

Andros, Sir Edmund

We all know the story of the Charter Oak and its role in preserving the royal charter that gave our colony its right to exist as an entity. What we might not be so clear on was the events leading up to the confrontation of the King's emissary and the elected officials of the Colony of Connecticut.

The people of Connecticut occupied their land for many years without any title except what they had from the Indians. But in 1662 John Winthrop secured a royal charter for Connecticut from King Charles II, the most liberal that had yet been given. The only restriction was that the laws should not conflict with the laws of England. This charter, creating a corporation on the place, was similar to that of Massachusetts, to which the king objected. One object in granting it was to encourage rivalries to Massachusetts.

The New England colonies had been embroiled in a series of conflicts with the Indians, which culminated with the death of King Philip, after which the Native Americans did not have enough survivors to pose a threat to the Whites.

Scarcely had this disastrous war come to an end when New England was called upon to face a new danger. The new foe was the British monarch. This trouble had had its roots in an event that had taken place fifteen years before, soon after Charles II had come to the throne. He became embittered toward the people of New England for refusing to give up the regicides, Whalley and Goffe, who had assisted in the putting to death of his father. This feeling of the king was heightened by the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights of 1661, which, while professing allegiance to the king, was regarded by him as an encroachment on his authority. This declaration is one of the memorable documents of the colonial era. By it the general court declared any imposition contrary to their own just laws, not repugnant to the laws of England, "to be an infringement" of their rights.

Commissioners were sent to the colonies in 1664, and a long and fruitless controversy resulted. Massachusetts would probably have lost her charter at this period but for the war with the Dutch. A fleet from Holland had entered the Thames and was threatening London. This required the full attention of the mother country, and New England's liberties continued for some years longer.

But the resentment of Charles against the colonies only slumbered; it was not dead. Once the threat to the home country was over, he opened the old quarrel. Most of his main complaints were against Massachusetts, but the other colonies had also gone against his wishes, such as the purchase of Maine by Massachusetts and the independent way in which the New England colonies had managed the Indian war. Another major consideration that should not be overlooked was that there was a deep laid scheme in England to destroy the separate colonial governments, and unite all New England, New York and New Jersey under one government, so as to curb the growing spirit of liberty and to resist more effectually the French aggressions from Canada.

In 1676 Edward Randolph, an officer of King Charles, and an enemy of the colony, arrived in Boston. Randolph set about to build up a more liberal party, with Tory leanings, in Massachusetts; and it must be added, he was to some extent successful. Times had changed somewhat in Massachusetts Bay. The rigid Puritan rule of the preceding generation had softened. The Puritan party in England had waned, and no

longer was it able to fight the political battles of its American offspring. Moreover, as men in the colony advanced in wealth and engaged in commerce on the high seas, they were unwilling to incur the displeasure of England. For eight long years the people of the Bay Colony resisted, but in the end were forced to surrender the charter that had been in effect for the past 54 years. With the charter went the independent government of Massachusetts, to return no more for a hundred years when a later generation was to rise successfully against the mother country.

In the year following this triumph of the Crown, King Charles died, and his brother, James II, more tyrannical than himself, began his short and turbulent reign. He sent Sir Edmund Andros, who had made a record as governor of New York and New Jersey, to govern New England and also New York and New Jersey. Andros arrived late in 1686, and made his seat in Boston. The people knew and despised him, nor did his brief administration do anything to redeem his reputation. Instructed to make laws and levy taxes without a legislative body, by the aid of a council only, he was not slow in carrying out his instructions. He abolished the legislature and laid taxes at his pleasure; he even took from the local town meeting its power of taxing; he sent innocent men to jail and curbed the liberty of the press. As bad as the situation was, he made it infinitely worse by attacking the titles to the land, pronounced many of them void.

In Connecticut he was strongly opposed, but, appearing in person at Hartford, he demanded the charter. The assembly was in session and Andros present. The session was prolonged till late at night, when suddenly the lights were put out and Captain Wadsworth seized the precious charter, escaped in the darkness, and hid it in the hollow of an oak tree, forever after known as the Charter Oak.

Andros' reign in New England was that of a despot. All those devices of tyranny that England had resisted were now adopted as part of the regular machinery of government. But the spirit of liberty, fostered by a half century of self-government, could not be crushed in the New England heart. The people waited, and the opportunity came. While Andros was at the height of his power, a copy of the declaration of the Dutch Prince of Orange to the English people reached the colony. Andros arrested the messenger who had brought it, but he could not arrest the wild shout of joy that rang from one settlement to another, from the ocean shore to the river valley. Next came the news of the prince's landing on English soil, and this became the signal for the people to rise in rebellion against their oppressor. Andros was seized and sent a prisoner to England, and the people again breathed the air of liberty.

The new era brought many changes, such as the absorption of Plymouth as a separate organization into the colony of Massachusetts. For seventy-one years the colony had sailed its little boat through storm and sunshine, but from this time its identity continued on as a sacred memory of the original band of Pilgrims who had left England in the *Mayflower*, of which only two remained alive. The two survivors were John Cooke, who died in 1695, and Mary Cushman, who lived 71 years after the famous voyage, dying in 1699. Cushman, however, was survived by Peregrine White, the child born on the *Mayflower*. Several of his direct descendants, some by the same name, made their home in Colebrook River for many years. One of them, Barnice White, the toll keeper on the Farmington River Turnpike, was murdered in 1850 in what was to be remembered as Colebrook's most infamous crime.

Historic Bytes
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