

The Magna Carta

The Magna Carta was one of the most important legal documents of medieval Europe. It has been described as the earliest constitutional document ever written. The Magna Carta, which means “great charter” in Latin, was a document signed by King John and the feudal barons. It was a written promise that the king would govern according to feudal laws. The barons wanted to make sure that they were treated fairly. Because King John had lost a lot of land in France, he raised taxes without asking the barons first, which angered them. The document was created and signed at Runnymede near Windsor Castle. It was signed by 25 barons and witnessed by almost 30 bishops and abbots. The Magna Carta contained 37 English laws, some new and some that were already in existence. Some are still in effect today, such as the requirement that a person’s legal rights are respected and not **impeded**. For example, clause 61 stated that the barons could meet at any time and go against what the king had decided if they felt that they were being governed unfairly.



Background

John became king in 1199 when his brother, Richard the Lionheart, died without any children. John had a bad temper and could be very **callous**. He was not liked by the English Barons.

John also had to deal with a lot of issues while he was king. He was constantly at war with France. To fight this war he placed heavy taxes on the Barons of England. He also angered the Pope and was excommunicated from the church.

The Barons Rebel

By 1215, the barons of northern England had had enough of John's high taxes. They decided to rebel. Led by Baron Robert Fitzwalter, they marched on London calling themselves the "army of God". After taking London, John agreed to negotiate with them.

Signing the Magna Carta

King John met the barons on June 15, 1215 at Runnymede, a neutral site just west of London. Here the barons demanded that King John sign a document called the Magna Carta guaranteeing them certain rights. By signing the document, King John agreed to do his duty as King of England, upholding the law and running a fair government. In return, the barons agreed to stand down and surrender London.

Civil War

It turns out that neither side had any intention of following the agreement. Not long after signing, King John attempted to **nullify** the agreement. He even had the Pope declare the document "illegal and unjust". At the same time, the barons didn't surrender London. Soon the country of England was facing civil war. The barons, led by Robert Fitzwalter, were supported by French troops. For a year the barons fought King John in what is called the First Barons' War. However, King John died in 1216, putting a quick end to the war.

Details of the Magna Carta



The Magna Carta was not a short document. There were actually 63 **clauses** in the document outlining various laws that the barons wanted the King to enforce. Some of the rights these clauses promised included:

- Protection of church rights
- Access to swift justice
- No new taxes without the Barons' agreement
- Limitations on feudal payments
- Protection from illegal imprisonment
- A council of 25 Barons who would insure that King John followed the laws

Legacy

Although King John did not follow the agreement, the ideas put forth in the Magna Carta became lasting principles of liberty to the English. Three of the clauses are still enforced as English law including the freedom of the English Church, the "ancient liberties" of the City of London, and the right to **due process**. The ideas of the Magna Carta also influenced the constitutions and development of other countries. The American colonists used the rights guaranteed in the document as a reason to rebel and form their own country. Many of these rights are written into the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Interesting Facts about the Magna Carta

- Magna Carta is Latin for Great Charter. The document itself was originally written in Latin.
- King John is often portrayed as the villain in the story of Robin Hood.
- The council of 25 barons that the Magna Carta formed to watch over the king eventually became the Parliament of England.
- Archbishop Stephen Langton helped to negotiate the agreement between the two sides. He is also credited with dividing the Bible up into the modern system of chapters used today.
- The Magna Carta was influenced by the Charter of Liberties signed by King Henry I in 1100.

Write one of the **bold, underlined** words from the reading next to its synonym or definition:

Synonym/Definition	Word(s) from reading
sections	
eliminate	
fair treatment	
obstructed	
cruel	

Below are four quotes from the U.S. Constitution that are directly related to parts of the Magna Carta. On the table, match the quotes from the U.S. Constitution with the quotes from the Magna Carta. In the middle column, write each quote from the Magna Carta in your own words. A glossary is provided to help with unfamiliar terms.

Quotes from U.S. Constitution

Article 1, Section 8: “The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes, **Duties, Imposts and Excises**, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the United States...”

Article 3, Section 2: “The Trial of all Crimes, except in Cases of Impeachment, shall be by Jury.”

Amendment 5: “...nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just **compensation**.”

Amendment 6: “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right...to be confronted with the witnesses against him...”

QUOTE FROM THE MAGNA CARTA	WHAT DOES IT MEAN?	RELATED QUOTE FROM THE U.S. CONSTITUTION
12. “No scutage nor aid ...shall be imposed on our kingdom, unless by common counsel of our kingdom...”		
28. “No constable or other bailiff ...shall take corn or other provisions from anyone without immediately tendering money ...”		
38. “...no official shall place a man on trial upon his own unsupported statement, without producing credible witnesses to the truth of it.”		
39. “No freemen shall be taken or imprisoned...or exiled or in any way destroyed...except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.”		

Glossary: “**Duties, Imposts and Excises**”: types of taxes **Compensation**: repayment **Scutage**: a type of tax **Aid**: tax **Tendering**: paying [the owner] **Credible**: trustworthy or reliable **Freemen**: men who are not slaves or serfs **Counsel**: agreement