

The Magna Carta was the document that guaranteed English political and civil liberties. It limited the king's power by guaranteeing rights to nobles and "freemen," or those not bound to a master. Their property could not be seized by the king or his officials. They could not be taxed, unless a council of **prominent**, or important and well-known, men agreed. They could not be put on trial based only on an official's word, without witnesses. They could be punished only by a jury of their peers, people of the same social rank.

PRIMARY SOURCE

“No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or exiled . . . nor will we proceed . . . against him . . . except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land.”

—Magna Carta, translated in *A Documentary History of England*

Over time, the rights promised by the Magna Carta were gradually expanded. One important right was the right to elect representatives to government. The Magna Carta protected the rights of the people and remains the foundation of modern American democracy.

CONNECT *Citizenship and History*

TRIAL BY JURY

The Magna Carta promised that no free man would be punished for a crime without being judged by "his equals". By the 1700s, this phrase had helped create a tradition of trial by jury in which jurors listen to the evidence presented in a court and then debate before coming to an agreement.

Jurors are selected from various sources such as voting lists and tax rolls. The Constitution states that jurors in a criminal trial (one that determines the guilt or innocence of a person accused of a crime) must be neutral regarding the case. In addition, a juror must be selected from the community where the crime is supposed to have happened. Every juror is questioned by both defense and prosecuting lawyers, and either lawyer may reject a juror if he/she feels the juror would not serve fairly.

Activity

Set Up a Mock Jury Trial

- 1 Have one student accuse another of a crime and bring him or her to "trial."
- 2 Let each student in your class write his or her name on a piece of paper and put the names in a hat.
- 3 Select twelve jurors.
- 4 Have the jurors listen to the evidence during the trial.
- 5 Let the jury discuss the evidence and then vote to determine if the defendant is guilty or innocent.



See Citizenship Handbook, page 300.