

# Thomaston & the Charter Oak

W.J. Duffney

*Part of the enjoyment of philately is researching the historical background surrounding the items in our collections. Before turning to the Thomaston fancy cancellation, we review the story of the Charter Oak. It has been told and retold so many times over the years that fact has been mixed with fiction, legend has become myth. So, we always take it with a grain of salt. It is surprising, however, to find that many of the details thought questionable can be corroborated with memoirs or written statements of those who were there. Adding more hyperbole than is already present has been avoided, mostly...*

Old it was — very old. Older than living memory. Posthumous ring counters estimated that it was over 700 years old. It ruled the landscape when Dutchman Adrian Block, the first European to travel up the Connecticut River, saw it in 1614. We know this because he wrote about it in his journal. The indigenous local tribes had been holding their council meetings under its protective canopy for generations. During times of seasonal flooding they secured their canoes conveniently to its branches. This great white oak was revered long before it became an iconic symbol of the American Revolution and the State of Connecticut itself.

Big it was, too — very big. You could say that it was humongous and actually be using the word properly this time. Massive, somehow gothic, gnarly limbs meandered out in all directions seemingly unaffected by Newton's Law of Gravity. The tree and branches measured about seventy feet across while the trunk was said to be 33 feet in circumference.

About 1638 George Wyllys, third Governor of Connecticut, built a mansion on a site which became known as Wyllys Hill. The stately home was the largest thus far built in the area. Wyllys fortunately spared one venerated oak from clearing during construction. The Suckiag Indians had pleaded him to do so; after all, it was their beloved ancestral *Peace Tree*. From this estate

the Wyllys family helped govern the Colony and State of Connecticut for decades.

The English settlers of Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield wrote and adopted the *Fundamental Orders*, considered the first constitution in America, in 1639. The document established a government of free-men without mention of any outside sovereign power. The Connecticut Colony was therefore established without a properly authorized charter from the king. It was virtually operating as an independent state. Even so, it was decided to apply for a charter of liberties like the other colonies had from King Charles II.

John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was the most ardent supporter of Charles I in New England. His grandson John Winthrop, known as 'Winthrop the Younger' and was governor of Connecticut at the time, negotiated the charter. It was hoped that Charles II would treat him with kindness because of his family ties. The plan worked; the Connecticut Charter of 1662 granted very liberal rights and major concessions to home rule.

King James II, who succeeded Charles II, intensely disliked the New England colony charters and their lack of conformity. In 1686 Sir Edmund Andros was appointed "Captain General and Governor in Chief in and over the Colonies of Massachusetts Bay and New Plymouth,

the Provinces of New Hampshire and Maine, and the Narragansett county or King's Province." James II wanted to consolidate control over the colonies by recalling the charters, so ordered Andros to confiscate them. Connecticut did not comply.

Andros, whom the colonists judged to be arrogant and tyrannical, took this affront badly and decided to travel to Connecticut himself to demand they turn over the Charter. He sent a letter announcing that he would be present to address the General Assembly in Hartford which met on October 26, 1687, at Moses Butler's Tavern on Main Street. He arrived in a procession intended to intimidate led by two blasting trumpeters and riding on a magnificent steel gray horse accompanied by a force of "twenty-five or thirty red coated soldiers with small guns and short lances in the tops of them." Some reported that there were as many as seventy troops with him. For their part the local Hartford militia took up positions along the route to keep an eye on the menacing redcoats.



*Sir Edmund Andros*

Connecticut's then Governor Robert Treat, known to have been long-winded, presided over the afternoon meeting at the tavern. As the day wore on towards evening two seven-branched candelabra were lit to illuminate the room. When Sir Edmond finally got to address the assembly, he wasted no time in pointing out that he was the King's Governor of all New England and that they in turn were all subjects of the king. He demanded that they surrender the charter without further delay. Failing to do so would be considered a treasonous act. It was threatened that the Connecticut Colony might be split up

by adding half of it to Massachusetts and the other half to New York. The real possibility of a confrontation with firearms then and there charged the atmosphere.

