

The Charter Oak

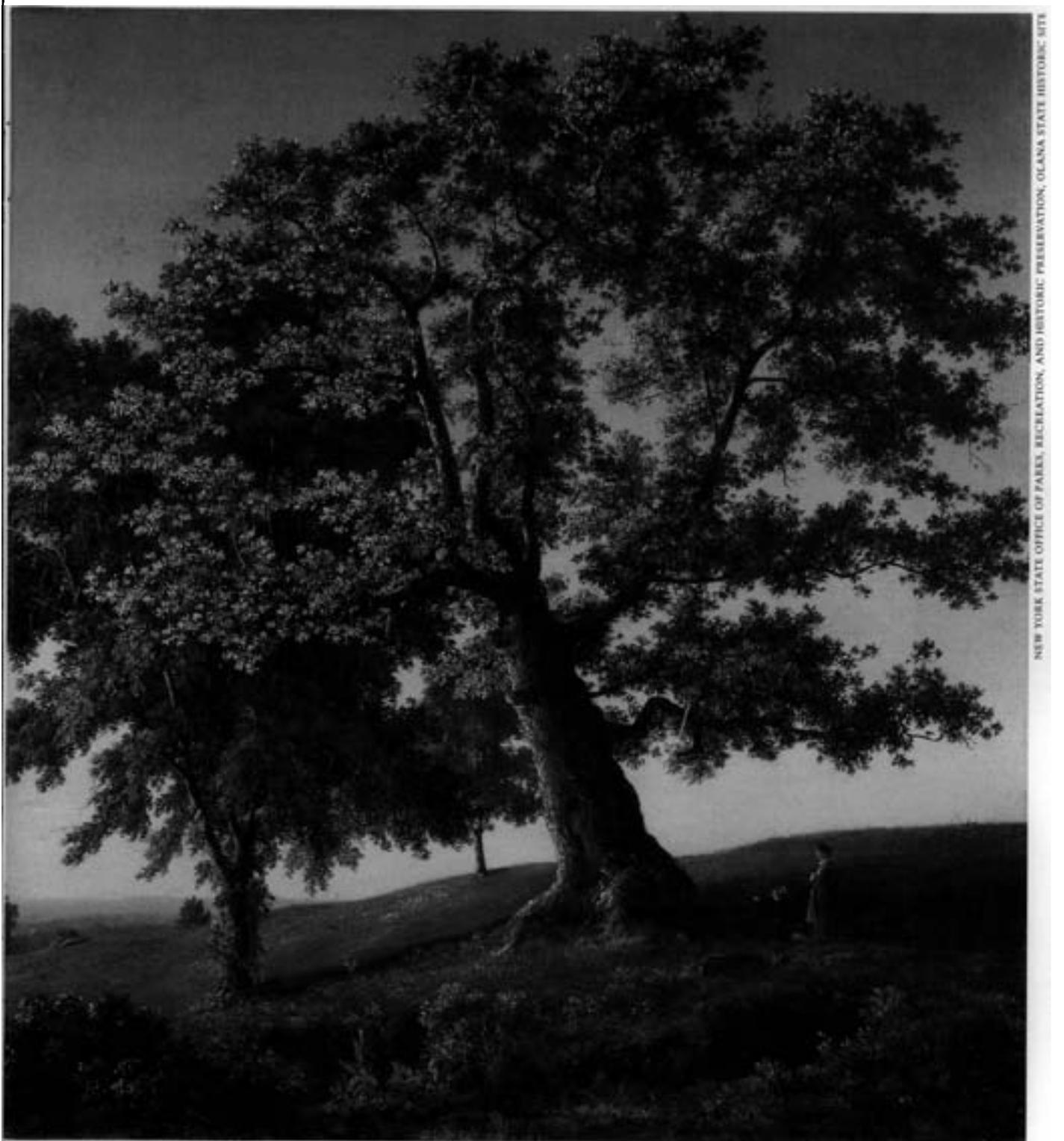
Gayle Barndow Samuels

Hartford is the home of the Connecticut Historical Society. Sitting there in a quiet room at a library table, I am reading about a funeral for a tree. Centered between two items urging support for the newly formed Republican Party's antislavery candidate, the soldier-explorer John C. Frémont, a black-banded front-page obituary in the August 21, 1856, *Hartford Courant* proclaims a tree's death. "The Charter Oak is Prostrate! Our whole community, old and young, rich and poor, were grieved to learn that the famous old CHARTER OAK, in which Wadsworth hid King Charles' Charter of the old colony of Connecticut, in 1687, at the time when James 2nd demanded its return, had been prostrated by the wind." The article goes on to say that "no tree in the country has such legendary associations," and to tell of a dirge being played at noon by Colt's Armory Band and of the bells all over the city tolling at sundown "as a token of universal feeling, that one of the most sacred links that binds these modern days to the irrevocable past, had been suddenly parted."

At the time of its death the Charter Oak had been a Hartford institution for almost two centuries. The tree was fully mature when colonial Hartford was founded. It was then, according to the enduring tale alluded to in the obituary, that the colonists, finding their freedom threatened by their monarch's decision to revoke their liberal charter, had turned to the tree and hidden the cherished document in a cavity within its trunk.

Newspapers across the country and as far away as England sympathetically reported the tree's death—from the *New York Times* to the *Louisville Journal*, *Springfield Daily Republican*, *Washington Daily Union*, and *London Times*. Grief, followed closely by a feeding frenzy among those eager to secure a fragment

