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Exploiting the Legend of the Charter Oak

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There is perhaps no greater Connecticut legend than that of the Charter Oak. The very words immediately conjure up the story of how, on October 27, 1687, Joseph Wadsworth, in order to safeguard Connecticut's Colonial Charter, removed the 1662 document from a table in a suddenly darkened room in a Hartford inn, just as Sir Edmund Andros, agent of King James II, was about to confiscate it. Wadsworth allegedly ran from the inn and secreted the Charter in the hollow of a white oak tree on the property of George Wyllys. King James sought the Charter as part of his plan to curtail the rights of English colonists granted by his predecessor, King Charles II, and establish the Dominion of New England. It took some time for the legend to become legendary. There is no contemporary mention of the events related in the legend, and the official records of the Colony of Connecticut from May 1678 to June 1689 are silent regarding the removal of the Charter. Whether Andros got the goods or not, the Charter retained its power in Connecticut. At the outbreak of the American Revolution, the General Court declared that the Charter would continue to serve as Connecticut's governing document. The General Court also voted to absolve Connecticut residents from all allegiance to the British Crown, saying, in effect, that they should simply ignore all references to the King in the Charter. In fact, the Charter, heavily amended over the years, continued to so function until ratification of the Constitution of 1818.



*Miniature Goblet,
2 ⁷/₈ inches tall*

The Charter Oak legend first surfaced in the late 1790s, possibly as part of a post-Revolutionary euphoria and Connecticut chest-thumping, since the legend posited a nearly 100-year history of resistance to tyranny that no other state could claim. The legend was bolstered by the existence of the Charter Oak itself, which became a national icon of political freedom and an early tourism destination.

Connecticut regarded the fall of the Charter Oak in a violent storm in August 1856 as a major calamity. A Hartford Courant headline proclaimed, "The Charter Oak is Prostrate!" The Colt Armory Band played funeral dirges at the site, and Lydia Sigourney wrote a Victorian funeral poem. Photographs of the fallen tree were offered for sale. Charles DeWolf Brownell, a local artist, produced four paintings of the Charter Oak as it stood before its fall, done from pencil sketches made earlier. Over the years, Brownell's image of the Charter Oak became the generally accepted view of the revered tree.

Items made from the wood of the fallen Charter Oak became highly desirable as tokens of the tree's role in the history of political freedom. With the demise of the Charter Oak itself, and as the supply of Charter Oak wood out of which to craft mementos dwindled, the use of its name and its image increased. Private individuals, companies, and organizations, mostly in the greater Hartford area, have consistently used the name and image of the Charter Oak as both an historical icon and as a marketable symbol of stability and trustworthiness.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, "reverent" uses of the image and name, mindful of the Charter Oak's place in history, have coexisted with more commercial uses, although the typically subdued, restrained commercialization of the name and image suggests that appreciation for the tree's long-standing historical significance may have curbed less-appropriate uses.

Belief in the legend of the Charter Oak has declined over the years. But the continuing use of the name "Charter Oak" and its image indicates an ongoing public awareness of Connecticut's history coupled with an awareness of the branding possibilities associated with Connecticut's quintessential political legend and icon.

Here are images of objects either made of pieces of the Charter Oak or using its name or image. All are in the collection of the Museum of Connecticut History in Hartford and many are on view in the Museum's exhibition "Liberties and Legends."

The Museum of Connecticut History is located in the Connecticut State Library at 231 Capitol Avenue in Hartford. The museum is open Monday through Friday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Contact the museum at (860) 757-6535 or at www.museumofcthistory.org.



Standing more than five feet tall, the Charter Oak Chair featured in this c 1915 postcard is the largest, most famous item carved from the fallen oak. It resides in the Connecticut State Senate chambers in Hartford



Herbert's Inc., of Ansonia marketed Charter Oak Clothes in the 1950's.