

# This Day in History... August 21, 1856

## Connecticut's Charter Oak

On August 21, 1856, Connecticut's famed Charter Oak Tree was struck down in a thunderstorm. The tree had become a legend in the state's history, reportedly hiding the colonial charter two centuries earlier.

Connecticut's most famous tree, the "Charter Oak," was revered by Native Americans who pleaded with an early settler not to cut it down. They told him, "It has been the guide of our ancestors for centuries as to the time of planting our corn; when the leaves are the size of a mouse's ears, then is the time to put the seed into the ground."

The Connecticut colony enjoyed a large degree of autonomy in its early years under the reign of British King Charles II. However, his successor, James II, wanted to consolidate power in the New World. Sir Edmund Andros was appointed governor-general by James and insisted that his appointment made all previous colony charters invalid.

In 1687, Andros traveled with an armed guard to Hartford to take control of the colony. He appeared at a legislative meeting and demanded that the charter be turned over to him. Members of the legislature debated with Andros, and then suddenly, the candles went out. When they were lit again, the charter had vanished. According to tradition, the Connecticut Colony Charter was passed out a window to Joseph Wadsworth, who fled with it to keep it safe. He stashed the charter in a hollow bowl on a great oak tree, where the British soldiers could not find it.



*The Charter Oak was estimated to be 1,000 years old.*

Andros' rule as governor ended in 1689, after James II's fall from power. The charter remained the supreme law of Connecticut until a new constitution was adopted in 1818. As the hiding place of Connecticut's charter – its early legal identity – the Charter Oak became a beloved symbol of the state.

Unfortunately, a violent thunderstorm struck Hartford on August 21, 1856, and blew the tree down. Lumber from the tree was used to make chairs for the state's speaker of the House and president of the Senate, as well as the governor's desk. These are on display at the Hartford Capitol Building. Artist Frederic Church also made a chair that is displayed at his former home, the Olana State Historic Site in New York. Additionally, a wooden baseball was made and given to the Charter Oak Base Ball Club of Brooklyn. In 1868, supporters of Andrew Johnson gave him a cane made of wood from the Charter Oak.



*The Charter Oak had been considered for this Connecticut Statehood Bicentenary stamp.*

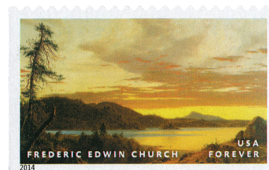
In 1905, a granite monument was placed at the corner of Charter Oak Avenue and Charter Oak Place. It is inscribed, "Near this spot stood the Charter Oak, memorable in the history of the colony of Connecticut as the hiding place of the charter October 31, 1687. The tree fell August 21, 1856." Because of its history, the Charter Oak (White Oak) was adopted as the Connecticut state tree on April 16, 1947.



*The Connecticut Tercentenary stamp pictures the Charter Oak.*



*The Connecticut state flag includes oak leaves in honor of the Charter Oak.*



*Artist Frederic Church made a chair from the wood of the Charter Oak after it was blown down.*

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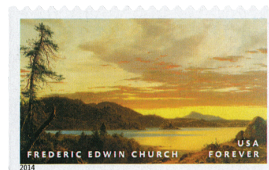
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