



2025 Theme Narrative: *Rights & Responsibilities in History*

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The theme for National History Day® (NHD) 2025 is *Rights & Responsibilities in History*. It is very broad, allowing students to choose family, local, national, or world history topics. At first glance, the theme seems clear and straightforward. Under greater consideration, however, it is far more complex. So before students choose their topics, we must break down the theme and analyze its parts.

It is important to remember that with rights come responsibilities. In the present day, we frequently read and hear discussions about “my rights” or “our rights.” While we all have the right to freedoms such as free speech, we also have a responsibility to use these freedoms in a manner that respects the rights and well-being of others, with an understanding of how that responsibility is necessary for the greater good of all. Thus, the NHD theme for 2025 is focused on **both** historical rights **and** responsibilities. **NHD projects in 2025 must focus on both as well.**

Rights and responsibilities determine the relationship between individuals and society. A society can be defined as a community, state, country, family, club, school, or religious organization, among other groups, where individuals gather and feel a sense of belonging. Together, rights and responsibilities play a crucial role in how individuals interact with each other, their communities, and their governments.

Defining Rights & Responsibilities

Rights are freedoms or privileges that individuals possess as human beings or as citizens of a society.

They are often, though not always, protected by laws, charters, or constitutions that establish the boundaries of personal freedoms (rights) and protections and obligations (responsibilities).

- › **Civil rights:** nonpolitical rights of individuals that their governments (through law) are bound to protect. They can include:
 - › Freedom of speech: the right to speak freely (within reason).

- › Freedom of religion: the right to worship the religion of one’s own choice (or decline to worship).
- › Freedom of assembly: the right to assemble in a group of one’s choosing.
- › Freedom of petition: the right to ask the government to make a change.
- › Freedom of the press: the right to report on events and express opinions on the events of the day.
- › **Political rights:** the rights of citizens to participate in their government. They can include the right to vote, run for public office, and participate in the process. Political rights ensure that citizens have a say in how they are governed.
- › **Social rights:** the rights that establish a basic standard of living and well-being for all members of society. Social rights can include the right to an education, safe housing, or access to social services such as health care, access to food, and care for children or the elderly.
- › **Economic rights:** the rights that allow people to participate in their economy. These can include the right to own property, work, and earn fair wages. They can also include the right to pursue a career of one’s choosing, to start a business, or enjoy fair and safe working conditions.
- › **Human rights:** the rights that apply to all individuals, no matter who governs them. They are considered *universal* because they belong to everyone regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, or other identities or affiliations. These rights are *inalienable* because they cannot be withdrawn, surrendered, or transferred except in specific situations. They are most famously defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in December 1948. This document affirms the right of every person to life, a fair justice system, and access to the resources of the community.¹

¹ Access the full Universal Declaration of Human Rights at [un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights](https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights).

Responsibilities are expectations of individuals as members of society. These include laws, social norms, or ethical principles designed to promote the well-being of society as a whole.

- › **Legal responsibilities:** the duty to maintain order and justice within a society. They include obeying the law, paying taxes, and respecting the rights of others. By following the laws, societies can function, and the rights of others are protected.
- › **Civic responsibilities:** the obligation to participate (directly or indirectly) in the functioning of a government. They can include voting, staying informed about political issues, and engaging in community activities.
- › **Social responsibilities:** the commitment to treat others respectfully and kindly and to help those in need. Examples include volunteering in the community or establishing organizations that support others.
- › **Ethical responsibilities:** the charge to make morally sound choices and decisions—even when driven by personal values and principles rather than being demanded by law—and making decisions between right and wrong.



During World War II, many nurses joined the U.S. military, causing a shortage in civilian hospitals. At Freedmen's Hospital (now Howard University Hospital) in Washington, D.C., Ethel Washington and Louise Beleno volunteered to pack surgical kits to aid the nursing staff. Library of Congress (2017696522).

History of Rights & Responsibilities

The concepts of rights and responsibilities have a rich and complex history, evolving over the years and taking different forms depending on time, location, culture, and values. As with other concepts, they develop, ebb, and flow. The process of rights and responsibilities changing over time reflects societal values; advances in science, medicine, and technology; and our understanding of human dignity and well-being. The changes we observe also reflect philosophical, religious, and political developments, including the form of government that evolves or is in place. Importantly, the concepts of rights and responsibilities differ significantly when viewed through the lens of political organization. How do rights and responsibilities take shape within democracy, communism, fascism, socialism, or authoritarianism? What about monarchy, oligarchy, or anarchy?

To study rights and responsibilities in history, we must ask questions. Who decides who has rights? Does everyone have the same rights? Who decides on the limits individuals should or should not have? Why? What led to establishing certain rights, and to whom were they given? How have people, governments, or institutions decided what parameters should be set to enforce responsibilities? How are such decisions justified?

The relationship between rights and responsibilities is crucial to maintaining a just and functioning society. While citizens enjoy certain rights that protect their freedoms, they also bear responsibilities to one another.

Historically, it has not always played out that way.

