

True Heroes of Jamestown.

*Beloved fatherland, royal Poland
like a priceless gem we should carry you in our heart.*
Zbigniew Stefanski

These were the first words of Zbigniew Stefanski's memoir written nearly 400 years ago; Stefanski was one of five Poles settled in America, Jamestown. Thanks to contribution of these five Poles, the Jamestown colony survived and thus the future United States was founded.

The history of the United States brings us to mind polish names such as Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Kazimierz Pulaski. We do not know much about our countrymen who were the first people who landed in America over 400 years ago. And then a beautiful daughter of Chief Powhatan – Pocahontas supposedly saved the life of Captain Smith. So the legend says heard in almost the whole world. **However, almost nobody knows that the Poles saved not only the life of the Captain but also the colony in Jamestown.**

The settlers sailing from London to America hoped for easy money, thinking it was the land of milk and honey (or rather gold and silver). Unlike with the Spanish in South America, the settlers did not find neither silver nor gold. Instead of that some problems occurred, such as lack of skilled workers. The settlers who came to Jamestown had no idea about the work. Part of them were the noble people who had not the habit of the manual working, who probably were getting on very well in the world of money and business but did not want to necessarily deal with deforestation and crafts.

The second element weighted against it, was the place of settlement. The colony was located in wetlands and swamp with unfavorable climate condition, and very bad for growing crops. There was lack of fresh and clean water. All this and decreasing food supply affected in disease transmission which decimated the colonists, completed with constant discord and intrigue among the colonists.

It did not to be taken for a long time to see the full effect. After one year only the colony was in danger of failure. When everybody thought that Jamestown would share the same fate as previous colonies, Captain John Smith and his reasonable decision came to its rescue. Thanks to his intervention when he met up with the king, foreigners – Dutchmen or Germans (they were called Dutch) and Poles were allowed to arrive at the colony.

October 1, 1608 the ship "Mary and Margaret" captained by Christopher Newport with the first five Polish settlers came to Jamestown. They were two Polish nobles - Michal Lowicki from London and Jan Bogdan from Kołomyja, and craftsmen - Zbigniew Stefanski, Jan (Jur) Mata and Stanislaw Sadowski.

Immediately after arrival, the Poles have build the first well and provided fresh water. It was them who built a furnace for glass production. It was the first manufacturing of glass in America and its goods were the first one exported to Europe. The glass products were exchanged for food with the local Indian population. The Poles produced also tar and pitch necessary to build and repair ships. And finally they erected houses and fortifications.

Captain Smith leadership was terminated in October 1609; injured by gunpowder explosion he decided to return to England. And then in the colony serious conflicts began again. The people were decimated by severe winter, Indian attacks, disease, and famine. Only sixty of the first settlers survived famine and winter in 1609. The Settlement was saved in 1610 by arrival of flotilla of British ships captained by Lord De la Ware. The Poles were with them but this time in a larger number.

In 1618 the settlers had to choose their own representatives to the Legislative Assembly, House of Burgesses. The British officials were informed by the Poles living in Jamestown that they intend to take part in the vote. The answer they heard was that the law applies only to British citizens, and not foreigners. In this situation the Poles abandoned their work.

The first political strike in American history has been started. However, it was not a strike for working conditions or pay. The Poles fought for civil and political rights. The strike was highly effective. In the book - *The Court Book of Virginia* – the notes from July 21, 1616 stated that: **"In the case of a dispute of Poles living in Virginia, it has been decided that they have to be endowed with the right to vote and made as free as any other local resident.**

With hard work, talent and dedication the Poles were able to save the first colony from failure. Nevertheless, the merit of Poles at the dawn of the Anglo-Saxon settlement are unknown. No mention of the Polish settlers who were the pioneers not only of the American industry, but also the fathers of American democracy is made. **If Jamestown had failed, Spain and France might have divided America between them and the United States might never have come into being.**

Eugene Starky