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The Magna Carta

Signed by England’s King John in 1215, the Magna Carta (Great Charter) was the first document to limit the power of England’s monarchs. The result of tough negotiations between the king and rebellious nobles, the Magna Carta established the principle that rulers are subject to law—a major step toward constitutional government.

We . . . by this our present Charter, have confirmed, for us and our heirs forever: —

1. That the English Church shall be free and shall have her whole rights and her liberties inviolable [secure from harm]. . . .
2. Neither we nor our bailiffs shall seize any land or rent for any debt while the chattels [possessions] of the debtor are sufficient for the payment of the debt. . . .
3. All merchants shall have safety and security in coming into England, and going out of England, and in staying and in traveling through England . . . to buy and sell, . . . excepting in the time of war, and if they be of a country at war against us. . . .
4. It shall be lawful to any person . . . to go out of our kingdom, and to return safely and securely, by land or by water, saving his allegiance to us, unless it be in time of war, for some short space, for the common good of the kingdom. . . .
5. If any have been disseised [deprived] or dispossessed by us, without a legal verdict of their peers, of their lands, castles, liberties, or rights, we will immediately restore these things to them. . . .
6. Wherefore our will is . . . that the men in our kingdom have and hold the aforesaid liberties, rights, and concessions . . . fully and entirely, to them and their heirs, . . . in all things and places forever.

Analyzing Primary Sources

1. What basic American right has its origins in Article 39 of the Magna Carta?
2. Which article provides the basis for the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution, which states that no person can “be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law”?
3. What limits does Article 12 place on the king’s power to tax?

Answers to . . .

Analyzing Primary Sources

1. The right to a trial by jury has its origins in Article 39 of the Magna Carta.
2. Article 52 provides the basis for the Fifth Amendment.
3. The king may not impose taxes without the general consent of the people.