

## The Magna Carta

**Directions: Read and annotate (highlight important or interesting information) the story. Answer the questions at the end of the document.**

The following is a true story. Once upon a time, around the year 1200, England was ruled by a cruel and wicked king named John. In those days kings could do anything they wanted. The people of England had to do whatever the king said; they had no choice.

If a man died and left his property to a son, King John took a large part of the inheritance for himself. If the man had no sons and left the property to his daughter, then the king would sell the daughter (and her inheritance) to the man who would pay the most money for her.

King John was believed to have killed his own nephew. One noble lady foolishly was talking about this at a party. When King John heard that she was talking about it, he took all of her family's wealth, kicked her husband out of England, and starved the lady and her son to death in a dungeon.

Despite all this, the thing that really got King John in trouble was that he kept increasing taxes on his nobles. If he needed money he would just invent new taxes. He took more and more away from the people and kept it for himself. He became VERY unpopular with his people. His nobles HATED him. The nobles decided to meet with King John to tell him he had to stop being so greedy and pushy. They met together and asked the king to admit that they had some rights. The King said he would think about it and get back to them.

Instead of thinking about it, King John tried to raise an army to have a battle with his nobles and to defeat them. But he found out that he couldn't get enough soldiers! Very few people were on the king's side. So King John went to other European countries to hire their soldiers (mercenaries). But before King John could wage war on the nobles, the nobles occupied (took over) London! That was the capitol city!

King John now had no choice but to listen seriously to what the nobles wanted. He met with the nobles and signed a document (paper) called The Magna Carta. The Magna Carta listed some rules that the king would have to follow and it listed some rights that he would have to allow citizens to have. This was the first time that a king ever agreed to follow rules (laws) that he didn't make himself!

One of the rules in the Magna Carta was that people who were accused of a crime could now have a trial. The king couldn't just put people in jail or to death if he wanted. They had a right to a trial. Now he couldn't punish someone unless a jury found them to be guilty. Also, the king couldn't make taxes without the approval (okay) of a group of men who had been chosen by the nobles (Parliament). Now the king couldn't make up new taxes unless it was agreed upon!

This might not seem like a big deal to us today, because we expect that we have those rights. But this was the first step in getting to where we are today with our government in the United States. The Magna Carta, which was signed by King John over 800 years ago, was an admission by the head of a government that citizens of that country had rights too!

Answer the following questions using your annotations and existing knowledge.

1. In what ways was King John cruel and greedy?
2. If you had been King John, would you have listened to the nobles the first time, or would you have tried to raise an army to defeat them? Why would you make that decision?
3. What do you think the American people would do if the President of the United States tried to behave like King John?
4. Do you think it's a good idea for the leaders of a country to have to follow rules which limit their power? Explain why you think your answer is right.