

## The Charter Oak – Connecticut's Most Famous Tree

The "Charter Oak incident," though never fully proven as fact, remains one of the most exciting chapters in both Hartford and Connecticut history.

Thanks to the diplomacy of Gov. John Winthrop Jr., the General Court of Connecticut won a charter from King Charles II on Oct. 9, 1662. Among other things, the document legitimized all existing settlements in Connecticut, set the boundaries of the colony, and - most importantly - perpetuated the rights laid out in the Fundamental Orders, allowing the colonists a high degree of self-government.

But by the time James II assumed the throne 25 years later, England wanted greater integration of the New England colonies - and more centralized control. Sir Edmund Andros, assigned by the king to rule New York and all of the New England colonies in a single "Dominion of New England," demanded return of Connecticut's charter. After trying various strategies for accomplishing this, he finally marched to Hartford with an armed force to seize it. The following is legend:

On October 27, 1687, Andros' party met with Gov. Robert Treat and other colonists at the public meeting house. Andros again demanded surrender of the charter; Treat responded with a long speech in defense of the colony. The debate went on for hours. Eventually, candles had to be lit - darkness fell early at that time of year. With the Charter on the table between the opposing parties, the room suddenly went dark. Moments later, when the candles were re-lighted, the charter was gone. Captain Joseph Wadsworth is credited with swiping the document and hiding it nearby, in the trunk of a giant white oak before the home of Samuel Wylllys, one of the magistrates of the colony.

"This secreting of the charter in the great Charter Oak tree soon grew into one of Connecticut's cherished traditions," historian Albert V. Van Dusen wrote. "Whether or not the charter ever was actually put there, even for a few hours, is a matter of conjecture. It does seem fairly certain, though, that the charter actually was spirited away under cover of darkness." He noted that 28 years later, in 1715, the colony paid Wadsworth 20 shillings for "securing the Duplicate Charter of this Colony in a very troublesome season."

Yet, despite all the drama of that night, the colony effectively surrendered to Andros, who named Treat and John Allyn to his council and made various other Dominion appointments before leaving. Van Dusen observed, though, that Andros "undoubtedly felt vexed at his failure to obtain the charter." Moreover, the colonists had only recorded that he was taking control; they never made a positive vote of submission.

Andros' reign did not last long anyway. The spring of 1689 brought news of the Glorious Revolution in England. James II had fled to France; in Boston, Andros was arrested. Connecticut colonists convinced James' successors, William and Mary, to confirm the 1662 charter.

The tree itself lasted another century and a half as a cherished landmark. According to historian Ellsworth Grant, its base eventually reached a circumference of 33 feet. When a windstorm finally toppled it in 1856, the marching band belonging to gun maker Samuel Colt played funeral dirges on the site. In 1907, the Connecticut Society of Colonial Wars erected a monument at the corner of Charter Oak Avenue and Charter Oak Place, near the spot where the tree stood. The monument remains.

In tribute to the Charter Oak legend, Connecticut designated the white oak as the state tree.

The Charter Oak is Connecticut's official State Tree – an image of the Charter Oak was selected to emblazon the back of Connecticut's state quarter. Until very recently, every Connecticut school child was familiar with Hartford's Charter Oak and the stirring legend which planted the venerable tree firmly at the center of the state's cultural symbolism – the tree that played a pivotal role in saving a young colony from tyranny and preserving her people's freedom. The history (and legend) surrounding the Charter Oak is of interest to all Connecticut historians and may be of interest to Charter Oak Figure Skating Club members.

The great white oak stood taller than other trees in the forest long before circumstances rooted it deep in the colonial history of Connecticut. Ancient (perhaps 400-500 years old) at the time of Columbus' voyages to America, the tree had been an object of veneration by generations of native Americans, who had traditionally held their councils beneath its expanse. In 1614, the old tree became the property of Samuel Wyllys, one of the first landowners in what would come to be the city of Hartford. But according to legend, as Wyllys was busy clearing away the forest around his homestead and getting ever closer to the white oak, he was visited by a delegation of Indians fearful that their revered tree would be destroyed. The Indians begged him to spare the tree, explaining that it had originally been planted as a token of peace by a great sachem who had brought his people from the west to the Connecticut River valley, and that the appearance of its first leaves in spring was a signal from the Great Spirit to begin the spring planting. To the relief of the Indians, Wyllys left the ancient tree standing.

In 1662, Connecticut received its Royal Charter from England's Charles II. The Charter granted concessions to the Connecticut colonists' home rule making it the most liberal guarantee of rights enjoyed by a British colony in America, with the exception of Rhode Island. A quarter century later, King James II, in contempt for the colonies' chartered rights, attempted to seize the charter. The

monarch was upset by the number and variety of rights granted to the people by their separate charters, and wanted to bring all of the colonies together under a consolidated patent which made it unequivocally clear that the word of the King of England was law. The colonies would be “encouraged” to give up their charters to the crown. They would then be revoked. Sir Edmund Andros, who had been appointed by the Crown as governor of all of New England, began putting pressure on Connecticut by sending messengers into the colony, demanding that the precious Charter under which the people had lived more or less happily for a quarter-century be surrendered to the Crown. When Governor Treat refused, Andros responded with a threat to eliminate Connecticut. All of the colony’s lands east of the Connecticut River would be annexed to Massachusetts, while territory west of the river would become part of New York. In a last attempt to take control of the Charter, Andros personally appeared in Hartford at Moses Butler’s Tavern on the evening of October 26, 1687 to address Governor Treat and the Assembly on the meaning of treason.

By accident or as part of a conspiracy on the part of defenders of Connecticut’s rights, Guilford’s Andrew Leete knocked over two candelabra on the table, plunging the chamber into darkness. Captain Joseph Wadsworth, who was positioned outside the tavern, found himself in possession of the charter during the ensuing chaos. Wadsworth took it upon himself to hide the Charter safely inside the majestic white oak tree on the Wyllys estate. Wadsworth’s bold move served to preserve not only the document but the rights of the colonists. Thus, the tree earned its nickname – the “Charter Oak.”

The tree, which in 1687 seemed on the verge of collapse, continued to put out new growth for almost 170 years thereafter, until it was finally destroyed by a great storm on August 21, 1856. The city of Hartford and all of Connecticut began a period of civic mourning. On the day the Charter Oak fell, an honor guard was placed around the remains, Colt’s Band of Hartford played a funeral dirge, and an American flag was attached to the shattered trunk. At sunset, all of the bells of Hartford sounded in homage. From near and far the people of Connecticut came to gather even the smallest fragments of the oak to hold and to pass along to posterity as precious reminders of their heritage. At least three chairs, including the one used today by the Speaker of the House in the General Assembly, were fashioned from the wood of the Charter Oak, while acorns dropped by the tree were gathered and planted, to produce in time a forest of trees directly descended from the historic oak.