In 2026, the United States will commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the beginning of our nation. In 1774, two years before the signing of that document, the First Continental Congress met at Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia. To better understand the significance of that congress, we must ask questions about rights and responsibilities. What led to the convening of delegates from the colonies? What were their grievances? How did the delegates' ideas about rights and responsibilities as British citizens differ from those of Parliament? What resulted from that first convening?

Two years later, in 1776, the delegates to the Second Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Independence, a remarkable document declaring that individuals had certain fundamental rights guaranteed to them simply by being human. When they outlined their view of individual rights and wrote, “all men are created equal,” did they truly mean *all*? Who was left out? How did some individuals struggle to extend the idea of rights for all? What events made it possible to extend rights to more than just the propertied men of the eighteenth century? Who was instrumental in helping to secure rights for women, people of color, and Indigenous populations—and whose responsibility was it to do so? How and why? What compelled them to risk the very things the delegates of the Continental Congress pledged—their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor—to do so, and what were the consequences? In what ways did people who were excluded in the document use its language to make the case for rights for a broader group of Americans?



Artist Charles Édouard Armand-Dumaresq's 1873 painting depicting the signing of the Declaration of Independence. White House Historical Association.

And what about responsibility? How did that figure into the equation? Did the framers simply believe in and discuss rights? Who did they feel was responsible for guaranteeing those rights? Why? How have individuals considered responsibilities in their struggle for rights?

Americans were not the first nor will they be the last to fight for their rights. From ancient times until the twenty-first century, people around the globe have demanded and fought for, been guaranteed, or been denied certain rights and freedoms. Again, rights and responsibilities—as a concept—are shaped by culture, society, time, and place. No matter the example, we can consider: how have different contexts impacted entitlements (rights) and duties (responsibilities)?

Let's look at a few other historical topics.

One of the earliest known legal codes was the **Code of Hammurabi** created in Mesopotamia around 1754 BCE. In what way did it outline laws and punishments? Why was it created? How did it reflect the idea of taking responsibility for one's actions? Why did its creators feel that they were responsible for producing such laws and the consequences for breaking them?

In what ways did societies such as the **Incas or Aztecs** create and enforce ideas of rights and responsibilities in society? What was the *Codex Mendoza*? How did its painted images depict the history of the Aztecs and their conquest by the Spanish during the sixteenth century in Mexico? Why was it created? In what way did it define gender roles or issues of discipline?



The first page of the *Codex Mendoza*, showing the founding of the Aztec capital at Tenochtitlan, c.1541.

When and where did the **concept of citizenship** emerge? How did the ideas of rights and responsibilities play out in ancient Greek city-states such as Athens or Sparta? What responsibilities were required of citizens, and what rights were granted in exchange? Why?

In what ways have different **perspectives on childhood** played out in history? Historical notions about child rearing depended upon time, place, and culture. How were family roles defined in Late Imperial China? In what way did societal status play a role in defining issues such as child labor or gender roles? How did these change over time? Why? What were the consequences?

How did **Native American societies**, such as the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (referred to at the time as the Iroquois Nation), establish codes of conduct related to rights and responsibilities? Why did these societies feel compelled to create such codes? In what context were they created? How did these codes impact Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities?

In what ways has **religion** played a role in outlining rights and responsibilities for some? What were some of the consequences? What influenced the Crusades of Medieval Europe? How were the Crusades an example of the relationship between religion and government? What other examples of such relationships influenced the course of human events?

The year 1994 marked the end of **apartheid** in South Africa. It had been in effect since 1948. What was apartheid, and how and why did it evolve? What were the consequences? What was the context in which it took place, locally and globally? Who and what helped bring about the change that resulted in its end? What had changed by 1994 that led to the end of apartheid?

Foreign policy has long influenced the notion of whose rights should be granted or denied and by whom. How has the effort to secure economic profit influenced rights and responsibilities? Consider the British East India Company in China or the Belgian monarchy's actions in the Congo. In what ways did the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 influence (impose) the formation of new countries, such as Yugoslavia? What were the immediate impacts and long-term consequences? In what way did it lead to the Bosnian conflict some 70 years later? How was the May Fourth Movement in China a reaction to the Treaty of Versailles? What role did it play in influencing individual rights and modernization in China?

These are just a few ideas from among the hundreds of topics students might choose to study for their NHD projects during the 2024–2025 program year. Students should brainstorm with their teachers and classmates, friends and family members, and skim through textbooks and other reference materials to find topics of interest. NHD topics can be drawn from family, local, national, or world history. Some of the best can be found in the students' own backyards. Nothing happens in isolation. Whatever their topic, students should remember to place it into historical context and view it through the lens of *Rights & Responsibilities in History*.

The next article in this book, "Celebrating America 250 and Inspiring National History Day® Topics," offers local history suggestions from 13 of our NHD affiliate programs. Students might be interested in researching the topics presented. They might also be inspired to look for parallel events in their own communities or explore local history in other places.

To access more theme resources,
go to nhd.org/theme.