The ancient Greeks and Romans were the first civilizations in history to create governments based on democracy. The word democracy means “the people rule.”

The Greek city-state of Athens was the first civilization to a democratic system of government. The system used in Athens was called a direct democracy. The citizens met in a large assembly, discussed issues, and voted directly on proposed laws. To cast a vote on a proposal, citizens dropped either a white or a black pebble into a vase. The side with the most votes won.

In Rome, a somewhat different form of democracy developed. The Roman Republic used the system of indirect democracy. Citizens elected representatives who made laws on their behalf.

Indirect democracy is most often called representative government. A country using this type of democracy is called a republic. The word republic means the government is based on the people. That’s why we call the United States a republic. Americans elect representatives who make the laws on their behalf.

The democracy in Athens grew, but eventually fell. Roman power spread widely, but it eventually became controlled by emperors, not the people.

The early leaders of the United States knew the history of Greece and Rome. Their hope was the America would revive democracy as a workable system. They favored the Roman Republic as a model, with elected representatives, rather than the kind of direct democracy used in ancient Athens.

The U.S. Constitution, written in 1787, sets up the American government as a republic. The leaders who wrote the Constitution did not just copy the ancient Roman system, however. They created rules in the Constitution that they hoped would limit the power of government, and better protect the rights of citizens.
The Magna Carta: A Foundation for Liberty

Long before the English ever set foot in America. Even before Columbus sailed from Spain to the New World... A remarkable document was written in England that is a vital part of the story of freedom.

Magna Carta is Latin for Great Charter.

English barons forced King John to sign the Magna Carta because they were tired of the way he abused his power. Barons were very high ranking noblemen in those days, higher even than knights!

So, what did the Magna Carta actually say?

“The city of London shall enjoy all of its ancient liberties and free customs, both by land and by water.”

“We also will and grant that all other cities, boroughs, towns, and ports shall enjoy their liberties and free customs.”

“No man shall be seized or put in prison, or stripped of his rights or possessions... except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land.”

“To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice.”

“All merchants may enter or leave England unharmed... for purpose of trade, free from all illegal fees or payments.”

The Magna Carta put limits on the king’s power. It also made clear that the king was not above the law, but had to follow the law himself.

Today, we call these ideas the fundamental principles of:

1. Limited Government

2. Rule of Law
The picture shown to the left is a copy of the Charter of the Virginia Company of London. This charter was first issued in England in 1601, and revised twice in later years.

You can think of a charter as a kind of business license. It was given by King James I to a group of merchants in England who wanted to start a colony in Virginia. Jamestown is named after King James.

In 1606 England was running well behind other major European countries in colonizing the New World. Spain, Portugal, and France already had colonies. England’s attempts had all failed.

One attempt became known as the Lost Colony.

This charter was part of the king’s plan to encourage English merchants to keep trying to establish colonies in America. The charter made several important promises to settlers who would go to Virginia.

1. Settlers could own land in the colony. This was a big deal because most land in England was very expensive or already in use. Ownership of land offered opportunity to improve one’s life.
2. Settlers could create a council to help make their own laws. The council at Jamestown was called the House of Burgesses. It began in 1619, making it the first elected lawmaking body in America. The House of Burgesses is the direct ancestor of today’s Virginia General Assembly, which meets each year in Richmond.
3. Settlers would keep the same rights as any other Englishmen.

The early settlers sent to Jamestown by the Virginia Company of London faced a struggle just to survive. The company itself went into debt and failed. But the settlers still came, lured by the chance for success in Virginia.

Before long there were more English colonies – a total of 13 in all. England didn’t interfere very much with the colonies in the early years. But after about 1760, Great Britain started to tighten its control. A huge conflict began when the British government created new tax laws like the Stamp Act (1765). Colonists objected because they had no representatives in the British Parliament where the new laws were being made.

In 1774 Virginia leaders protested that by forcing laws on the colonies, the British government was violating the promises made in the older Charter of the Virginia Company of London. In 1775, after years of growing disputes and protests, actual fighting broke out in several places between British troops and the colonists. In 1776 Virginia leaders meeting in Williamsburg were convinced that there was only one sure way to protect their rights; full independence!

In May, 1776, Virginia broke away from British rule. Virginia leaders urged the other colonies to do the same. Leaders from all of colonies, meeting in Philadelphia, agreed with Virginia’s stand. The vote to adopt the Declaration of Independence came on July 4, 1776.

So that old document signed by King James in the year 1606 – the Charter of the Virginia Company of London – turned out to be very important, indeed. It promised the colonists would always keep all English rights and liberties, including the right to a voice in making their own laws. To protect those rights, the colonists were willing to fight, and create a new nation.
The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence was adopted in a building in Philadelphia now called Independence Hall. Colonial leaders met there in 1776 to deal with the growing crisis over British rule of the colonies. Each of the 13 colonies sent delegates to the meeting. Many leaders still hoped to reach a compromise with England, but that seemed less and less likely as the months went by.

In June, the delegates appointed a committee to write a statement in favor of independence. Thomas Jefferson, a lawyer and political leader from Virginia was one of those chosen. He became the main author of the document.

