

King John Signs the Magna Carta

For all of his brilliance in creating a justice system for England, Henry II had a blind spot when it came to family matters. He put his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, in prison, and she got revenge by stirring up their sons against Henry. Richard and John plotted with the French King Philip Augustus against Henry. Henry had never liked Richard, and of his sons, John was clearly the favorite. After Henry's death, Richard (the Lion Hearted) became king. While he added little to the monarchy, he did nothing to tear down the improvements that his father had made. In 1199, Richard died, and John succeeded him.



King John

John was an evil man and violated nearly every principle of justice his father had created. He wanted his nephew's land; he stole it, and the nephew suddenly disappeared. He fell in love with a 12-year-old girl who was engaged to one of his vassals. John married her despite public protests. John had a bitter argument with the Pope and was excommunicated. That should have cost him all support, but he threatened to punish nobles if they obeyed the Pope. John locked up a noble lady and her son and then allowed them only a piece of raw bacon and uncooked oats to eat; they soon died. Stories spread about a Jew in Bristol who refused to pay a special tax. Each day a tooth was knocked out until he gave in on the eighth day. John's unpopularity among the common people was so great that the commoners began to look to the barons for relief.

The nobility were complaining even more than the commoners. They began to gather around Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who openly criticized the king. John had pressured the barons to help him invade France; when most had refused to go, he hired professional soldiers (mercenaries) and raised taxes on the nobles to pay for them. The war went badly, and finally the nobles decided it was time to act.

On June 12, 1215, the barons rode out to a meadow along the Thames River called Runnymede and met King John. They brought a document with their demands on it, and after a week of debate, John put his seal to it (he did not know how to write). This document is known as the Magna Carta (the Great Charter). There were 63 points in it, many of which involved trivial subjects. However, there were major points as well. Every person was entitled to justice, and only those who knew the law and obeyed it should be made officials. The king was to refund illegally collected fines and grant a general pardon.

Two parts of the Magna Carta were especially important in the long run. The 12th article said there must be no tax levied unless by "common consent of our kingdom." This led to "no taxation without representation." The 39th article provided that no freeman could be tried except by the "lawful judgment of his peers." The only "freemen" were nobles, but out of this grew our jury system. Now, government was more limited in what it could do.

Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. Who was Henry II's favorite son?

2. Who preceded John to the throne?

3. After John was excommunicated, what did he do?

4. Whom did the unhappy nobles turn to as a leader?

5. Why were the nobles especially unhappy with John in 1215?

6. What do the words *Magna Carta* mean?

7. How did the king "sign" the Magna Carta?

8. What qualities did the writers of the Magna Carta want in royal officials?

9. What modern phrase comes from the "common consent" clause?

10. What part of our legal system came from the "lawful judgment of his peers" clause?

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POINTS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you think John helped or hurt himself by his acts of cruelty? Why?

2. Since King John, no English ruler has called himself John II. Do you think that has been by coincidence or is there a reason for it?

3. If the Magna Carta had been the last words ever written on reform, would it have made any difference in the long run? Why or why not?
