

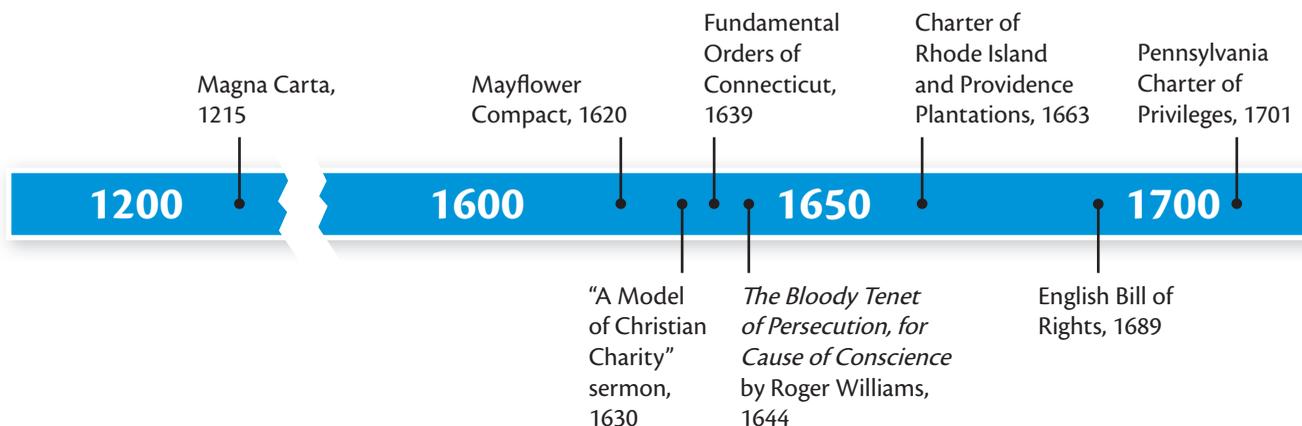
Introduction

The Centerpiece of Freedom in the United States: The U.S. Constitution

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lists five identified freedoms that protect Americans:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

America's economic and political success is a direct result of these freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition guaranteed in the First Amendment, as well as the other nine amendments of the Bill of Rights, and other provisions throughout the U.S. Constitution. The ideas of the Constitution are far-reaching—they originate from our English heritage harking back to Magna Carta in 1215, through the 17th century English Bill of Rights and the Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke, who articulated the duty of citizens to abolish a government that did not protect their rights. In the 18th century, these ideas were expressed in the American colonies by the Revolutionary generation who knew that their rights as English citizens were violated by a Parliament and king both distant and indifferent to American liberty.



***Freedom in America, Part 1: Obtaining Freedom (through 1865)* traces the key documents of freedom that formed the basis for the freedoms and rights enjoyed by the citizens of the United States.**

The Declaration of Independence reminded Great Britain of the “self-evident,” widely agreed upon truths of equality and freedom. The U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights expressed those truths in a plan of government to represent an already diverse populace. Many other documents, sermons, and speeches, both before and after the writing of the U.S. Constitution, communicated the meaning of freedom. Those documents that came before the U.S. Constitution seem, in retrospect, to have led inevitably to the Constitution. The speeches and publications that came after—starting with those in the *Federalist Papers* written by James Madison, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton—did not attempt to change the content of the Constitution, but continued to explain, clarify, and defend its singular principle: freedom.

This simple graphic organizer of historical categories summarizes the journey the reader takes through the documents:

English Heritage → The Colonial Experience → The Revolutionary Generation → Creating a Democratic Republic → Addressing Slavery in a Democratic Republic

As we present the founding documents and succeeding documents, we will follow the same format:

Background—the setting and context for the writing of the document

Author—the writer(s) of the document

Excerpt—exemplary and representative quotes from the document. Occasionally, the full text of a document appears in the body of the text; it is noted in the text when that occurs.

Significance—the historical significance of the document, as well as its relationship to the U.S. Constitution