Just prior to the meeting a copy of the Connecticut Charter was placed in a locked blanket chest and brought to the Wyllys mansion for safe keeping. (The British authorities seem not to have known that there were actually three copies.) Governor Treat, realizing the gravity of the situation, sent Captain Joseph Wadsworth to retrieve the charter. Meanwhile, the assemblymen began a raucous debate over whether or not to hand it over. Each stood making his arguments while the rest shouted out their support or dissatisfaction with the speaker from their seats.

At this point Captain Wadsworth returned with the chest which was opened by Governor Treat. Guilford's Andrew Leete sprang to his feet to rail against the return of the charter. The more he argued, the more animated the frail old man got. He was gesticulating wildly when he suddenly collapsed striking and knocking down both candelabra, plunging the tavern into darkness.

Seizing advantage of this moment of chaos, assemblyman Nathaniel Stanley grabbed the charter and passed it out a window to Captain Wadsworth who was standing there. Wadsworth ran it back to the Wyllys mansion as he recounted, "in less than ten minutes." He had little difficulty when he encountered the two trumpet players who were obviously drunken along his path. Ruth Wyllys was at home alone and she assumed that the house would be searched by the king's men at some point because they all knew it had been kept there previously. It was her idea to place the charter in the large hollow cavity of the stalwart great oak to keep it from Andros. Wadsworth wrapped the Connecticut Charter in his own coat and carefully hid it inside the tree. Andros never found the charter.

When order was restored back at Butler's Tavern Andros knew that he had been had. Without displaying any level of annoyance to the public, he turned coldly to what must have been his 'plan B'. He said that there was no reason to continue with the meeting and dictated the following which he insisted be included in the minutes:

His Excellency, Sir Edmund Andros, Knight, Captain General and Governor of His Majesty's Territories and Dominions in New England by order of His Majesty James the second King of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, the thirty-first of October, 1687, took into his hands the Government of this Colony of Connecticut, it being by His Majesty annexed to the Massachusetts and other Colonies under his Excellencies Government. — Finis.

The venom of that *Finis* still stings strongly today. With that entry he assumed control of the of the colony, governing it himself until 1688. Since the charter had never been officially nullified the colonists choose to resurrect it when Andros left. It stayed in force until it was replaced, long after the birth of the nation, by the Connecticut State Constitution in 1818.

That is not the end of the story, though it might be the beginning of our philatelic interest in it. The ‘Charter Oak’, as it came to be known, had attained legendary status and lived on much longer, only adding to its mystique.

Fast-forward 170 years. Imagine the great storm that occurred August 21, 1856, which caused the demise of the cherished oak. At ten minutes before one o’clock in the morning high winds brought it crashing to the ground amid crackling and rustling of its heavy foliage. A city watchman who was within two hundred feet of it said that it reeled “convulsively in the air” for a moment after the fall.



*The Connecticut Charter Oak tree standing on Wyllys Hill in 1855 photographed just one year prior to its demise by Nelson Augustus Moore.*

The people of Hartford went into mourning, giving their Charter Oak all of the respect and tribute usually bestowed upon a fallen martyr at his funeral. Many of those who gathered to view the tree that day began taking pieces of the wood and acorns as relics. An honor guard was set up partly to stop the blasphemous looting. Nelson Augustus Moore, who had photographed the standing tree just one year earlier, took pictures of the newly recumbent figure. At noon Samuel Colt's Armory Band played a dirge titled *Dead March in Saul*, then *Home Sweet Home*, and finally the patriotic *Hail Columbia* at the site. Two flags of the republic were draped over the trunk and stump. When sundown came bells all over the city tolled at the loss. The Hartford Courant ran the headline *The Charter Oak is Prostrate!* on a black bordered obituary. Thanks to the telegraph newspapers across the continent and England also carried the news.

State Senator Isaac W. Stuart was the owner of Wyllys Hill and had therefore been the caretaker of the Charter Oak since 1840. The politician was also a historian. One of his books, *Life of Captain Nathan Hale, the Martyr Spy of the American Revolution*, was published the year that the mighty oak fell. A local cabinet maker John H. Most helped Stuart during the careful dissecting and removal of the tree. Stuart gave him a goodly portion of the saintly wood remains, possibly for payment of services rendered.

