

Under the reign of King John, England was faced with high taxes, a series of unsuccessful wars, and religious conflict with the Pope. Many people felt that the King had too much power, and was not respecting the power and rights of lords and knights. Unhappy with the state of the country, large numbers of these lords and knights rebelled against the king. They battled throughout the first half of the year to determine who will gain the upper hand. Finally, in June 1215, after six months of fighting, the victorious nobles force King John to sign an agreement that will eventually become known as the Magna Carta, or “Great Charter” in Latin.

The new document addressed many complaints that the lords and knights had with the king. Before this time, the king was thought to hold absolute power; however, the Magna Carta puts limits on royal power and requires certain rights be given to the lords, nobles, knights, and all free men. Not only did it limit the power of the King, but it required that he follow the laws that everyone else has to follow. Unfortunately, however, women and the poorest members of society, those who did not own land, were not given rights under the Magna Carta.

The Magna Carta granted the right of the church to be free from control of the king, the rights of all free citizens to own and inherit property and to be protected from overly heavy taxes. It established the right of widows who owned property to choose not to remarry, and established principles of due process and equality before the law. It also contained provisions forbidding bribery and official misconduct.

One other major purpose of the Magna Carta was to strengthen the rights of other lords and knights/vassals. About 200 years after the creation of the Magna Carta, two knights from every county, two people from every town, and all wealthy nobles and bishops would meet to collect taxes and pass laws, taking this authority from the King. This new group was called the Parliament.

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