



King John and the Magna Carta

John was the youngest and favorite son of King Henry II of England. When he was born his father called him John Lackland, as his older brothers had already been given large lands to rule and there was little left for John. Unfortunately, John grew up to be a selfish and arrogant man. It is thought that John broke his father's heart when he secretly joined with his older brothers in a plan to take the throne away from Henry II. After Henry's death, John's older brother, Richard, became king. Richard, who had no sons of his own, named his nephew, Arthur, to be his heir in place of the wicked John. It is generally believed that John had Arthur murdered, giving him clear claim to the throne. When John became king he increased taxation and his royal powers. These acts along with his wicked ways so angered the barons that they rebelled against John. The barons demanded for themselves and their vassals rights that gave them certain liberties and ensured them a trial by jury. They also said that the king himself was not above the law. John was forced to sign this charter which became known as the Magna Carta in June 1215 at Runnymede, a field outside of London. King John died a year later reportedly after overindulging in a meal of peaches and beer.

Pretend that you are a baron in King John's time. Prepare a charter in which you and the other barons would demand certain rights for yourselves and your vassals who have been denied many of the freedoms we enjoy today. To make your document look ancient, follow the suggestions on the next page.