

MAGNA CARTA

LAW AND LEGEND, 1215–2015

JUNE 13-OCT. 12, 2015 | *Library, West Hall*

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

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This exhibition celebrates the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta by exploring the language and ideology of constitutionalism (both written and unwritten) and the rule of law. While the cornerstone of the exhibition is The Huntington's 13th-century draft of the Magna Carta, the exhibition's themes move beyond Medieval England to explore the relevance of Magna Carta to later English history, the history of the United States, and the modern world, with items drawn entirely from The Huntington's collections.

On the cover: Rare draft of Magna Carta, from an English statute book, 13th century. Below: Illustration of King John and the barons at Runnymede from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 1577.



Eight hundred years ago on June 15, 1215, in a meadow called Runnymede not far from England's Windsor Castle, discontented and rebellious feudal barons forced King John to issue a Great Charter (in Latin a "Magna Carta") addressing years of financial exploitation, military failure, and arbitrary government under a treacherous, cruel, and tyrannical king. Some of the 63 chapters of the charter promised carefully defined reforms of recent abuses and added rights and privileges beyond standard practice for specific groups, mostly the wealthy and socially privileged classes. Others were more esoteric, focusing on issues pertaining to a feudal world. Still others were directed at "all free men"—a relatively small portion of the population comprising barons, knights, and the free peasantry—and would form the solid foundation of an Anglo-American legal tradition that has endured for 800 years: the principles that not even a king was above the law, that no man should be deprived of his life, liberty, or property except by the judgment of his peers and the law of the land, and that all were entitled to free, prompt, and impartial justice under that law. The evolution of that tradition over eight centuries is the subject of the exhibition, "Magna Carta: Law and Legend, 1215–2015."

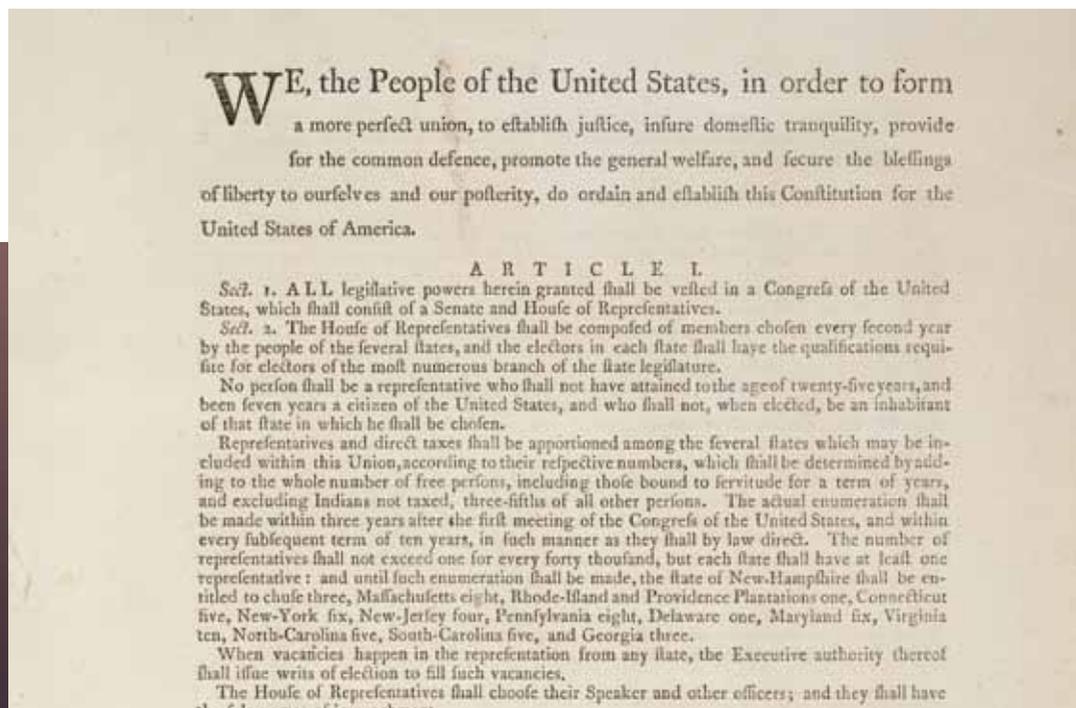
In the 250 years that followed Runnymede's historic accord, the Great Charter traditionally was confirmed and reissued by later medieval

kings at their coronation and in times of political unrest, securing its iconic status. When the new representative institution of Parliament evolved in the mid-13th century, Magna Carta was considered to be the first English statute, giving it even greater legislative force; thereafter it appeared at the beginning of any collection of Parliamentary acts.

Henry de Bracton (d. 1268), the medieval lawyer whose treatise on English common law was the standard interpretation during the Middle Ages, had clearly absorbed Magna Carta's fundamental lesson when he wrote, "the king ought to be under no man, but under God and the law." During the reign of Edward III (1327–1377), new laws further refined and expanded the reach of the original grant: Chapter 29's famous "judgment of his peers" and "the law of the land" were interpreted to guarantee a trial by jury and due process, while "all free men" was broadened to include "any man [or woman], of whatever estate or condition he may be."