The longest part of the document is a list of complaints about the way the British government was treating the colonists! It claims King George III was deliberately trying to establish “an absolute Tyranny over these States.” It lists many examples that colonial leaders felt were proof of his bad intentions.

The Declaration criticizes the British Parliament as well. It points out the fact that taxes were put on the colonies by Parliament without the approval of the colonists’ own elected assemblies. Colonists considered that an abuse of their rights as Englishmen.

The Declaration of Independence expressed the ideas of political equality, individual rights, the consent of the governed, and the right to change or even abolish an abusive government. When the official vote for the Declaration of Independence was called on July 4th, not a single colony voted against it.

The Articles of Confederation

The Articles of Confederation was the first form of national government in the United States. In a confederation, each of the states would keep its independence, but all would agree to work together on common concerns. The Articles make it clear that the states would be supreme. The national government would have very few powers.

The Articles helped hold the 13 states together during the Revolution. But those years also revealed the major weakness of the Articles. The plan gave Congress the power to make some decisions, but it did not give Congress the power to enforce its decisions.

For example, Congress had the power to make decisions about the war for independence. Yet it could not tax, nor could it force the states to pay the funds needed by the American army. That meant soldiers often went unpaid or without supplies.

The difficulty of governing the new nation became even more apparent after the Revolution. Year after year, the states seemed less and less united. As a result, a special meeting of delegates from the states was set up in 1787 to consider revising the Articles. Instead of revising the Articles, they began creating a completely new design for the national government. The new plan – The United States Constitution – was completed that summer.
The Virginia Declaration of Rights

Who was George Mason?
- He lived in __________ Virginia __________ before, during, and after the American Revolution.
- His family lived in a house called __________ Gunston Hall __________ located by the Potomac River in Northern Virginia.

Disputes with England:
When British tax laws like the Stamp Act caused growing anger in the colonies, Mason became well known for his arguments and writings in __________ favor __________ of the colonists’ __________ rights __________.

Breaking Away and Creating a New Government:
When Virginia leaders voted to break away from British rule completely, Mason set to work on a listing of basic principles of __________ government __________ and the __________ rights __________ of the citizens of Virginia. Mason based his list partly on __________ English __________ laws and customs. He also included the bold new ideas that were spreading in the colonies!

All in Favor...
The document is known as the __________ Virginia Declaration of Rights __________.
It is still part of Virginia’s state constitution!

Does it Really Matter? YES!
George Mason’s Virginia Declaration of Rights was also the model for the __________ Bill of __________ Rights __________, which became a part of the U.S. Constitution in 1791.

Remembering Mason:
A bronze statue of George Mason holding in his hand the Virginia Declaration of Rights, can be seen at George Mason University, located in __________ Fairfax __________, VA.

The U.S. Constitution

The Constitution is a written agreement that describes how the __________ government __________ in America will operate. It tells the powers of different parts of the government, and also puts some __________ limits __________ on those powers so the government doesn’t get out of control.

The Constitution is divided into a __________ Preamble __________, or introduction, and seven __________ Articles __________, or sections.

The Preamble tells the __________ purpose __________ or __________ goals __________ of the Constitution.

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

Article 1 creates the U.S. __________ Congress __________ and describes its powers and responsibilities.
It is the __________ legislative __________, or law-making branch of the government.

Article 2 creates the office of __________ president __________ of the United States. The president heads the __________ executive __________ branch of government, which is given the job of carrying out laws made by Congress.
Article 3 creates the U.S. Supreme Court. This is part of the judicial branch of the U.S. government. It has the power to rule on important legal cases, especially those involving the Constitution itself.

Federalism – in this type of system, the powers of government are shared between a national level and the state level.

- National Level was responsible for:
  - foreign Policy
  - military _______________
  - money System
  - laws dealing with trade across state lines

- State Level was responsible for:
  - schools
  - public health and safety
  - criminal laws
  - marriage laws
  - roads and highways

The Constitution created a national government with three branches. The separations of powers would help avoid the risk of putting too much power in one place. Each branch has the power to block unwise actions by the other branches. This is the system known as checks and balances.

Article 4 tells how new states can join the United States.

Article 5 describes the procedure for amending the U.S. Constitution.

Article 6 says the U.S. Constitution is the “Supreme Law of the Land.” So laws cannot be made that go against the basic principles in the U.S. Constitution, either by the state governments or by Congress.

Article 7 says that when the people of nine states ratify (officially approve) the new Constitution, it would take effect. The approval of the Constitution, however, came only after much debate and discussion in all of the states. One of the main objections was that it did not include a Bill of Rights.

To help win approval of the Constitution, supporters promised that such a listing would be created and added quickly. The Bill of Rights was ratified as the first ten Amendments to the Constitution in 1791.

As part of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights protects key rights such as:

- Freedom of religion, speech, press, petition, and assembly.
- Fair, public trials.
- No cruel or unusual punishments.
- No unreasonable searches.
- The right to bear arms.
- The right to own property.

The Constitution is still the Supreme Law of the Land in the United States today.

Amendments to the Constitution over the past two centuries have abolished slavery, (the 13th Amendment), assured women of the right to vote, (the 19th Amendment), and addressed other important issues in American life. The Constitution is still the supreme law of the land in the United States today.

To date, there are only 27 Amendments to the U.S. Constitution!