“The Law Givers” – Carved by Baltimore County resident Matthew Peloso in bas relief for what was the main courtroom installed as part of the 1958 addition to the Baltimore County Courthouse. The room was later reconfigured in 1975 for the Baltimore County Council as part of an extensive renovation. The Council held their first meeting in this room in January of 1976. Each figure is 32 inches high, 2 inches thick and 10 inches wide. The inscription on the wall above the Council seating was also chosen by the judges of the Baltimore County Circuit Court for the new main courtroom and are carved of wood.

The text for this document has been taken from a 1976 report which was initiated and prepared at the request of Councilman Norman W. Lauenstein. The research was conducted by Sally Tullis, Towson Area Branch, Baltimore County Public Library. The production was conducted by the Technical Services Department of the Baltimore County Public Library. Minor changes were made for editorial purposes.

The men chosen for the carvings were meant to personify ideas and civilizations which influenced our present day concepts about government. Their actions helped shape the laws we live by. Moral law, criminal law, civil law and public law are all represented, as are the contributions of ancient Egypt and Babylonia, the Orient, Jewish, Greek, Roman and English civilizations.

Hammurabi – “If a man has thrown a curse upon another man, and is not justified, the layer of the curse shall be slain.” - Code of Hammurabi

A Babylonian ruler named Hammurabi (c. 1792-1750 B.C.) saw the need for a civil law code and was farsighted enough to have his ministers gather together the laws of his kingdom into the famous Code of Hammurabi. Many of the laws in this code dealt with relationships among people – punishment for crimes against one another, regulations concerning business dealings, the laws of inheritance. Perhaps its most famous principal was that of “lex talionis” or the eye for an eye theory of justice.

John Marshall – “It is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is…If two laws conflict with each other, the courts must decide on the operation of each…This is the very essence of judicial duty.” - Marbury vs. Madison, (1 Cranch 137) 1803

John Marshall, the fourth Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, served from 1801 - 1835. During his long sojourn as Chief Justice, he clarified the role of the Supreme Court in our system of government, establishing through his decisions its power of “judicial review,” its right to federal and state laws and pronounce judgement on their constitutionality. He emphasized that the powers of the federal government are limited to those expressly granted by the Constitution, but at the same time recognized the supremacy of Federal law over that of the states if conflict should arise between the two.

Caesar – “Arms and laws do not flourish together.” – Plutarch, Lives: Julius Caesar

Long governed by the powerful few, Rome began under Julius Caesar (c. 100-44 B.C.) to serve the many faithful citizens who had helped build the mighty Roman Empire. Caesar brought political organization to the vast empire, and instituted agrarian reform designed to make distribution of wealth more equitable.
Napoleon – “My glory is not to have won forty battles; for Waterloo’s defeat will destroy the memory of as many victories. But what nothing will destroy, what will live eternally, is my Civil Code.” - Napoleon at St. Helena

The first modern legal code was the Code Napoleon (1804) or Code Civil. Although very much concerned with unifying Europe, Napoleon I of France (1769-1821) was an administrator as well as a soldier. His code embodied both the traditional French civil law and the principals which had long governed the Roman Empire. It was later used as a model by many other nations in Europe and Latin America as they attempted to formulate their own national code.

Solon – “Laws are like spiders’ webs, which stand firm when any light, yielding object falls upon them, while a larger thing breaks through them and escapes.” Plutarch, The Banquet of the Seven Wise Men

Solon {c. 639 – c. 559 B.C.} was a great Athenian statesman. He is credited with providing a foundation for the development of the Greek concept of democracy. Through his economic and political reforms, and his codification of the laws of the various city states, he made possible a more humane government, one responsive to all its citizens, not just the rich and powerful. He was a true reformer, especially in the field of criminal law. He modified the harsh justice of his predecessor, Draco, into a system whereby the punishment fit the severity of the crime, instead of imposing the maximum penalty {death} for almost any offense, however minor.

Confucius – “Virtue is not left to stand alone. He who practices it will have neighbors.” The Confucian Analects

Another great moral teacher was Confucius {c. 551-479? B.C.}. The principals inherent in his conversations and sayings were accepted as official state philosophy by Chinese governments from 500 B.C. until the 20th century. He emphasized respect for public authority and good citizenship. The idea of the Golden Rule found in the Ten Commandments was also important in Confucian thought, since he saw men as social creatures who needed to find a way to live together peacefully.

Justinian – “The precepts of the law are these: to live honorably, to injure no other man, to render to every man his due.” Justinian: Institutes

Another Roman ruler, Justinian I (483 – 565 A.D.), further centralized the Roman state. He directed his minister, Tribonian, to oversee the codification of Roman law into the Corpus Juris Civilis, which means the body of civil law. In this Justinian Code early Roman laws and legal principals were brought together and annotated with examples from case law. It is this code which formed the basis of much later European law.
Moses – “And Moses came and called for the elders of the people and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord commanded him.” *Exodus*, XIX, 7

Moses, the great Hebrew lawgiver, lived during the 13th century B.C. He led his followers out of Egypt to freedom at Canaan. There they began a new life, under the *Code of Moses*, a collection of moral principles which included the Ten Commandments. Moses also bequeathed to his people a legacy of criminal and liturgical law, but it is the Ten Commandments, entrusted to him by God, which have most influenced mankind.

Charlemagne – “The appellation of great has been often bestowed, and sometimes deserved, but Charlemagne is the only prince in whose favor the title has been indissolubly blended with the name.” – Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

In the early 800’s the mighty Charlemagne (742? – 814 A.D.) ruled the Roman Empire with much the same zeal for efficient administration shown by his two predecessors, Caesar and Justinian. His *Capitularies* or collections of laws were not in the form of a code. But they reflect an attempt to write down and keep track of administrative decisions having the force of law. Charlemagne also encouraged the writing down of tribal customs which were, in effect, a form of law.

William Blackstone – “It is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer.” – Blackstone, *Commentaries*

William Blackstone (1723 – 1780) helped to develop a truly English law. His famous *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, written in the 1760’s, brought a measure of order and clarity to the vast bulk of existing English law. Before the existence of his work, English law students had concentrated on the study of Roman law. His *Commentaries* also had a great influence on the teaching and practice of law in the American colonies and account in part for the great influence of English common law upon our legal system.

King John – “Magna Carta is such a fellow that he will have no sovereign.” – Sir Edward Coke, *Debate in the Commons*

With the signing of the *Magna Carta* in 1215 by King John of England (1167-1216) we see the emergence of another basic principal of government. The English nobles sought in this charter to establish limits to royal prerogative and to protect their feudal rights. At the same time it was written, the charter granted rights to the aristocracy and the ordinary man gained little. However, many of these rights were later applied to all citizens. Notable among them was the right to trial by one’s peers.
Menes – “The tradition which was still current in the days of the Greeks in Egypt, to
the effect that the two kingdoms were united by a King named Menes, is fully
confirmed by the evidence of the early monuments.” – James Henry Breasted,
A History of Egypt

As far back as 3100 B.C. we see the concept of federalism in government emerge, as
the legendary Menes (also called Narmer) worked to unite the kingdoms of northern
and southern Egypt. In doing so, one might say he established the office of Pharaoh
– a divine right king who had god-like power to protect and guide his people.
Indeed, the pharaohs were considered gods and worshipped as such. Menes, as the
founder of the first Egyptian dynasty, worked to centralize government in order to
make possible such communal enterprises as irrigation of the precious farmland so
necessary to the welfare of his people.

Sources-
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Photos courtesy of Teri Rising, Baltimore County Department of Planning