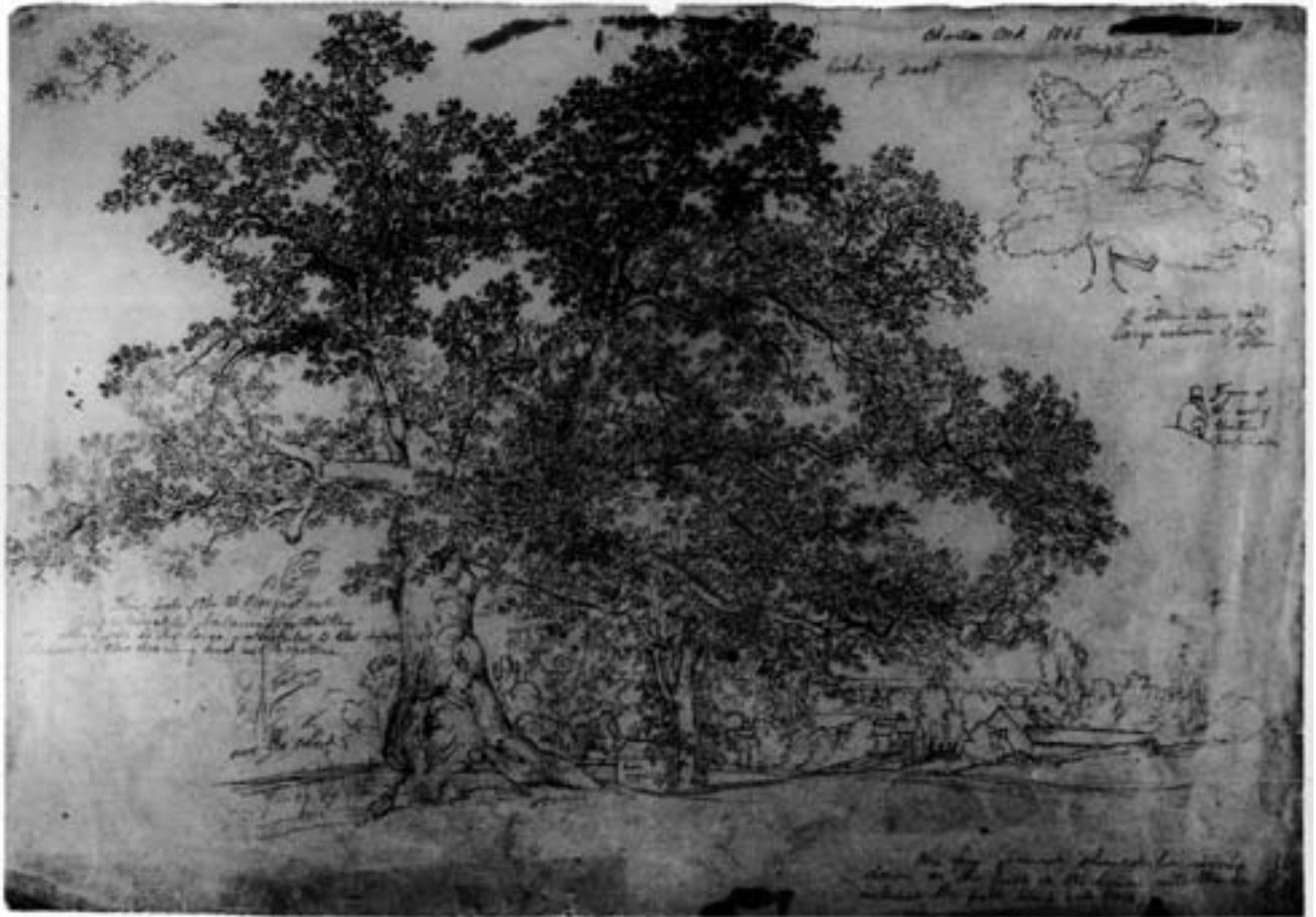




NEW YORK STATE OFFICE OF PARKS, RECREATION, AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION, GLANA STATE HISTORIC SITE

Frederic Edwin Church, The Charter Oak, looking southwest Oil on canvas, 1846

NEW YORK STATE OFFICE OF PARKS, RECREATION, AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION, OLANA STATE HISTORIC SITE



Frederic Edwin Church, *The Charter Oak, looking east*. Inscribed with notes made by Church, including the word “character” in the upper left. Ink and graphite drawing, August–September 1846.

of the sacred relic, reached into Texas, Alabama, Georgia, the newly admitted state of California, and the Minnesota Territory. The president of Jefferson College in Mississippi requested a piece as did Hartford residents who “bowed with age, and whose eyes were bleared with time begged a sprig in commemoration.”¹ Hartford and Connecticut chairs of state were fashioned from its wood, as were earrings, bracelets, goblets, beads, Bibles, a lamp and screen depicting heroes of the Revolution, and three pianos, which, by using the new technique of veneering, combined a celebration of nineteenth-century technology with commemoration of the ancient oak.²

Hartford resident Mark Twain quipped that he had seen enough pieces of the Charter Oak made into “a walking stick, a dog collar, needle case, three-legged stool . . . toothpick . . . to build a plank road from Hartford to Salt Lake

City.”³ Based on the estimate of one newspaper editor that in 1856 ten thousand pieces of the tree made their way across the country, Twain might have exaggerated only a wee bit. Although it amuses us to learn that some Charter Oak relics were actually made from elm, there was nothing counterfeit in the fervor that swept America in the wake of the tree’s demise. Flag-draped, it had been given a hero’s funeral, and the nation had responded with that mixture of respect and memento-gathering that it would dust off again less than nine years later as solemn onlookers placed pennies on the tracks when the train carrying Abraham Lincoln’s coffin passed by.

Lincoln’s presidency and the Civil War were still several years away when the Charter Oak fell, but the tree’s death was clearly a unifying symbol for the nation during a time of increas-

ing dissension. Portents of the coming conflict had been spewing forth like volcanic ash: the Missouri Compromise excluding slavery from a portion of the Louisiana Purchase; the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; the battle over Kansas, which had required federal troops to maintain order between pro- and antislavery factions; and the continued drumroll of states declaring their slavery sentiments as they entered the union. Political issues hung heavy in the air, but economic and cultural matters also claimed national attention.

