

Magna Carta

In 1215 an assembly of English nobles confronted an oppressive King John and forced him to sign Magna Carta, or Great Charter. Magna Carta limited the power of the king and made it clear that even the king was not above the law. It also contained such ideas as trial by a jury of one's peers and the guarantee of protection against loss of life, liberty, and property, except in accordance with proper legal procedures. Although the concepts contained in Magna Carta originally applied only to nobles, they eventually spread to all English citizens. And nearly 600 years after it was written, Magna Carta was to serve as an inspiration for the American independence movement.

John, by the grace of God, King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and Earl of Anjou; to his archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, barons, justiciaries [royal judiciary officers], foresters, sheriffs, governors, officers, and to all bailiffs [sheriff's deputies], and his faithful subjects—Greeting.

Know ye, that we, in the presence of God, . . . have confirmed [given assurance], for us and our heirs forever:

1. That the English Church shall be free, and shall have her whole rights and her liberties inviolable [safe from sudden change]. . . .

We have also granted to all the freemen of our kingdom, for us and our heirs forever, all the underwritten liberties, to be enjoyed and held by them and by their heirs, from us and from our heirs. . . .

12. No scutage [tax for military purposes] nor aid shall be imposed in our kingdom, unless by the common council of our kingdom. . . .

14. And also to have the common council of the kingdom, we will cause to be summoned the archbishops, bishops, abbots, earls, and great barons, individually by our letters. . . .

38. No bailiff, for the future, shall put any man to his law upon his own simple affirmation, without credible witnesses produced for that purpose.

39. No freeman shall be seized, imprisoned, dispossessed [deprived of land], outlawed, or exiled, or in any way destroyed; nor will we proceed against or prosecute him except by the lawful judgment of his peers, or by the law of the land.

40. To none will we sell, to none will we deny, to none will we delay right or justice.

41. All merchants shall have safety and security in coming into England, and going out of England, and in staying in and traveling through England, as well by land as by water to buy and sell, without any unjust exactions [demands], according to ancient and right customs, excepting in the time of war, and if they be of a country at war against us . . . they shall be apprehended without injury . . . until it be known to us or to our Chief Justiciary how the merchants of our country are treated who are found in the country at war against us; and if ours be in safety there, the others shall be in safety in our land.

42. It shall be lawful to any person, for the future, to go out of our kingdom, and to return, safely and securely by land or by water, saving [preserving] his allegiance to us, unless it be in time of war, for some short space, for the common good of the kingdom. . . .

60. Also all these customs and liberties aforesaid, which we have granted to be held in our kingdom, for so much of it as belongs to us, all our subjects, as well clergy as laity [nonclergy, or laymen], shall observe toward their tenants as far as concerns them. . . .

63. Wherefore our will is, and we firmly command that the Church of England be free, and that the men in our kingdom have and hold the aforesaid liberties, rights, and concessions, well and in peace, freely and quietly, fully and entirely, to them and their heirs, of us and our heirs, in all things and places forever, as is aforesaid. It is also