio-of-the-Statute-of-Virginia-for-Religious-Freedom-mp3/>. Have students highlight phrases that refer to the freedom of religion. When finished, have a piece of poster paper prepared that has the title "Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom". Have students add the highlighted phrases from the document to the poster. Encourage the students to use color and add pictures if it helps to add meaning to the words. If students have trouble finding phrases in the document, have them write their own words why having freedom of religion is important to people and add pictures that bring meaning to their feelings.

5. Closure. Remind students of the timeline of events covered in today's lesson:

1700s—Anglican Church (Church of England) only government approved church in the colonies

1747—Samuel Davies, dissenting minister, arrives in Hanover County, VA and starts the Presbyterian Church

1779—Thomas Jefferson's draft of Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom introduced

1786—Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom goes into effect making Virginia the first state to support religious freedom

1791—First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is adopted protecting religious freedom on a national level

Have students wrap up today's lesson by completing the following statement: The most important thing I learned in today's lesson is _____ because

_____.

Share responses as a way of closing the lesson.