Rights Take Shape

Trace how historical documents shaped American liberties.

USG.C.6.3 "Examine the traditions and historical documents which have contributed to the American concepts of rights and liberties (e.g., English Bill of Rights, Virginia Declaration of Rights, Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one protection or principle in each paragraph. Circle words that show a government power or action the document challenges.

Who Sets the Limits?

1. Imagine a government claiming it can cancel laws whenever its leader wishes. In England, the Bill of Rights of 1689 rejected the monarch's claimed power to suspend laws without Parliament's consent. It also called for free parliamentary elections and protected speech during Parliament's debates. These protections grew out of a struggle between the monarchy and Parliament. They did not give everyone a vote or protect every kind of speech. Instead, the document made a lasting argument: a ruler's power has limits, and elected representatives need room to challenge that ruler.

2. Across the Atlantic, Virginia's Declaration of Rights of 1776 took a different approach. Written chiefly by George Mason, it declared that people have inherent rights and that government gets its authority from the people. It defended freedom of the press and the free exercise of religion according to conscience. It also said a government that fails to serve the common good can be changed. These claims helped frame rights as belonging to people, not as favors from a monarch. Yet Virginia's laws still allowed slavery, and the declaration's broad language did not bring equal rights to all residents.

3. One question remained: Could a state make a person pay for worship that person rejected? Thomas Jefferson drafted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which Virginia adopted in 1786. It said no one should be forced to attend or financially support religious worship and that civil rights should not depend on religious beliefs. Unlike a rule that protects only a favored church, the statute restricted the state's power over religious choice. Together, the three documents show a shift from checking a ruler's authority toward stating individual liberties and protecting conscience. Their promises mattered even when their societies failed to honor those promises equally.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the English Bill of Rights limit the monarch's power? Name one protection it established.

2. How did the Virginia Declaration of Rights describe the source of rights differently from a monarch granting favors?

3. How did the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom make the declaration's principle of religious freedom more specific?

4. Why would it be inaccurate to say that the Virginia Declaration of Rights brought equal rights to all Virginians?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A public school board proposes requiring students to attend a religious ceremony. Write one paragraph advising the board, using ideas from at least two documents to explain your advice and acknowledging one historical limit of those documents.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USG.C.6.3

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline one protection or principle in each paragraph. Circle words that show a government power or action the document challenges. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the English Bill of Rights limit the monarch's power? Name one protection it established.	**It rejected the monarch's power to suspend laws without Parliament's consent. It also called for free parliamentary elections.**
2	How did the Virginia Declaration of Rights describe the source of rights differently from a monarch granting favors?	**It described rights as inherent to people and said government gets its authority from the people.**
3	How did the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom make the declaration's principle of religious freedom more specific?	**It said people could not be forced to attend or pay for worship and that civil rights could not depend on religious beliefs.**
4	Why would it be inaccurate to say that the Virginia Declaration of Rights brought equal rights to all Virginians?	**Virginia still allowed slavery, and the declaration's broad claims did not result in equal rights for all residents.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The public school board should not require students to attend the ceremony. Virginia's Declaration of Rights supports the free exercise of religion according to conscience, so students should be able to decide whether to take part. The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom offers a more specific reason: people should not be forced to attend worship, and their civil rights should not depend on belief. The declaration did not bring equal rights to everyone in its own time, but its principle still argues against the proposed rule.

Accept other passage-supported protections in Question 1. In the open response, look for an application of two distinct documents and a historically accurate limit, such as slavery in Virginia or the English Bill of Rights' limited reach.