It was a time when the advance of American industrialism, especially the extractive industries that depend on natural resources such as trees, was leaving an ever-greater mark on the common landscape and the collective consciousness. Industrialization created wealth much more rapidly than agriculture ever had, enriched a newly enlarged mercantile class, and populated factories and mills with immigrants, many of whose ethnic roots differed from those of the early colonists. Home-based production was being replaced by newer industrial modes. There was a growing awareness that idealized the past—and glorified its symbols, such as the ancient trees.

The Charter Oak fell during a time when Americans were trying to establish a national culture. Europeans had been busily mining their pasts searching out their “primitive, tribal, barbaric origin[s].” “Americans,” the historian Perry Miller explains, “tried to answer by bragging about the future, but that would not serve . . . [so] many of our best minds went hard to work to prove that we too were a nation in some deeper sense than mere wilfulness.” What emerged was an American culture that was “rooted in the soil.”⁴

Our forebears, then, sought their “identity in their relationship to the land they had settled” and looked to the wonders of the landscape to provide “points of mythic and national unity” not confined to any religion or sect. The genteel tourist pilgrimages of the 1820s and 1830s to places like Niagara Falls, Lake George, or the Catskills reflect that search for a nature-inspired cultural idiom by the part of the population with leisure, money, a broadly defined cultural literacy, and the ability to secure lodging in a network of inns and hotels not open to

everyone. Others saw in the continuing trans-Atlantic trade in new and exotic American plant species an affirmation of the more-than-raw-material value of the American landscape.⁵

And by the 1850s, the entire nation was awed and energized by a specific piece of the American landscape—trees. Reports of Yosemite and the Big Trees (*Sequoia gigantea*) rippled from west to east. The realization that America had living monuments of its own—older by far than Europe’s constructed landscape, reaching back beyond the beginnings of the Christian era—was a matter of national pride.

American scenery was also attracting the attention of serious artists. Influenced by European Romanticism, a school of American artists called the Hudson River School was celebrating the scope and scale of America’s natural riches and, in the process, founding our first truly national school of art. Called “priests of the natural church” by the art historian Barbara Novak, such men as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church, Asher Brown Durand, Jasper F. Cropsey, and Albert Bierstadt, they converted “the [American] landscape into art” and, in the process, created an “iconography of nationalism.”⁶ They produced a body of work revealing the sweeping grandeur of the American continent in such monumental canvasses as Bierstadt’s *Mount Whitney—Grandeur of the Rockies*, as well as its more intimate treasures, such as Cole’s and Church’s depictions of the Charter Oak.

Cole, who also wrote poetry condemning the widespread destruction of America’s forests (“The Complaint of the Forest” and “The Lament of the Forest” for example), produced a sketch of the oak, and Church did several sketches and two paintings. As Gerald Carr, who has written the catalogue raisonné of Church’s work, explains, “because it was situated only a few blocks from the family residence on Trumbull Street, Church must have passed by the Charter Oak many times during his youth, and doubtless he was nourished visually by images of the tree.” Said to be “one of the first things a stranger visiting Hartford generally wishes to visit,” in 1844 the tree that had preserved democracy was chosen as the backdrop for a Whig convention held “virtually beneath its branches.”

In his 1846 painting of the tree Church included two symbolic figures, presumably a mother and son; the former “passes on her knowledge of the tree to her young son who represents the next generation. The boy already has begun gathering fragments of the sacred tree.” The painting was prescient. Church himself was among the collectors of the tree’s fragments after it fell. The collection at Olana, his home in New York State’s Hudson River Valley, includes “two partial cross sections, one of a branch and the other of a root, and a letter opener with a wooden handle, all inscribed ‘Charter Oak.’”⁷

Church, Cole, and Brownell, however, were hardly the first, or the only, artists to produce renderings of the famous tree. Ralph Earl included the tree in a 1790s portrait of Mary Wyllys Pomeroy (the tree stood on the Wyllys property), George Francis painted it, and in the 1820s “when it became the custom to decorate earthenware with printed views of historical objects and places, the tree was celebrated on china.” Another “group of images is clustered in the 1830s . . . [and] include[s] schoolgirl watercolors, professional oil paintings, two lithographs, and a skillful pen and ink drawing by a Hartford engraver made on the basis of exact measurements of the tree. The lithographs and the wood engraver’s drawings are extremely important,” decorative arts expert Robert Trent explains, “for they demonstrate that inexpensive prints of the tree were in demand among those who did not have access to a piece of it.”⁸

