Pagan Vikings had pillaged, torched and butchered their way through the kingdoms of Britain for much of the 9th century. They had taken city after city, kingdom after kingdom until only the most powerful kingdom of Wessex remained. For seven years, King Alfred of Wessex fought off the “great heathen army.” But on the twelfth night of Christmas in January 878 A.D. Alfred was driven from his castle at Chippenham by Guthram, king of the Vikings. Alfred barely escaped with his family and bodyguards. The people of Britain now seemed destined to face a future of plunder, death and tyranny.

Alfred retreated to a tiny island hidden in the impenetrable swamps of Athelney where he and his father once hunted. Alfred could have slithered away to the European continent like so many other leaders had done. But he was determined to stand and fight for the liberty of his people. From his secret base on the highest hill in Wessex, Alfred could observe the Viking movements. With his small band of warriors using guerilla tactics, Alfred attacked the raiding parties of his entrenched foe. As he wiped out Guthrum’s scouting parties, he also cut off Guthrum’s supply lines and the people of Wessex saw that their king was not dead.¹

That spring, Alfred’s defeated noblemen learned the hard way the unbearable yoke of Viking pagan rule.

The looting, plundering, raping and kidnapping under the pagan warriors were devastating his people. “Anyone who had thought that life under the Vikings would be preferable to a campaign against them had been thoroughly corrected. It was now clear that freedom would have been worth continuing to fight for.”²

THE BATTLE OF EDINGTON

Five weeks after Easter, Alfred sent out a secret message through his spy network to all of his loyal nobles. They and their men were to meet him at Egbert’s stone, a memorial to his beloved grandfather, King Egbert. Alfred chose the day of Pentecost to gather for one last battle.

Traveling off road and through the forests, thousands of Saxons assembled at Egbert’s Stone to meet their king. Alfred must have been elated as he turned the last corner on the forest path. On the grasslands ahead he saw his still loyal fighting men rising to their feet—the armies of Wessex—5,000 strong. Alfred’s biographer captures the moment: “When they saw the king, receiving him as if one restored to life after suffering such great tribulations, they were filled with an immense joy.”³

The next day Alfred led them on a fifty-mile march. That night the army of nobles, farmers, commoners

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With such a ruthless pirate, the common practice of the day would have been for Alfred to drag Guthrum and his leaders out of the fortress and behead them all. What happened next was one of the most gracious acts of the age. Alfred offered Guthrum his life and a right to rule East Anglia if Guthrum would convert to Christianity, be baptized and submit to the Treaty of Wedmore. This treaty committed Guthrum to maintain equal rights for all his citizens, whether Saxon or Scandinavian.

Guthrum agreed to these terms. He signed a treaty with Alfred that began the long process of integrating into Britain the Scandinavians who were willing to live by the laws of a Christian nation. Guthrum left for East Anglia, but never forgot his vow. When the former pagan minted his own coinage he placed his new name, Aethelson, the Christian name Alfred gave him, on the coins. He was Alfred’s ally for the rest of his life.

**REBUILDING THE KINGDOM**

Alfred returned to power after his great victory at Edington, but his kingdom was impoverished and in shambles. Towns had been plundered, churches burned and his men exhausted from fighting. “Law was barely existent, literacy was effectively dead and Alfred was king of a wasteland.”

Alfred’s solution was revolutionary. His first concern was the safety and protection of the people. He built a network of thirty strong walled cities, called burhs, twenty miles apart, surrounded by moats. Each was defended by soldiers from the local community who had a personal stake in the safety of the city. These cities provided protection from enemy attack for the surrounding rural population. Because of the safety this network ensured, travelers and traders were free to travel and grow the economy. Prosperity was the result.

To reform his army of largely part-time farmers, Alfred turned to King Solomon’s biblical model of rotation of enlistments. His army was divided in half and rotated. His mobile offensive force had their own horses and carried provisions to respond instantly to any invasion. His other men were free to work their farms while providing defense for the fortified towns. Even though Alfred would lead his men in dozens of future battles with the Vikings he was never again defeated on the field.

The Vikings’ greatest advantage was their naval mobility made possible by their fast, shallow-draught longboats. They struck with lightning speed using Britain’s rivers, wa-
terways and surrounding seas. Alfred was the first English leader to create a naval force to overcome this advantage. He designed ships almost twice the size of the Viking vessels, with twice the manpower. These were the beginning of the English navy that expanded to rule the seas of the world up until the rise of America.

**ALFRED’S RENAISSANCE**

Alfred’s rebuilding project required something more than the rebuilding of towns, the reorganization of the army and the restarting of the economy. “The answer to his and his people’s problems was not weaponry but wisdom. He needed nothing less than a renaissance in learning. This alone would put an end to the Viking menace.”

