



THE TWENTY-SIXTH JOINT COMMEMORATIVE SESSION  
of the

## Virginia General Assembly

The Hall of the House of Burgesses

THE CAPITOL

Williamsburg, Virginia

January 30, 2016

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is honored and privileged to welcome the Virginia General Assembly and other distinguished guests to this historic site where the principles of independence, self-government, and freedom of the individual were so eloquently declared.

This pilgrimage by America's oldest legislative body comes two hundred and thirty-six years after the General Assembly held its first session in Richmond. It has become a tradition spanning over eighty years since the Capitol's rededication in 1934. Excepting two instances during, and shortly after, World War II, the General Assembly has honored this city with periodic visits to the Hall of the House of Burgesses to renew its inspiration and strengthen its resolve to perpetuate the great fundamental principles of free governments.

This occasion also pays tribute to the achievements of the great architects of representative government and individual liberty: Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, George Washington, James Madison, George Mason, Peyton Randolph, Richard Henry Lee, and other brilliant luminaries in Virginia's proud history. The principles these men proclaimed on this site are as fundamental as they are imperishable. Throughout the years, the basic tenets set forth in a series of great documents remain unaltered.

The Capitol is by far Williamsburg's most important building and the chamber in which this session convenes its most significant room. On this site, the House of Burgesses gathered and debated the great issues of the day. This assembly first met in a wooden church on the sandy soil of Jamestown in 1619. Those men and their successors survived famine, enemy attack, British intransigence, and internal strife to lay the groundwork for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in a truly brave new world.

In 1699, after Virginia had expanded its precarious foothold on the edge of the wilderness into a flourishing tobacco colony, the capital was moved from Jamestown to the settlement of Middle Plantation, soon to be renamed Williamsburg. Over the following eighty years, the groundswell for self-government was nourished until it erupted into the torrent of revolution.

After the House of Burgesses was disbanded in 1776, various Revolutionary conventions, followed by the House of Delegates of the commonwealth, met at this site. This chamber stands as a monument to those generations of patriots who served the cause of self-government and who believed along with John Locke that government is the servant of the people, not the master.

Here sat George Washington, a young man of twenty-seven already a battle-hardened veteran of the French and Indian War, serving his first days as a burgess while honeymooning with his new wife, Martha. Here sat the serious-minded Thomas Jefferson, who learned the meaning of liberty as a student at the College of William and Mary and of the law under the direction of George Wythe. Here

Patrick Henry, a brilliant voice of the Revolution, defied king and Parliament in 1765 with his denunciation of the Stamp Act.

The dramatic story of Virginia's leadership in the Revolutionary movement unfolded here—the bold May 15, 1776, resolution instructing Virginia's delegates to the Continental Congress to move for independence; the passage, on June 12, 1776, of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, forerunner of the federal Bill of Rights; the composition and adoption of the first Virginia constitution; the election of Patrick Henry as the first governor of the commonwealth; and the convening of the first General Assembly.

When the Williamsburg restoration began ninety years ago, only the foundations remained of the two Capitol buildings destroyed by fire in 1747 and 1832, protected by the foresight of the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. The eventual reconstruction by Colonial Williamsburg was made possible by the detailed records kept by the cost-conscious burgesses during the original construction in 1701 and the remodeling in 1748.

On February 24, 1934, at the official ceremonies dedicating this building, the House of Delegates and the Senate, meeting in joint session, passed a bill enabling the General Assembly to hold future sessions in the Capitol at times that might seem proper. The assembly was addressed by John D. Rockefeller Jr. who closed with the following words:

*What a temptation to sit in silence and let the past speak to us of those whose voices once resounded in these halls, and whose farseeing wisdom, high courage, and unselfish devotion to the common good will ever be an inspiration to noble living. To their memory the rebirth of this building is forever dedicated.*

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**Virginia General Assembly**

THE CAPITOL

2:00 p.m. Separate Sessions of the House of Delegates and the Senate

2:30 p.m. Joint Session in the Hall of the House of Burgesses

PRESIDING

The Honorable William J. Howell  
Speaker of the House of Delegates  
Commonwealth of Virginia

WELCOME

Dr. Mitchell B. Reiss  
President

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

ADDRESS

Mr. W. Taylor Reveley, III  
President

The College of William and Mary in Virginia