

## Samuel Davies and the Polegreen Meeting House: The Roots of the First Amendment

"Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects?"

- Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments  
by James Madison, 1785

Grade Level: 11<sup>th</sup>—12<sup>th</sup> grade

National Standards:

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

Virginia State Standards of Learning:

- The student will describe how the values and institutions of European economic and political life took root in the colonies and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the Americas [VUS.3]
- The student will demonstrate knowledge of civil liberties and civil rights by examining the Bill of Rights with emphasis on First Amendment freedoms [GOVT.11a]
- The student will demonstrate knowledge of civil liberties and civil rights by exploring the balance between individual liberties and the public interest [GOVT.11d]

Time required: 45 minutes for seminar discussion (extra time is needed before and after to prepare for seminar as well as to complete seminar assignments)

Overview: The Anglican Church was the only approved church in the colony of Virginia in the 1740s. As people move into unchartered territory, they embraced not only economic opportunities, but also personal ones as well. As meeting and reading houses begin to appear throughout the wilderness of Virginia during a time of "Great Awakening", England begins to react. Those who risk reading new sermons and the bible in unlicensed homes with unlicensed ministers place themselves in danger of religious persecution. The risks they take, in combination with other events of the times, lay the foundation for separation

of church and state as well as other individual rights. The struggle for these individual rights eventually results in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Learning Objectives:

- To explain the role of the Anglican Church as the established church during the colonial period
- To describe the motivation and struggle of the members of the Polegreen Meetinghouse (the Hanover Dissenter Movement)
- To explain that civil liberties are freedoms upon which the government may not infringe
- To identify First Amendment freedoms including religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition
- To identify the connection between the struggle of the Hanover Dissenter Movement and the First Amendment freedoms of religion, speech, assembly and petition

Materials needed:

- Special note for teachers: the seminar in this lesson is based on the Paideia Philosophy of actively engaging students in learning and critical thinking. For teachers who want more information, go to: [www.paideia.org](http://www.paideia.org)
- Access to a computer or hard copies provided of the reading selections listed below.
- Copies of the graphic organizer "**Struggle for Religious Liberty and the First Amendment**"
- Copies of the "**Struggle for Religious Liberty and the First Amendment Seminar Personal Checklist**"

Learning Activities:

1. Seminar Introduction: Students should prepare for the seminar by reading the following:
  - a. About the First Amendment, [http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?item=about\\_firstamd](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?item=about_firstamd)
  - b. The Williamsburg Charter, section I "A Time for Reaffirmation" only, <http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/first/findingcommonground/C02.WilliamsburgCharter.pdf>
  - c. The Polegreen Story, <http://www.historicpolegreen.org/story>
  - d. The Struggle of Protestant Dissenters for Religious Toleration in Virginia by Henry Read McIlwaine, excerpt from page 49 "At the next term ..." through page 54 "Mr. Davies had now seven places for preaching: three in Hanover county, one in Henrico, one in Goochland, one in Louisa, and one in Caroline." <http://books.google.com/books?pg=PA50&lpg=PA45&dq=hanover+dissenter+movement&id=I2WxkK4ioJcC&ots=aUQkZzzPeP>

While reading, students should highlight key terms and phrases that reflect the rights of the First Amendment in any form—supported or restricted. Students will need to reread texts or portions of texts more than once for thorough comprehension. Encourage students to define new vocabulary words so that the meaning of the texts is fully understood. Have them record any questions for clarification as well.

2. Seminar Process:

- a. On the day of the seminar, have students pair up and complete the graphic organizer “Struggle for Religious Liberty and the First Amendment”. Students should use their highlighted sections to help them record anecdotal information regarding the use or abuse of individual rights as recorded in the First Amendment. While students may work together in pairs, each student should have his/her own copy in order to fully participate in the seminar.
- b. Review expectations of roles for both student and facilitator. Pass out copies and go over the personal checklist. Have students set a personal goal to be completed during the seminar. (Words of encourage for setting personal goals: increase participation, show evidence of belief with documentation from reading, articulately defend a belief statement, and so on.)
- c. Ask if students have any questions for clarification. Discuss these before beginning the seminar questions.

3. The Seminar:

- a. Opening question: What revelation did you have regarding the struggles to attain First Amendment rights? (open the seminar with pairs sharing reflections on this question as a way to set the tone for the discussion)
- b. Main discussion questions:
  - In the article “About the First Amendment”, what price does an individual have to pay in order to unconditionally uphold the First Amendment freedoms?
  - According to the Williamsburg Charter, “No threat to freedom of conscience and religious liberty has historically been greater than the coercions of both Church and State.” What role do the Church and the State play regarding religious liberty? How does the role of Church and State affect the First Amendment freedoms?
  - What is significant about The Polegreen Story and the struggle for individual rights?
  - What would life have been like for Samuel Davies “In The Struggle of Protestant Dissenters for Religious Toleration in Virginia”? How did his actions reflect the First Amendment freedoms that we have today?
  - Looking at all the above texts: What are civil liberties? What role should the government take when acknowledging civil liberties? What role should an individual take when embracing civil liberties?

- c. Closing question: To what extent did the Dissenters play a role in helping us to achieve our First Amendment freedoms?
4. Seminar Reflection: Students should write a journal entry reflecting upon their role in the discussion. The students should also reflect upon whether or not their individual goal was met and what he/she would choose to improve in future discussions.
5. Seminar Assignments—the following activities are suggestions for independent study:
  - a. Create a map that reflects the importance of meetinghouses and the effect they had on the struggle for religious liberty. Go to this site: <http://www.hmdb.org/results.asp?SearchFor=meetinghouse>. Use a copy of a map of Colonial America (<http://www.msa.md.gov/ecp/10/214/images/00200001.gif>) choose ten of the historical sites mentioned that refer to religious meetinghouses to mark on the map. After the location is marked, label the name of the marker and give a one or two sentence summary about the location. Choose one of the locations, other than Historic Polegreen Church, to research and find out how religious liberty emerged in this area.
  - b. Write an obituary for Samuel Davies. Be sure to include how he played a role in the struggle for religious freedom.
  - c. Write an essay about one or more the First Amendment freedoms. Which one needs to be protected most and why? Which one is most sacred to you and why?
  - d. Another alternative to an essay is to consider the events of the 1740s regarding the First Amendment freedoms. Does the history of what happened at Historic Polegreen Church and the Dissenter Movement have anything to do with what you value today, and why or why not?