Alfred was a student of history. From great historians like the venerable Bede he knew of a golden age in England which emerged soon after the pagan Saxon tribes had been converted. In those days the Scriptures were read, schools founded and voluntary obedience to the Bible and its liberating truths led to peace and prosperity. Alfred wrote, “…very often it has come to my mind … how there were happy times then throughout England; and how the kings … obeyed God and his messengers … and how they not only maintained their peace, morality and authority at home … they succeeded both in warfare and in wisdom…”

Alfred believed that the Vikings were a divine scourge to awaken the people to return to the Lord and be blessed. Alfred, an expert hunter, used a hunting metaphor as he wrote: “Our ancestors, who formerly maintained these places, loved wisdom, and through it they obtained wealth and passed it on to us. Here one can still see their track, but we cannot follow it.” He concluded that the people had lost their wealth as well as their wisdom, because “we did not wish to set our minds to the track.” His people were slipping back into pagan illiteracy.

Alfred believed that the future of England rested on a revival of faith and learning, especially at the local level. He said, “Local government ought to be synonymous with local Christian virtue; otherwise it becomes local tyranny, local corruption and local iniquity.” Alfred’s task, his greatest goal, was to help rebuild the Christian virtue and wisdom of his people.

Almost no one in Wessex could read when Alfred became king. Latin was the language known only by the elites: clerics, bishops and kings. The people had often been kept intentionally illiterate and therefore easy to control by their leaders. Since the Bible and literature were only in Latin, it was nearly impossible for a Saxon to gain the wisdom of the ages.

Like a modern corporate headhunter, Alfred searched for the best Christian scholars from Mercia, Wales and the Continent. He paid them well to help him teach literacy to the people. They then helped Alfred translate many of the great works of Christendom from Latin to English. Alfred himself translated many of the psalms of King David. The king personally translated Pastoral Care by Gregory the Great in which Alfred wrote; “As often as you can, free yourself from worldly affairs so that you may apply that wisdom which God gave you wherever you can. Remember what punishments befall us in this world when we ourselves did not cherish learning nor transmit it to other men.” He translated Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius and the Soliloquies of Augustine because these books would “turn the mind upward toward wisdom and to value this virtue more than any other earthly treasure.”

These translations were the seedbed of a movement toward literacy and the reading of God’s Word by all the people. Later kings would reverse Alfred’s bold move, but 700 years later, through men like William Tyndale, the Bible was printed in English by the thousands on the newly invented printing press. By the end of the 16th century, England would become a “people of the Book.”

**ALFRED’S LAW CODE**

Until Alfred, the laws of Wessex were a strange and muddled mixture of various laws, useless to an illiterate people—especially useless for Illiterate nobles expected to enforce the laws. Legal verdicts had more to do with power, wealth and class than the facts of a case. There was little justice or impartiality.
Alfred restructured the law codes of Wessex. With the Holy Scriptures as his foundation, he set forth a just legal system based upon the teachings of Jesus and the Laws of Moses. In his preface to his law code Alfred quoted the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” He then wrote: “If a man understood how to apply this one law alone he would need no domboc [law book].”

He began his law code with his own translation of the Ten Commandments from Latin to English. (Exodus 20:2-17) Included are other passages from the Law of Moses (Exodus 21 to 23) describing the clear application of the law to their society. These were followed by excerpts from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and a brief account of apostolic history and the growth of Christian law among the Christian nations.

“By arguing throughout his preface that justice must be an eternal principle, handed down through both Scripture and the legal codes of the land, Alfred established the framework for what would later be known as ‘common law,’ the foundation for the legal system of England for the following millennia, as well as for the legal systems of the former colonies of the British empire—including the United States … and others.” The common law tradition is established explicitly in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution.

Only in “common law” nations, even to our time, is there the guarantee of “equal justice” based on “inalienable, God-given rights” that cannot be taken away through the whims of rulers. Our heritage of freedom based upon God-given rights has its roots in Alfred’s common law and its appeal to God as the final authority, the ultimate Judge.

ALFRED’S LEGACY – SEEDBED FOR AMERICA

Having reigned for twenty-nine years, Alfred died in October of 899 A.D. His five children were well trained in the faith and continued their father’s reforms wholeheartedly. His grandson, Athelstan, at the Battle of Brunenburh in 937, defeated the last Viking resistance to a united Christian nation. Going forward this united country would be called England. But the people of England knew that it was Alfred, King of Wessex who laid the foundation for their new country: a nation that would carry the torch of Christian liberty to a new world called America.

“…He was a fierce warrior, a devout Christian ever thirsting for wisdom, deeply committed to justice, a lover of mercy, and a king who gave himself for his people. He was practically a myth and a much-needed reality. He was the king of the Whitehorse—Alfred the Great.”

— Marshall Foster

References:
2 Merkle, Benjamin, The White Horse King (Thomas Nelson, 2009) p. 107
5 Ibid, pgs. 166
6 Pollard, Op. Cit., ps 198
7 Ibid, p. 233
8 Keynes and Lapidge, Op. Cit. p. 124
9 Ibid, p. 125
12 Ibid. P. 199
13 Ibid, p. 200
14 Ibid, p. 234

Alfred rebuilt London in 792 and laid out its streets in a pattern that exists to this day. He also laid the foundations for many other cities in England.