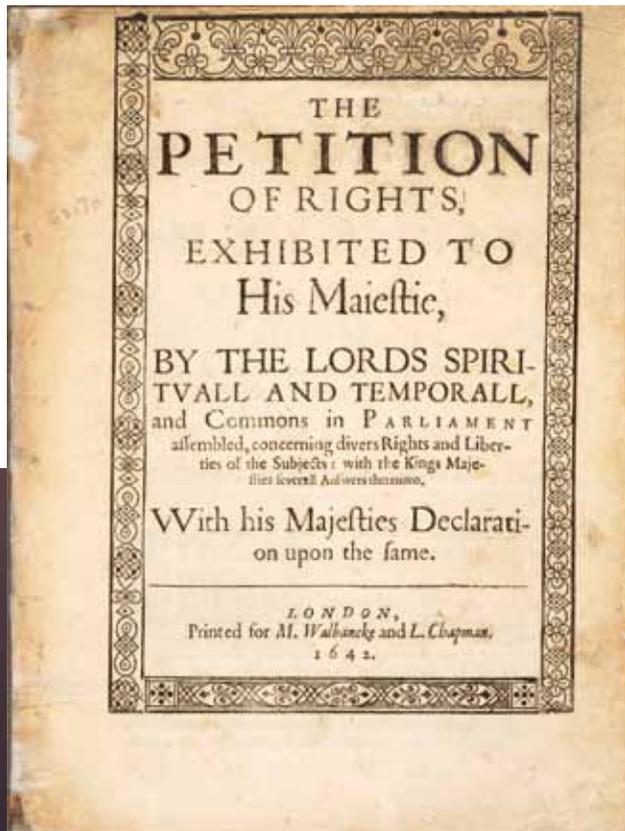
By the time the Tudor dynasty rose to power in 1485, Magna Carta seemed an established and uncontroversial fixture of English law and government, kept alive by lawyers and historians in a new world of

Members' copy of the U.S. Constitution, printed by the Constitutional Convention for members of Congress, 1787.



When American colonists argued that the English crown denied their rights and exploited their liberties, they pointed to Magna Carta, believing the document empowered them to rise up against an oppressive English state. In 1776, Thomas Paine called for Americans to convene a conference and frame a continental charter along the lines, he said, of England's Magna Carta. When the framers of the U.S. Constitution met, they did not specifically reference Magna Carta, but by the late-18th century, Enlightenment thinkers believed in the virtue of written constitutions as a clear declaration of freedoms and liberties. The English had their Magna Carta, the Petition of Right, and the Bill of Rights; as Americans drafted their Constitution, they imported core concepts from Magna Carta, such as the rule of law, due process, and habeas corpus. These represent important continuities between the English and American legal traditions.

While Magna Carta, like the American Constitution, remains a working document in debates about



liberties, freedoms, and rights, it also has assumed an iconic status in the past two centuries. Modern leaders, activists, and artists constantly rely on it as a powerful source of human rights and inalienable liberty. Political cartoonists from James Gillray in 18th-century England to Paul Conrad in 20th-century America included references to Magna Carta in their drawings. The ancient document is malleable, and throughout the past three centuries, people have repurposed it to suit their own needs and add historical significance to their arguments. Even the U.S. Supreme Court has referenced Magna Carta—187 times, in fact, since 1794. The rights promised in the Great Charter have not always been fully realized, but over the past 800 years, the celebrated document has proved a powerful weapon in the ongoing struggle for justice.

Exhibitions commemorating Magna Carta's 900th anniversary will likely be quite different from those of today as thinkers and societies continue to reimagine this document and debate its place in the world. Fueling such worthwhile discussions is perhaps Magna Carta's greatest contribution to history.

Vanessa Wilkie, William A. Moffett Curator, British Historical Manuscripts

Mary Robertson, Former Chief Curator of Manuscripts

RELATED EVENTS

CURATOR TOUR

July 16 (Thursday) 4:30-5:30 p.m.

Join curators Vanessa Wilkie and Mary Robertson for a private tour of the exhibition.

Members: \$15. Non-Members: \$20.

Registration: brownpapertickets.com or 800-838-3006.

MOVIE NIGHT: “THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD”

July 31 (Friday) 7p.m.

Inspired by the exhibition “Magna Carta: Law and Legend, 1215–2015,” The Huntington presents a special screening of the 1938 classic film “The Adventures of Robin Hood,” starring Errol Flynn. Prior to the film, Oscar-winning visual effects designer Craig Barron will give a special presentation on how some of the visual effects were created in the film.

Rothenberg Hall. Members: \$9. Non Members: \$13.

Registration: brownpapertickets.com or 800-838-3006.

LECTURE SERIES: MAGNA CARTA

Aug. 20, 27, September 3 (Thursdays) 10 a.m.-noon

Join curators Vanessa Wilkie and Mary Robertson for this three part lecture series that explores some of the major themes of the exhibition. This series also examines the iconic status of the idea of Magna Carta in the modern world, from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 to representations of the original document and “Bad King John” in popular culture.

Members: \$60. Non-Members: \$75.

Registration: brownpapertickets.com or 800-838-3006.

FAMILY MOVIE NIGHT: “ROBIN HOOD”

Aug. 29 (Saturday) 7—9:30 p.m.

Join us for an outdoor screening of the animated classic “Robin Hood” from Walt Disney Productions, with pre-show activities and entertainment. Bring a blanket and picnic to enjoy on the lawn.

Members: \$10; Non-Members \$20. Ages 2 and under free. Tickets: brownpapertickets.com or 800-838-3006.

PUBLIC LECTURE: SUPREME COURT JUSTICE STEPHEN BREYER

September 23 (Wednesday) 7:00pm

The Court and the World: The Supreme Court’s New Trans-national Role—Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer will speak about the many ways in which American judges, when interpreting American law, must take ever greater account of foreign events, law and practices—the subject of his new book.

Rothenberg Hall. Registration: huntington.org

HAHN & HAHN LLP

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The curators also wish to acknowledge Craig Barron, Vince Beggs, Tracey Garvin, Constance Jordan, Daniel Powers, and Westlaw for sharing their expertise.



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