

# Primary Source Activity

## Life in the American Colonies

### Lesson 2 *Colonial Government*

#### **The Magna Carta**

Early in its history, the Magna Carta—Latin for “Great Charter”—became a symbol of the battle against tyranny. Signed by King John in 1215, its ideas inspired angry American colonists 561 years later.

Throughout his reign, King John was at war with the French over Britain’s land in western France. Time and again, he suffered defeat. The wars were expensive, and Britain lost the income that had come from the land in France. As a result, King John demanded more and more money from his barons (nobles) to pay for the war and to make up the lost income. To do so, he collected a variety of taxes or fees.

Over time, King John became more and more desperate for money. Traditionally, the king was required to treat his barons and other subjects with fairness and respect. However, King John grew greedy and cruel in his dealings. He abused his power.

Finally, the barons, along with churchmen and townspeople, united against King John. In January of 1215, the leading barons wrote down their complaints against the king. A document was drawn up demanding that the king respect the traditional rights of his subjects. The document also put limits on the king’s power. This first document was called the “Articles of Barons.”

King John met with the barons at a place called Runnymede. He was faced with the threat of civil war if he did not sign the Articles. King John put his seal on the Articles of Barons on June 15, 1215. A formal document—the Magna Carta—was drafted in the following days. Copies were made and sent out to county sheriffs and bishops to be read to the people.

Nearly six centuries later, in 1776, America’s Founders prepared to challenge King George III and the English Parliament. It was the Magna Carta that they looked to when writing the Declaration of Independence.

# Primary Source Activity *Cont.*

The logo for 'networks' features the word 'networks' in a bold, sans-serif font. The letter 'o' is replaced by a stylized globe icon with several lines radiating from it, suggesting a network or global connectivity.

## Life in the American Colonies

**Directions:** The Magna Carta was written in Latin. It contained sixty-three clauses, or sections. Read the following translated excerpts from the Magna Carta.

**Reading 1** Clauses 7 and 8, concerning treatment of women under the law:  
**7.** At her husband's death, a widow may have her marriage portion and inheritance at once and without trouble. She shall pay nothing for her dower, marriage portion, or any inheritance that she and her husband held jointly on the day of his death. She may remain in her husband's house for forty days after his death, and within this period her dower shall be assigned to her.  
**8.** No widow shall be compelled [forced] to marry, so long as she wishes to remain without a husband. But she must give security [a pledge or promise] that she will not marry without royal consent, if she holds her lands of the Crown, or without the consent of whatever other lord she may hold them of.

**Reading 2** Clauses 39 and 40, concerning treatment of subjects under the law: (Note: In this document, "we" refers to the king.)  
**39.** No freeman shall be taken, or imprisoned, or disseized [deprived of possessions or property], or outlawed, or exiled, or in any way harmed . . . save by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.  
**40.** To none will we sell, to none deny or delay, right or justice.

**Reading 3** Clause 61, naming who will take control of many decision-making areas:  
**61.** Inasmuch as, for the sake of God, and for the bettering of our realm [kingdom], and for the more ready healing of the discord [conflict] which has arisen between us and our barons, we have made all these aforesaid concessions, . . . we make and grant to them the following security: that the barons, namely, may elect at their pleasure twenty five barons from the realm, who ought, with all their strength, to observe, maintain and cause to be observed, the peace and privileges which we have granted to them and confirmed by this our present charter . . .  
And the aforesaid twenty five shall swear that they will faithfully observe all the foregoing, and will cause them be observed to the extent of their power . . .

# Primary Source Activity *Cont.*



## Life in the American Colonies

### Analyzing Primary Sources

**Directions:** Answer the following questions.

**1. Identifying** Based on Reading 1, how were women protected by the Magna Carta?

---

---

---

**2. Making Inferences** Based on Reading 2, how had some people been mistreated by the law during King John's rule?

---

---

---

**3. Describing** Based on Reading 3, how would the Magna Carta be enforced?

---

---

### Critical Thinking

**4. Making Connections** Of these clauses, which describes early principles of:

**a.** representative government?

---

**b.** trial by jury?

---

**c.** women's rights?

---

**d.** due process under the law (to ensure fairness, justice, and liberty)?

---