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The Magna Carta

John Lackland, the king of England from 1199–1216, was not a popular or attractive ruler. Some histories written during his time say that he was a tyrant, a spoiled and selfish person, with a suspicious and unforgiving nature. John conspired against his father, Henry II, and plotted to take the crown from his brother, Richard the Lion-Hearted. In 1202 his nephew, Arthur of Brittany, challenged John's right to be king, and John murdered him.

The English kings had been at war with their French barons since 1159. In 1204, John finally lost the English holdings in Anjou, Normandy, and Brittany to Phillip II of France. Then, in 1206, John quarrelled with the church over the appointment of the archbishop of Canterbury. The Pope responded by closing down all the churches in England. This was a disastrous event for the people of England, all of whom thought they needed the church in order to go to Heaven when they died.

This situation continued until 1213, when John abandoned the fight. The following year, he joined with Emperor Otto IV in an attempt to regain the French provinces. He was badly beaten.

When he returned home, he found his barons united against him. After years of heavy taxation to support foreign Crusades and the failed war with France, the English people had little alternative. The barons also accused John of violating their feudal rights.

On June 15, 1215, King John was forced to sign the Magna Carta (Great Charter) at Runnymede. This document, which is named for its length, basically dealt with two concerns: property rights and the right to be tried by one's peers, or equals. John also agreed not to interfere with the church and not to imprison or sentence a man without a trial. He had to give back the forest land he had taken from the barons without their consent, he had to allow a baron to be tried by men of his own class, and he could not raise taxes without the consent of the barons.

At that time, these rights King John agreed to were given only to the barons, not to the common people. However, the Magna Carta became the foundation of the U.S. Constitution and the rights of English people.

Activity

Research how the agreements made in the Magna Carta are reflected in our laws today. What rights do we have concerning property and the right to a trial by jury that originally came from the Magna Carta? Do we now believe a king is appointed by God?



Before and After

Have you ever been lost from your parents in a strange place? How did you feel? What did you do? How did you feel when you were finally reunited?

Because he is so frantic to find Nick, Adam leaves to look for him, totally unaware until it is too late that he and Roger are lost from each other. After looking for months, he still has not found Roger, and he is left to his own devices to get food and shelter for himself.

In oval A below, write the symbols and words which show you how Adam feels during those months he is without his father. In oval B, write the symbols and words which show you how Adam feels after he finally finds Roger.

Now write two paragraphs explaining the symbols and words you have placed into the ovals. In the first paragraph, explain what you mean by the words and symbols in oval A, and in the second, write what you mean by the symbols and words in oval B.

A

B

