Virginia is the oldest of all the English land claims in the New World. When the colony was first established by the Virginia Company, it was ruled under martial law, headed by a governor appointed by the company in London. In an attempt to grow the colony, the company ended its monopoly on land ownership, allowing colonists to buy property instead of renting it.

The company also changed the way the colony was run, adopting English Common Law as the basis of decision making, instead of letting the governor decide in all cases. The company also created the House of Burgesses as the lower house of a General Assembly—the upper house was made up of the governor and a panel of important citizens he appointed. The House of Burgesses’ members were chose by eligible voters in the colony (landowning males over the age of seventeen). Each settlement in the colony chose two people—or burgesses—to represent it. The Burgesses met to make laws for the colony and to set the direction for further growth. It met once a year.

The idea of electing representatives to make decisions on behalf of the colonists was important and new. It gave Virginians a chance to control their own government for the first time. At first the burgesses were elected by all the free men in the colony; women, indentured servants and Native Americans could not vote. Later the rules for voting changed, making it necessary for men to own at least fifty acres of land in order to vote.

The House of Burgesses met for the first time on July 30, 1619 at Jamestown. The Virginia House of Burgesses was the first legislative body in the New World and ultimately became the foundation for self-government in the American colonies. Even though it did not allow everyone in the colony to have a say, it established the expectation that colonists had a say in government. When the British government attempted to gain a firmer grasp on the colonies in the late 1700’s, colonists viewed this as a violation of their right to have input in government.