The Bill of Rights—Simplified

First Amendment
The government cannot support any religion or prevent citizens from worshipping as they please; the government cannot censor people or the media; people have a right to gather peaceably; and people can complain to the government. There are exceptions to these rights.

Second Amendment
Right to Bear Arms
People have the right to own weapons.

Third Amendment
Quartering Troops
Citizens cannot be forced to house soldiers in their homes during peacetime and only during wartime as the law requires.

Fourth Amendment
Right to Privacy, Search Warrants
Officers of the law must get a warrant from a judge to search and take property or persons. A judge must have a “reasonable cause” to issue a warrant to officers and the warrant must describe the place to be searched and the items or persons to be taken. There are exceptions to this amendment.

Fifth Amendment
Rights of the Accused, Due Process, Right to Remain Silent
A grand jury must determine if there is enough evidence to send to trial a person accused of a serious crime. A person cannot be put on trial more than once for the same crime (double jeopardy). A person has the right not to answer questions asked by officials. The government must follow certain fair procedures (due process) before it can take away life, liberty, or property.

Sixth Amendment
Right to a Speedy and Fair Trial, Right to Face Accusers, Right to a Lawyer
An accused person will not be held in jail for a long period of time before their trial begins. An accused person will also get a public trial before a fair jury. An accused person has a right to face their accusers. If an accused person cannot afford a lawyer, one will be provided to defend them.

Seventh Amendment
Civil Suits
A jury may be provided if one person sues another person and the case involves more than $20 (these cases are generally no longer heard in federal court).

Eighth Amendment
Reasonable Bail and Punishment
Bail will not be set unusually high as to make it impossible for someone to pay. No cruel or unusual punishment will be used against an accused or a convicted person.

Ninth Amendment
People’s Rights
Citizens have rights beyond those written in the Constitution and they cannot be taken away.

Tenth Amendment
States’ Rights
Those powers not given to the federal government are given to the states.
After the founders wrote the Constitution in 1787, they needed nine states to approve it before it became law. The Antifederalists, people who opposed the Constitution, feared a powerful national government. To get support from states like New York and Virginia, the Federalists, supporters of the Constitution, agreed to pass a bill or rights to limit government power.

The Congress wrote twelve amendments but the states only passed ten. On December 15, 1791, Virginia became the last state to ratify the Bill of Rights making them a part of the Constitution. Originally, the Bill of Rights applied only to limiting the power of the government of the United States and not state governments. However, by the mid-twentieth century, the courts began applying the Bill of Rights to state governments as well.

The Bill of Rights contains the very core of American liberty: limited government and individual freedom.