



2025 History Essay Contest

School High School Winner

Turning Towards Democracy

By Ruth Tocci
Bethlehem Catholic High School
Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

Since the human species learned to write and record material, countless written artifacts have been discovered that deserve attention and study. From cuneiform and hieroglyphics, Greek and Latin writing, all the way to the printing press, the people of the past documented the important ideas of their time. Those ideas survive to this day, providing insight and the opportunity to understand the world. Living in the United States of America, it can be argued that the most important records are the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. However, looking deeper into the democracy that defines this nation, another significant document can be found. The Magna Carta is an overlooked piece of history that may have been the most pivotal turning point of all.

King Henry II of England had eight children with his wife, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, five sons and three daughters. Unfortunately, his three eldest sons, William, Henry, and Geoffrey, died before their father did, leaving Richard and John to inherit the throne. Two days after the death of King Henry, “on July 6th, 1189, Richard became King of England, Duke of Normandy, and Count of Anjou.”¹ Soon after claiming the crown, King Richard left England to fight for the Holy Land in the Crusades, and through these battles, he earned his nickname, “Lionheart.” A few years later, in 1199, he was wounded by a shot

¹ Ben Johnson. "Richard Lionheart." Historic UK, www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Richard-Lionheart/.

in the back with a crossbow. Richard the Lionheart died shortly afterward, leaving England with his younger brother, John.

In contrast to his popular, successful brother, King John of England is known to be disliked and reportedly a cruel leader. At the time of Richard's death, there was some controversy as to who would be the next ruler. Arthur was the son of John's late brother Geoffrey and was seen as a threat to his authority. According to StudySmarter, "He [John] made a deal with England's enemy, King Philip II of France, in exchange for supporting his claim to the throne against Arthur."² John's close association with France, as well as other unpopular actions, caused him to lose the support of his people.

At the time of King John, England operated under a feudal system. As stated by Oxford Languages, feudalism is "the dominant social system in medieval Europe, in which the nobility held lands from the Crown in exchange for military service, and vassals were in turn tenants of the nobles, while the peasants (villeins or serfs) were obliged to live on their lord's land and give him homage, labor, and a share of the produce, notionally in exchange for military protection."³ However, because of John's bad decisions, the structure was not as mutually beneficial as it was designed to be. Expensive but unsuccessful military campaigns had put John in debt, and the easiest solution for him was to tax the barons and nobles whose loyalty belonged to him. Regrettably for the king, that loyalty would soon be gone.

Simply put, people do not like to be exploited and taxed highly. The barons eventually decided they had enough of the King of England's tyranny, and they threatened to go to war with him. To avoid a civil war, John had no choice but to meet with them and listen to their demands. They met in a field called Runnymede, near the River Thames to discuss the delicate situation they, along with the country itself, were in. The agreement produced was called the "Magna Carta Libertatum," meaning "the Great Charter of Freedoms" in Latin.⁴

The document consists of sixty-three clauses written to address the issues that King John and the barons were facing. While the intentions of the Magna Carta were certainly honorable, they had very little

² "The Magna Carta." StudySmarter, www.studysmarter.us/explanations/history/modern-world-history/the-magna-carta/.

³ "Feudalism." *Oxford Languages*, www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1GCEA_&sxsrf=AB5stBi2NWH55jtqeIWY4bQryVizbgYEBQ:1690432698382&q=feudalism

⁴ "The Magna Carta." *StudySmarter*

actual impact on England's current conditions. In reality, both the barons and the king only used their negotiations as a postponement of the inevitable physical conflict. Within a few months, Pope Innocent III annulled the charter on behalf of John, starting the First Barons' War and leaving the Magna Carta to be forgotten.

The Magna Carta was remembered after King John died. William Marshal, king regent for nine-year-old Henry III, "was responsible for issuing revised versions of the Magna Carta in 1216 and 1217, which secured baronial support for the young king," says the British Library.⁵ King Henry III himself is credited with the Great Charter of 1225, also a revision of the original Magna Carta. Throughout the next few centuries, the practices of the Magna Carta went in and out of use, depending on the monarch ruling England. The document gained relevance in the seventeenth century when similar to John, King Charles began to abuse his power. Parliament stepped in and wrote the Petition of Right of 1628, which "sought recognition of four principles: no taxation without the consent of Parliament, no imprisonment without cause, no quartering of soldiers on subjects, and no martial law in peacetime."⁶ Later, in 1716, the Magna Carta was once again cited in the Septennial Act that established Parliament as the supreme power of England.

Although it produced many positive results in England, the Magna Carta was a barrier to the crown when considering the thirteen colonies in the New World. However, for those living in America, this piece of paper from 1215 was just what they needed to claim their liberties. The colonists used the Magna Carta to justify their so-called "traitorous" actions during the Revolution. Even though they were across the ocean from England, they still deserved to be seen by the king and Parliament.

The Magna Carta became essential to Americans when they were being denied their rights, and the Continental Congress used concepts from it, such as clauses thirty-nine and forty, which state: "No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so,

⁵ "English Translation of Magna Carta." *British Library*, 28 July 2014, www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-english-translation.

