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ELIZABETH FRANTZ / Monitor staff

A traveling exhibit honoring the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta is reconstructed at the UNH School of Law Library in Concord. The exhibit will be on display until April 22.

CONCORD

Exhibit on historical accord makes debut at law school

The Magna Carta was an agreement written in Britain in 1215

By **DAVID BROOKS**
Monitor Staff

Considering it was written in Latin on parchment with quill pens eight centuries ago and deals mostly with English barons and kings, the Magna Carta still carries quite a punch.

"It is the foundation of our democracy," said Susan Zago, director of the UNH Law Library, which is hosting a traveling exhibit about the Magna Carta that opened Monday. Zago ticked off ideas that had their genesis in the 1215 agreement and still hold sway today, including due process, trial by jury, writ of habeus corpus and limits on executive power.

Evidence of the power of this document could be seen in Beijing last year, when the government shifted a display of an original Magna Carta out of a public university to a small, private enclave, allegedly out of concern that it might raise uncomfortable questions about freedoms in today's China.

Or you may recall the 2012 attempts by three New Hampshire lawmakers to require that every state bill "addressing individual rights or liberties . . . include a direct quote from the Magna Carta" as legal and philosophical justification.

That bill didn't succeed, but it reflects a respect for the Magna Carta in American government and law that dates back to the Founding Fathers, who were inspired to create the Constitution in part by its longevity and power, and which continues today.

The traveling exhibit, titled "Magna Carta: Enduring Legacy 1215-2015," was created by the American Bar Association and the Library of Congress as part of the Magna



Courtesy

A copy of the Magna Carta.

Carta's 800th anniversary. It will be at UNH School of Law's Law Library, 2 White St., Concord, until April 22, open to the public for free.

"They've done a really wonderful job of taking larger concepts that we hold near and dear, that first appeared in the Magna Carta and continue to have play in our legal system today," Zago said of the exhibit.

The Magna Carta (Latin for "great charter") was written as a sort of peace treaty to end decades of fighting between King John and groups of English barons over who had power in England at the time. The barons had won the fighting and King John signed the agreement under duress.

"Rather than demand that John step down, the barons proposed that he agree to a list of remedies to correct specific grievances and failures of the feudal system, as well as to prevent further abuses of royal power. The intended effect of the agreement was to force King John to submit to 'the rule of law' - that is, to agree to the principle that England was a nation under law and that the law both empowered and limited the authority of the Crown," wrote legal scholar Paul Larkin in a 2015 piece titled, "The Role for Magna Carta in America in

2015."

The Magna Carta was revised many times and some of its provisions have not stood the test of time, such as two clauses targeting debts owed by Christians to Jews, reflecting attitudes and financial practices of the day. But the importance of having a written document which spells out some limits to rulers' power, as well as guarantees some rights to ordinary people, lives on.

The exhibit has an interpretive video and also includes 16 large banners displaying objects from the Library of Congress collections, an interpretive video and other artifacts highlighting the impact the Magna Carta had on forming modern democracy.

The Magna Carta will also be the topic of a symposium today at 6 p.m. in the Law School, Room 204. That even is sponsored by the law school's chapters of the Federalist Society and the American Constitution Society for Law and Policy. Those interested in attending the symposium are asked to contact sue.zago@law.unh.edu, or 513-5129.

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