The clamor for Charter Oak souvenirs increased exponentially from the very first day. Requests for pieces of the wood were received by Isaac Stuart from as far away as Texas, Mississippi, Minnesota, and California. It is estimated that Stuart sent out thousands of fragments himself, although this seems exaggerated. He famously donated a large block of the trunk to the State of Connecticut which was beautifully carved into an imposing high back ceremonial chair featuring an eagle, State coat of arms, oak leaves and acorns. The 'Charter Oak Chair' now takes pride of place in the State Senate Chamber. Artifacts of all sorts were fashioned, including earrings, bracelets, beads, and the infamous wooden nutmegs. Proliferation led provenance to be met with skepticism. We can imagine many Connecticut yankee peddlers traveling the countryside with ample inventory of Charter Oak items. Not all were actually authentic.

Exactly ten years after the fall the newspaper marked the event with a one paragraph notice which bemoaned the "...many frauds... practiced in the sale of the wood." Hartford's most illustrious resident, Mark Twain, later would quip that he had seen enough Charter Oak mementos, "...to build a plank road from here to Great Salt Lake City."

It was about the time of the tenth anniversary that the Thomaston, Connecticut, Post Office began using its Charter Oak fancy cancellation. Whether this was intended to commemorate the anniversary is not known. Developing a cover census helps us to make a few observations. The fact that most of the examples are not "auction house quality" complicates the effort because we must rely upon the availability of private holdings.

The fancy cancel is always found in black ink on covers bearing Scott #65 accompanied by a 24mm THOMASTON/CONN. cds which is placed 5mm away at its nearest point. This strongly suggests that the handstamp was a duplex device. The fancy cancel itself measures 17.5mm high by 17mm wide. The earliest dated record is of August 27, 1866, during the tenure of Postmaster Seth Thomas, Jr., son of the famous clock manufacturer. The postal marking continued to be used by his successor, George Wakeman. Only sixteen covers are currently recorded.



September 17, 1867 Thomaston Charter Oak fancy cancel detail.

Looking at it objectively, the cancel is a bit rough. Very Fine strikes are truly rare. The irregular boughs of the Charter Oak are difficult to represent, but there is a good attempt at showing the legendary hollow in the center. We can speculate that it might have been made by a clock case maker working in the Seth Thomas clock factory who certainly would have had necessary carving skills, or that it was simply bought as a curio from a passing peddler and used as a cancel. Perhaps it was Seth Thomas himself or John H. Most who crafted it. We will probably never be able to prove who carved the fancy cancel.

There is one detail worth mentioning: Parallel horizontal channels are clearly cut into the fancy cancel. This might have been a futile attempt at gathering ink to improve the strike; in fact, it only serves to weaken the strike. This engraving-like technique might have something in common with the Windsor Locks Steam Boat-in-Canal type II postmark which also has parallel



September 14, NYD Thomaston Charter Oak fancy cancel on #65 to Boston PFC #363729.

channels, sometimes called 'shading lines'. The difference is that they are cut vertically on the Windsor Locks handstamp. Of course, if the cancel was made of wood or cork, we could be looking at the grain pattern. In all likelihood however, the grain would not have been as pronounced. The passage of time has made the unanswered questions unanswerable.

Just ten years on the United States Centennial Exhibition was held in Philadelphia in 1876. Connecticut was well represented in the Main Exhibition Building and the Connecticut Cottage by dozens of innovative manufacturers: Ansonia Brass and Copper, Collins Axes, Colt Firearms, P. & F. Corbin, Eagle Lock, Meriden Britan-

nia, Northfield Knife, Pratt & Whitney, Scovill Manufacturing, Waterbury Button, Winchester Repeating Arms, etc... The list was very long and impressive. Thomaston's Seth Thomas Clock Company was responsible for making the Great Clock Tower in front of Machinery Hall, one of the main buildings of the exhibition. It was described as having "twenty dials in various sections, connected by electricity." The firm was awarded a patent for the first small bedside alarm clock that year.