Pruned of its images and artifacts, however, the Charter Oak emerges even more clearly as a storehouse of national memory. Its role in the 1687 myth of colonial legitimacy and freedom gave it fame and a new name; but this particular white oak had also served Native Americans as a council tree “under which they had met for generations.” As a guide to the time for planting their corn, and as a landmark where “at flood time, they tied their canoes to its branches.” Reaching even farther back, it stood as a primordial visitor, a living reminder of the vast woodlands that had once covered New England.⁹

Trees are the oldest and the largest of all living things. For the centuries before buildings exceeded their height, trees dominated the land-

scape. They still do in many places. Their long life, stature, and seasonal regeneration have made them objects of wonder and worship. Some believe that the tracery of arching branches against the sky inspired the design of Europe’s great Gothic cathedrals and that the quality of filtered light experienced in the forest is what stained glass is meant to duplicate. Why not? What else negotiates the space between heaven and earth as felicitously as a mature tree? Most widely revered among the trees, the oak is called Jupiter’s tree because of its status as king of the forest; it is also, as Michael Pollan points out, “the tree most often struck by lightning, and so may be thought to enjoy a special relationship with the heavens.”¹⁰

The Charter Oak was a white oak (*Quercus alba*), a deciduous tree that can grow to one hundred feet and have a crown spread that exceeds its height. The *cognoscenti* speak of it in superlatives. “I have selected the alba,” Thomas Jefferson wrote to a French gardener to whom he was sending seeds, “because it is the finest of the whole family, it is the only tree with us which disputes for pre-eminence with the Liriodendron [the tulip tree]. It may be called the Jupiter while the latter is the Juno of our groves.”¹¹ And in 1884 when Charles Sprague Sargent, director of the Arnold Arboretum, wrote the first comprehensive catalog of North American trees, his *Silva of North America*, he had this to say about the white oak:

The great size that it attains in good soil, its vigor, longevity, and stately habit, the tender tints of its vernal leaves when the sunlight plays among them, the cheerfulness of its lustrous summer green and the splendor of its autumnal colors, make the White Oak one of the noblest and most beautiful trees of the American forest; and some of the venerable broad-branched individuals growing on the hills of New England and the middle states realize more than any other American tree, the ideal of strength and durability of which the Oak has been the symbol in all ages and all civilized countries.¹²

Natural historian Donald Culross Peattie writes, “if Oak is the king of trees, as tradition has it, then the White Oak, throughout its range, is the king of kings. The Tuliptree can grow taller, and the Sycamore in the days of the



R. U. Piper M.D., *The Charter Oak*, drawing taken from the housefront of the tree's owner. According to Piper, both trunk and canopy measured about seventy feet; the diameter at the ground was sixteen feet. He wrote that "some thirty persons have been at one time within its cavity." Engraving, 1855.

virgin forest had gigantic boles, but no other tree in our sylvia has so great a spread. . . . Indeed, the fortunate possessor of an old White Oak owns a sort of second home, an outdoor mansion of shade and greenery and leafy music."¹³

A slow-growing tree, therefore not likely to reach old age quickly, the oak waits until maturity to really make a statement. White oaks sometimes reach an exceptional size. Wye Oak in Wye Mills, Maryland, for example, has a circumference of 382 inches (at breast height, or

4 1/2 feet above ground level) and measured 96 feet tall with a crown spread of 119 feet in 1996; its estimated age then was over 400 years.¹⁴

