**Early American History: Early Influences**

Magna Carta – In 1215 in England, King John’s subjects were extremely dissatisfied with his foreign policies of unnecessary, costly war and increased taxation on British citizens. He was facing a rebellion from the wealthy ruling class and was forced to sign the Magna Carta, the first written Constitution in European history. This document limited the scope of his power, documenting the rights of the Church as well as the legal and property rights of landowning citizens. The Magna Carta only includes regulations benefiting wealthy and powerful citizens, but was still a great influence on America’s Founding Fathers, showing that the King of England could be pressured to acquiesce to demands. The leader of a country must also be subject to Rule of Law, meaning that the king or president cannot break laws without facing consequences.

More information on the Magna Carta and full text in English:

<https://www.bl.uk/magna-carta/articles/magna-carta-english-translation>

Glorious Revolution – In the late 1680s, British citizens were once again unhappy with their King’s abuse of power. King James II showed strong favor to Roman Catholic citizens, which deeply angered the majority Anglican population. Powerful British Anglicans invited a competitor to the King, William of Orange, to bring an army to depose King James II. James fled to France, essentially abdicating the throne to William of Orange. William signed a document put before him by the British Parliament, the *Declaration of Rights* or *English Bill of Rights*. This document established England as a Constitutional Monarchy, with the King bound to respect the wishes of Parliament and maintain a social contract philosophy to his leadership. The King and elected leadership in the Parliament had to compromise and agree on any new laws or taxes.

Common Law – the legal system of making judicial decisions based on an established set of precedents. This system was used in England after the Norman Conquest in 1066 and valued local traditions above all. Crimes were seen as transgressions against other citizens and restitution was provided to the victim.

The Enlightenment (1715-1789)– European philosophers of the Enlightenment era had great influence on the American Founding Fathers, particularly in the fields of governmental authority and human rights.

* John Locke – All people are born free, equal, and independent. They maintain Natural Rights that cannot be violated by any government. These rights are life, liberty, and property. These rights were amended by Thomas Jefferson in the *Declaration of Independence* to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
* Jean Jacques Rousseau - Any government attempting to deprive citizens of these rights will be breaking the social contract, which states that citizens give up part of their freedom in exchange for protection of their natural rights by the government.
* Baron de Montesquieu – Montesquieu proposed the idea of a Separation of Powers, which stated that the government should be divided into different branches which would balance one another. No branch should be allowed to become strong enough to threaten the rights of citizens.
* Thomas Hobbes – Hobbes believed that without government, life would be “nasty, brutish, and short.” Like Rousseau and Locke, Hobbes strongly advocated for a social contract in government to promote cooperation, replacing chaos and competition with a functioning society. People need a strong government and clear laws to help them live together peacefully.