

The History of Patent Law

A

The concept of intellectual property rights, particularly patent law, has played a pivotal role in the advancement of science, technology, and industry throughout history. Patents grant inventors exclusive rights to their inventions for a limited period, thereby encouraging innovation by offering a temporary monopoly as a reward. The origin of modern patent law can be traced back to early privileges granted to inventors and artisans, evolving into the complex legal frameworks that govern innovation today.

B

One of the earliest known systems resembling patent protection can be found in ancient Greece. In the Greek city-state of Sybaris, around 500 BCE, innovators were granted one-year monopolies on culinary inventions. However, these early systems were sporadic and lacked the institutional backing of modern legal systems. In medieval Europe, monopolies were often granted by royal prerogative, but they were more political tools than incentives for genuine innovation.

C

The first statutory patent system emerged in the Republic of Venice in 1474. The Venetian law provided that new and inventive devices, once disclosed, would grant the inventor exclusive rights for ten years. This law is widely recognized as the foundation of the modern patent system. It laid down key principles such as novelty, disclosure, and temporary protection, which remain central to patent law today.

D

In England, the evolution of patent law gained momentum during the

reign of Queen Elizabeth I. The Crown would issue "letters patent" to individuals, allowing them exclusive rights to produce or trade certain goods. However, these grants were often abused, leading to monopolies on everyday items. The widespread discontent culminated in the Statute of Monopolies in 1624, which restricted the Crown's powers and permitted patents only for "true and first inventors." This statute is considered a critical moment in patent law history, shaping the English legal tradition and influencing global frameworks.

E

During the Industrial Revolution, patent systems became increasingly relevant. As scientific discoveries and mechanical inventions proliferated, the need to protect intellectual property grew. In the United States, the Constitution granted Congress the power to issue patents, leading to the establishment of the U.S. Patent Office in 1790. The first U.S. patent was issued to Samuel Hopkins for a process of making potash, a component used in fertilizer. The simplicity and accessibility of the American system, which encouraged ordinary inventors to participate, helped foster a culture of innovation.

F

In the 19th and 20th centuries, patent systems expanded globally. Countries established formalized procedures for filing and granting patents, with many adopting similar principles: novelty, usefulness, and non-obviousness. As international trade increased, the need for cross-border protection became evident. The Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, signed in 1883, was one of the first international treaties to harmonize patent rights. Later, the establishment of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the

Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) provided further cohesion.

G

Despite its importance, patent law has not been without controversy. Critics argue that overly broad or vague patents can stifle innovation, particularly in fields like software and pharmaceuticals. Patent trolls—entities that acquire patents solely to sue others—pose additional challenges. Furthermore, the high costs of patent filing and litigation can create barriers for small inventors and developing countries. These debates have led to reforms and calls for more balanced systems that protect inventors while ensuring public benefit.

H

Today, patent law continues to evolve in response to technological advances. Emerging fields such as biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology raise novel legal questions about what constitutes an “invention” and who should be credited. As global innovation accelerates, the challenge for lawmakers is to create systems that promote progress while maintaining fairness and access.

Questions

Questions 1–5: Paragraph Matching

Match each statement with the correct paragraph, A–H.

You may use any letter more than once.

1. ___ An early attempt at international cooperation in patent law.
 2. ___ The misuse of monopoly privileges prompted legal reforms.
 3. ___ Patent law is facing new legal challenges due to emerging technologies.
 4. ___ The first formal legislative patent system was established in Europe.
 5. ___ Early examples of monopolies for inventions appeared in ancient history.
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Questions 6–9: Yes / No / Not Given

Do the following statements agree with the information in the reading passage?

Write YES if the statement agrees with the views of the writer.

Write NO if the statement contradicts the views of the writer.

Write NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this.

6. ___ The Statute of Monopolies completely abolished all forms of patents in England.
7. ___ The U.S. patent system was more inclusive than those in Europe during the 19th century.

8. __ Samuel Hopkins was the first person to invent fertilizer.
9. __ The Paris Convention discouraged smaller nations from joining international patent agreements.
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Questions 10–13: Summary Completion

Complete the summary below using words from the passage.

Write **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS** for each answer.

Patent law aims to reward innovation by granting inventors a limited 10. _____. One of the earliest official laws to formalize this system was enacted in 11. _____, requiring disclosure in exchange for protection. In England, letters patent granted by the monarch often led to public dissatisfaction, resulting in the 12. _____ in 1624. In more recent times, organizations like 13. _____ have tried to make international rules more uniform.

Answer Key

1. F
2. D
3. H
4. C
5. B
6. NO
7. YES
8. NO
9. NOT GIVEN
10. temporary monopoly
11. Venice
12. Statute of Monopolies
13. WIPO