But there are older white oaks. At 515 years old, the Columbus Oak in Solebury, Pennsylvania—"so named because it predates Columbus' arrival in the Western Hemisphere"¹⁵—may be one of the oldest white oaks in the eastern United States. There are even older members of the oak genus, *Quercus*, such as the Angel Oak on John's Island, South Carolina. Named after

the nineteenth-century owners of the property on which it stands, the Angel Oak is a live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) believed to be about fourteen hundred years old.¹⁶

On these shores Native Americans were the first to separate the trees from the forest. This was a task of more than philosophical interest to a farmer—creating fields generally means destroying forests—especially a farmer confronted with the once-dense forests of southern New England. Long before the first colonists arrived, as William Cronon points out in *Changes in the Land*, Native American farmers had established fields by repeatedly burning the fallen trees and underbrush. The colonists continued to use some burning to expand their fields, along with girdling and cutting of trees, and they added extensive cutting to support their lumbering. Still, remnants of the forest dotted even the cultivated landscape, and because fire had long been the method of choice for clearing, the more fire-resistant species of hickory, chestnut, and oak achieved a new dominance in the eastern countryside.

The Charter Oak, then, was first of all a survivor of the forest—trees do not stand alone unless they are made to do so—and secondly, a valued part of the Native American landscape. To the agricultural tribes of southern New England, where corn provided about 65 percent of their caloric intake, determining the correct time for planting was crucial to survival. The cultivators were women and, according to the historian of science Carolyn Merchant, they used a variety of ecological indicators as guides: the spring runs of alewives, the position of the stars, and “the spring growth of the leaves of the white oak to the size of a mouse’s ear.”¹⁷ In the 1630s, when the land the tree stood on became the property of George Wyllys, a “deputation of Indians representing the former occupants of the place” came asking that the oak be spared. And it was. The tree, as the librarian of the Connecticut Historical Society, W. I. Fletcher, commented in 1883, thus “became an interesting link between the prehistoric and the modern.”¹⁸

The request would not have seemed strange to the colonists. They, too, were an agricultural people; they understood the importance of determining the correct time to plant crops.

And they were familiar with the oak. It is a tree of both the Old World and the New.

The first Europeans to settle Connecticut were the Dutch. They bought the land for their Hartford settlement from the Pequot and built a trading post there in 1633. That same year English members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony bought land from the Nawaas tribe and established a settlement near Hartford. By 1635, when John Winthrop arrived with the first official claim to the land on the part of the English authorities—a deed from the Earl of Warwick—three English towns surrounded the soon-to-be-abandoned Dutch trading post. Four years later these towns drafted and signed the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, incorporating provisions for governance that provided for the election of officials, the supremacy of the General Court, and the collection of taxes. The Orders remained in effect until 1662, when Charles II issued the Connecticut Charter, a liberal document that superseded but endorsed the limited self-government the colonists had already set up under their Fundamental Orders.

This arrangement worked as long as Charles II was on the throne, but when James II succeeded his brother, he moved to scrap the Charter and subsume Connecticut, along with all of New England, under the rule of Sir Edward Andros, his appointed governor of New York.

What followed has become the stuff of legend. On October 31, 1687, Andros came seeking the Charter. The colonists understood that its transfer into his hands would mark the end of their limited independence. In a moment that includes the best of theater, magic, and playground strategy, the document mysteriously disappeared at the moment when it was about to be handed over, having been secreted in the oak by Captain Joseph Wadsworth. Although the event itself was magical, without its sequel the colonial action would have been a minor skirmish and not a triumph. Because in 1689, after James II fled England and William and Mary assumed the crown, Andros was displaced and Connecticut’s Charter, never having been officially rescinded, was considered still valid.