John H. Most, mentioned previously, was rather busy making things from his allotment of Charter Oak wood to be displayed and sold at the Centennial. His handiwork was shown in the Main Exhibition Hall and the Con-



The exterior of Connecticut Cottage at the Philadelphia Exhibition of 1876.

necticut Cottage. It included: a square piano veneered with Charter Oak wood, a child's cradle, five canes, four card cases, two wine goblets, a wooden imitation of an 8 lb. ham, a chess set which featured an outline of the tree, a lifelike wooden human hand formed naturally by the Charter Oak, and a picture frame made of Charter Oak wood with an engraving of the tree which was hung over the Cottage mantelpiece. Since Connecticut already had a reputation for its wooden nutmegs, Most used the joke by offering modestly priced examples made from his oak. The curios were so popular with the crowds of people that he had difficulty keeping up with the demand.

The Connecticut Cottage was a popular meeting place for the 40,000 attendees who signed the guest book. Everything on display, historical or otherwise, was manufactured and/or donated by Connecticut citizens. People could send or receive mail at the branch post office which operated within the building. The cottage was comfortably appointed with chairs in which to sit and read Connecticut newspapers provided at no cost. The reception room had a beautiful antique fireplace and mantel. On one raw and rainy late autumn day a visitor was standing by the hearth talking advantage of the warmth when he turned to a nearby cottage guard and asked, "Is this a Charter Oak wood fire?"



*The interior of the cottage showing a Charter Oak table and the imitation wooden ham made by John H. Most to the left of the fireplace.*

# Thomaston Charter Oak Census

(Skinner-Eno PP-73)

## Year Dated Examples



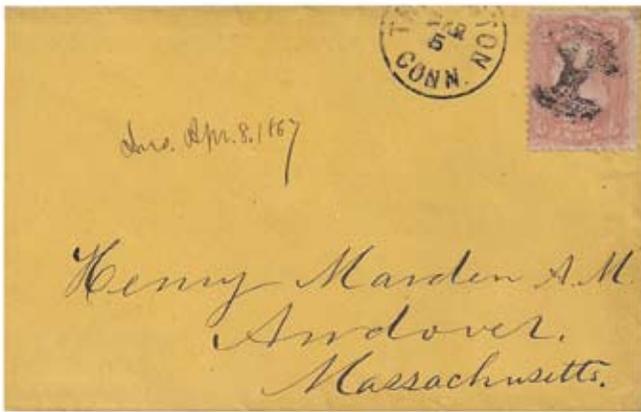
Date: Aug 27, (1866)  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65 not tied, straight edge  
Correspondence: Charles H. Voorhees, New York City  
Description: receipt docketing at left; reduced at left  
Strike: partial pmk and fancy, Fine  
Cert: No  
Source: RAS Sale 1012, Lot 48



Date: Sep 13 (1866)  
Pmk: 24mm THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: fancy cancel ties 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Mrs Sarah W. Gunn, Avon, New York  
Description: TERRY MFG. CO., Thomaston, Conn. Corner Card  
Strike: complete pmk and fancy, XF  
Cert: PFC #529088



Date: NOV 23 (datelined 1866)  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS ties  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Miss \_\_\_\_\_ Paddock, Vernon, Oneida County, New York  
Description: with letter enclosed, edge tears, faded stamp  
Strike: complete pmk, partial fancy, Good  
Cert: No  
Source: Private Collection



Date: Mar 5, (1867)  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65 not tied  
Correspondence: Henry Marden, Andover, MA  
Description: answer Apr. 8, 1867 dated docketing  
Strike: partial pmk and fancy, Fine  
Cert: No  
Source: Private Collection



Date: Sep 17 (1867)  
Pmk: 24mm THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: fancy cancel ties 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: First National Bank, Ann Arbor, Mich.  
Description: Blue double circle receiver's dated hs on reverse, front only, cut to fit filing system  
Strike: complete pmk and fancy, F-VF  
Cert: No  
Source: Private Collection

### No Year Dates



Date: (Indistinct Month) 25 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS ties  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Mrs. Sarah W. Gunn, Clinton, NY  
Description: Pmk just ties  
Strike: complete pmk and fancy, VF+  
Cert: PFC #226549  
Source: RAS 342, Lot 616



