**The Bill of Rights (Ratified in 1791)**

On September 25, 1789, the First Federal Congress of the United States proposed to the state

legislatures twelve amendments to the Constitution. The first two, concerning the number of

constituents for each Representative and the compensation of Congressmen, were not ratified.

Articles three through twelve, known as the Bill of Rights, became the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution and contained guarantees of essential rights and liberties omitted in the crafting of the original document. James Madison introduced the amendments that would become the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights guarantee a number of personal freedoms, limits the government's power in judicial and other proceedings, and reserve some powers to the states and the public. They provide for freedoms not explicitly indicated in the main body of the Constitution. These freedoms include freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and free assembly; the right to keep and bear arms; freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, security in personal effects, and freedom from warrants issued without probable cause; indictment by a grand jury for any capital crime; guarantee of a speedy trial with an impartial jury; among other rights and freedoms. The Bill of Rights were influenced by such documents as the *Magna Carta* (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), and Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776).

**Source: From Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/billofrights.html**

**The Magna Carta**

In 1215 King John of England (ruled 1199-1216) was forced to sign the Magna Carta or “Great

Charter” or Great Paper,” as his subjects tried to limit his powers by law. Under the Magna Carta, the King was required to renounce certain rights concerning some legal procedures and that the King’s will could be bound by law. The document also protected certain rights of the monarch’s subjects, most notably the writ of *habeas corpus*, allowing appeal against unlawful imprisonment. The writ of *habeas corpus* historically has been an important instrument for the safeguarding of individual freedom against arbitrary actions of the state. The Magna Carta influenced the development of common law and our Founding Fathers when they were writing the U.S. Constitution. Like the U.S. Constitution, the Magna Carta went through changes over time. Divide class into groups and handout copies of the Bill of Rights, the Magna Carta, and the

Student Handout: Compare and Contrast. Have students read both documents. After reading

them, have the groups compare and contrast the two documents. Identify passages that are

similar and those that are not. After completing the exercise, have each group discuss which

points they found to be similar and which are not.