Sadly, no contemporary accounts of the event exist. The first recorded mention of the Charter Oak incident came in 1715 when the Connecticut General Assembly voted a stipend to Joseph

Wadsworth for “securing” the charter “in a very troublesome season when our constitution was struck at, and in safely keeping and preserving the same ever since unto this day.” Over the next ninety years the story was embellished by various accounts, most notably one in 1759 by Roger Wolcott, a former governor of Connecticut, which indicates that after the Charter was laid on the table “all the candles were snuffed out at once.” In the time it took to relight the candles, the Charter had vanished. A 1797 account identified the location of the “ancient hollow tree on the property of the Wyllys family in Hartford,” and by 1805 all of the elements of the legend were in place when Abiel Holmes, in *American Annals*, mentioned “the large hollow oak tree, which to this day is regarded with veneration, as the preserver of the constitution of the colony.”¹⁹

Maps began to note the tree’s location in 1846 (during that period of seeking a cultural idiom in the landscape), and soon after it fell the two roads that intersect at the corner where it stood were renamed Charter Oak Avenue and Charter Oak Place. If you visit that eponymous intersection you will find a very small enclosed park planted with a young white oak and featuring a treelike column erected by the Society of Colonial Wars with an inscription praising the former oak for its role “as the hiding place of the Charter.” If you stay long enough you will know you are at a meeting place, a place where people come and go and congregate, next to the monument, in the scant shade of the young white oak planted as a reminder of those earlier deeds.

The Charter Oak, then, has served as the preserver of a limited democracy, as a symbol of national identity deeply rooted in the American soil, and as a place for us to come together, to find that evanescent ideal we call community, or “company,” as the poet said. “To plant trees,” the gardener Russell Page wrote, “is to give body and life to one’s dreams of a better world.”²⁰ Exactly what the Charter Oak is all about.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Hartford Courant*, August 24, 1856.
- ² Robert F. Trent, “The Charter Oak Artifacts,” *Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* (Summer 1984), 133–138.

- ³ Mark Twain, “Charter Oak,” *Alta California*, March 3, 1868
- ⁴ Perry Miller, *Nature’s Nation*, Cambridge Harvard University Press (1967), 11–12.
- ⁵ John F. Sears, *Sacred Places American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*, NY: Oxford University Press (1989), 4–5.
- ⁶ Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture. American Landscape and Painting 1825–1875*, NY: Oxford University Press (1980), xxii, 9. 15.
- ⁷ Gerald L. Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: Catalogue Raisonné of Works of Art at Olana State Historic Site*, NY: Cambridge University Press (1994), 93, 95, 94.
- ⁸ Trent, “The Charter Oak Artifacts,” 129, 127.
- ⁹ The first quote can be found in Anson T. McCook’s address before the Society of the Founders of Hartford on the 250th Anniversary of the Hiding of the Charter, October 31, 1937, and the second in *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin* (July 1956), 67.
- ¹⁰ Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education*, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press (1991), 160.
- ¹¹ Jefferson’s letter to Madame Tessé can be found in Allen Lacy’s *The American Gardener. A Sampler*, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux (1988), 169–170.
- ¹² Charles Sprague Sargent, *The Silva of North America*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin (1890), 8. 19.
- ¹³ Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin (1950), 95–196.
- ¹⁴ Whit Bronaugh, “National Register of Big Trees,” *American Forests* (January/February 1994), 28.
- ¹⁵ Jan Murphy, “512-Year-Old Oak Tree Needs a Helping Hand,” *Bucks County Intelligencer*, August 10, 1995, A1, 8
- ¹⁶ Ruth M. Miller and Linda A. Lennon, *The Angel Oak Story*, Charleston, SC: Tradd Street Press (1994), 9.
- ¹⁷ Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*, Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press (1989), 77.
- ¹⁸ W. L. Fletcher, *The Story of the Charter Oak*, Hartford: Case, Lockwood & Bramard (1883), 34–35.
- ¹⁹ Diana Ross McCain, “The Ol’ Oak Tree,” *Connecticut Magazine*, November 1987, 164–166.
- ²⁰ Russell Page, *The Education of a Gardener*, London: Collins (1962), 173.

Gayle Brandow Samuels is the principal author of *Women in the City of Brotherly Love*. This excerpt is from *Enduring Roots Encounters with Trees, History, and the American Landscape* by Gayle Brandow Samuels, copyright © 1999 by Gayle Brandow Samuels. Reprinted by permission of Rutgers University Press.