Date: (Indistinct Month) 30 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65 not tied  
Correspondence: Miss Florena Dudley, Milton, Conn  
Description: with DUE/3 in circle hs  
Strike: Fine  
Cert: WW Cert, 8-25-2008  
Source: Fabio Auctions



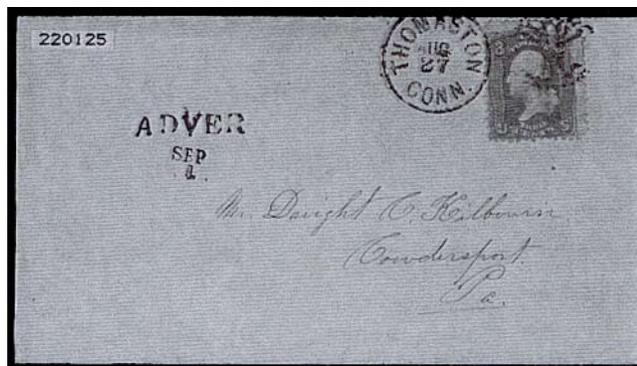
Date: APR (?) NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65 not tied  
Correspondence: Miss Hattie E. Miner, Cornwall, Conn  
Description: repaired at right and top left corner, faulty stamp, ex-Skinner  
Strike: partial pmk and fancy, Good-Fine  
Cert: No  
Source: Private Collection



Date: June 8 NYD  
Pmk: Black 24mm THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: Pmk and fancy tie 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Miss Julia Whiting, Tolland, Mass  
Description: smaller cover; partial pmk, full fancy  
Strike: partial pmk, full fancy, Fine+  
Cert: No  
Source: Private Collection



Date: AUG 20 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65 not tied  
Correspondence: Messrs. Woodson & Co., Manufacturers of Lamp Shades, 56 Washington St., Boston, Mass  
Description: stamp centered to left  
Strike: Fine  
Cert: PFC #160684  
Source: Philatelic Foundation



Date: Aug 27, NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: Pmk and Charter Oak fancy cancel tie #65  
Correspondence: Mr. Dwight C. Kilbourn, Chowdersport, Pa.  
Description: with ADVER/ SEP 1. hs  
Strike: partial pmk and fancy, Fine  
Cert: PFC #220125  
Source: Philatelic Foundation



Date: SEP 14 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65 not tied  
Correspondence: Woodson & Co., Boston, Mass  
Description: reduced at right trimming the perfs at top right  
Strike: Fine  
Cert: PFC #363729, 11-21-2000  
Source: Fabio Auctions



Date: Sep 23 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Messrs. Woodson & Co.,  
56 Washington St., Boston, Mass  
Description: pmk & fancy cancel tie stamp,  
yellow cover with rough opening at right  
Strike: Fine  
Cert: No  
Source: DK 623, Lot 1188



Date: October 2 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS,  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65 not tied, perf flaws  
Correspondence: Mrs Sarah W. Gunn, Avon, New York  
Description: 'Livingston County' ms at lower left;  
cleaned right edge, including partly under stamp  
Strike: complete pmk and fancy, well-inked, VF+  
Cert: No  
Source: RAS 1063, Lot 1460



Date: October 8 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: fancy cancel ties 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Mrs Sarah W. Gunn, Avon, New York  
Description: 'Livingston County' ms at lower left,  
TERRY MFG. CO., Thomaston, Conn. CC  
Strike: partial pmk, full fancy, VF  
Cert: PFC #210687 965, 1980  
Source: Cherrystone Sale 420, Lot 65



Date: Oct 14 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Mr. Henry D. White,  
Church St., New Haven, Conn.  
Description: bold fancy cancel barely ties stamp  
Strike: complete pmk and fancy, VF  
Cert: No  
Source: RAS 870, Lot 966



Date: (sic) NOV 37 NYD  
Pmk: THOMASTON/CONN. CDS ties  
Stamp: 1861 3¢ Rose #65  
Correspondence: Mr. Levi Hodges, Bridgeport, Conn.  
Description: date error, small cover, stamp well-centered  
Strike: Fine-Very Fine  
Cert: No  
Source: ex-Skinner; Matt Kewriga, Dealer



*The Connecticut Charter Oak (1857) by Charles De Wolf Brownell*