⁶ "Petition of Right." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 Nov. 2022, www.britannica.com/topic/Petition-of-Right-British-history.

except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land; To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice.”⁷ A segment of the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution states that “no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.” The language may not be exact, but the concept remains the same, providing the basis of democracy and a symbol of universal rights.

The value and importance of the founding documents of the United States should not be diminished; however, it is crucial to acknowledge that these documents were not created alone but are based on ideas that can be traced back centuries. The most pivotal document that deserves recognition for its influence on democratic principles is the Magna Carta Libertatum, the Great Charter of Freedoms. In 1215, King John's meeting in a meadow may have seemed like an ordinary event at the time, but little did he know that this gathering would lay down a foundation for future societies striving for freedom and justice. The Magna Carta stands as a sign of the belief that individuals possess inherent rights that come from God and cannot be taken away. It introduced ideas that continue to shape legal systems worldwide today, turning towards democracy.

⁷ "English Translation of Magna Carta." British Library

Bibliography

Cartwright, Mark. "King John of England." *World History Encyclopedia*, 16 Dec. 2019,

www.worldhistory.org/King_Johnof__England/.

"The Contents of Magna Carta." *UK Parliament*, [www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/e](http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/originsofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/magnacarta/magnacartaclauses/)

[volutionofparliament/originsofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/magnacarta/magnacartaclauses/](http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/originsofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/magnacarta/magnacartaclauses/).

"English Translation of Magna Carta." *British Library*, 28 July 2014,

www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-english-translation.

"Feudalism." *Oxford Languages*,

[www.google.com/searchrlz=1C1GCEAenUS1047US1047_](https://www.google.com/searchrlz=1C1GCEAenUS1047US1047_&sxsrf=AB5stBi2NWH55jtqeIWY4bQryVizbgYEBQ:1690432698382&q=feudalism&si=ACFMAn9JMf4XB0MESme7cFyOD-y8ktie9zOf-k_U0HFSv5jNT0Jd7QhM-GgzLr2giI_XJ3Kzp)

[&sxsrf=AB5stBi2NWH55jtqeIWY4bQryVizbgYEBQ:](https://www.google.com/searchrlz=1C1GCEAenUS1047US1047_&sxsrf=AB5stBi2NWH55jtqeIWY4bQryVizbgYEBQ:1690432698382&q=feudalism&si=ACFMAn9JMf4XB0MESme7cFyOD-y8ktie9zOf-k_U0HFSv5jNT0Jd7QhM-GgzLr2giI_XJ3Kzp)

[1690432698382&q=feudalism&si=ACFMAn9JMf4XB0MESme7cFyOD-y8ktie9zOf-](https://www.google.com/searchrlz=1C1GCEAenUS1047US1047_&sxsrf=AB5stBi2NWH55jtqeIWY4bQryVizbgYEBQ:1690432698382&q=feudalism&si=ACFMAn9JMf4XB0MESme7cFyOD-y8ktie9zOf-k_U0HFSv5jNT0Jd7QhM-GgzLr2giI_XJ3Kzp)

[k_U0HFSv5jNT0Jd7QhM-GgzLr2giI_XJ3Kzp](https://www.google.com/searchrlz=1C1GCEAenUS1047US1047_&sxsrf=AB5stBi2NWH55jtqeIWY4bQryVizbgYEBQ:1690432698382&q=feudalism&si=ACFMAn9JMf4XB0MESme7cFyOD-y8ktie9zOf-k_U0HFSv5jNT0Jd7QhM-GgzLr2giI_XJ3Kzp).

Frithowulf, Hrothsige. "Timeline of the History of Writing: From 40,000 BC to Today." *Marvelous*, 6 Jan.

2023, malevus.com/writing-history-timeline/.

Gupta, Tanya. "Magna Carta: Runnymede, the Meadow Where History Was Made." *BBC News*, 15 June

2015, www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-surrey-32828251.

"Henry II." *English Monarchs*, www.englishmonarchs.co.uk/plantagenet.htm.

Johnson, Ben. "Richard Lionheart." *Historic UK*,

www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Richard-Lionheart/.

Landrith, George. "Magna Carta's Influence on the Declaration of Independence & U.S. Constitution."

Constituting America, constitutingamerica.org/90day-dcin-magna-carta-influence-on-declaration-of-independence-and-us-constitution-guest-essayist-george-landrith/#:~:text=The%20Magna%20Carta%20came%20to,and%20the%20.

"Magna Carta." National Archives, 26 Apr. 2019,

www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/magna-carta.

"The Magna Carta." *StudySmarter*,

www.studysmarter.us/explanations/history/modern-world-history/the-magna-carta/.

"Magna Carta: People and Society." *British Library*, 28 July 2014,

www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-people-and-society#:~:text=than%20the%20UK.,The%20barons,the%20barons'%20most%20radical%20achievement.

"Petition of Right." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5 Nov. 2022,

www.britannica.com/topic/Petition-of-Right-British-history.