



*View of Verdery Room in the Dana House Museum showing Woodstock's three charters.*

## Woodstock Charters

What is a charter? It's a document issued by a sovereign, state, or province, defining the conditions, the rights, the privileges, and the powers under which the colony, state, or province is organized. The Woodstock Historical Society has three charters for the town of Woodstock. The first charter is a certified true copy of the 1761 Royal Charter, issued in the name of King George III and signed by the Provincial Governor of New Hampshire, Benning Wentworth. The second charter for Woodstock was issued in 1772 by

King George III on behalf of the Provincial Government of New York, and signed by its Royal Governor, William Tryon. This charter carries the Great Seal of the Province of New York, a wax medallion that hangs from the bottom center of the hand-written document. The third and final charter in our collection is the Federal Charter of Woodstock, issued by the State of New York in 1791, with its Great Seal. It is signed by George Clinton, the Governor of New York State.

Why does Woodstock have three charters? Governor Wentworth of NH had granted many other land claims, beginning with Bennington in 1749 at the westernmost edge of his claim, in what became known as the New Hampshire Grants. By 1763 he had issued over 100 grants. At the same time, the colony of New York was also issuing grants for some of the same land, because it claimed territory all the way east to the Connecticut River. Both NH and NY agreed that the land claims would have to be settled by a royal verdict, but in the meantime, both continued to issue land grants.

In 1764, the king's order came down in New York's favor, ruling the western bank of the Connecticut River to be the boundary between NY and NH. However, the NH titleholders interpreted "to be" to mean from the date of the order, therefore validating all pre-existing land claims. NY argued that the ruling was retroactive and all NH claims were invalid, so the arguments continued. In 1770, the NY Supreme Court ruled that all of the NH claims were invalid. In response, many NH titleholders, including Ethan Allen who managed the defense fund, formed the Green Mountain Boys, an informal military organization that fought against being evicted. East of the Green Mountains, in the Connecticut River Valley, some title disputes were resolved through payment to NY of reconfirmation fees, and many of the easterners did not initially support Allen. However, other issues, especially high court costs and debt proceedings precipitated a March 1775 courthouse riot in Westminster that left two dead and collapsed NY authority in the area. With the start of the American Revolution the following month, NY probably lost any chance of reclaiming the land.

However, the disputes continued for many more years. In 1777, representatives from the NH Grant towns declared themselves independent and wrote their own constitution for New Connecticut (later Vermont). NY continued to object to Vermont's independence, and Vermont undertook an initiative to annex amenable border towns in western NH and eastern NY. Vermont relinquished control of these towns in hopes of promoting its admission to the union, but it was not until 1791 that NY removed its final objections—and accepted payment of \$30,000 to settle disputed land claims—and Vermont became the 14<sup>th</sup> state.

A couple of further notes about the land grants/charters....The NH grants were typically "town-sized", about six miles square, and settled by middle class farmers. The NY grants were generally irregularly shaped and issued to wealthy landowners. In general, after statehood, the NY boundaries were ignored in favor of the NH town boundaries. A charter typically set aside lots: one for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (a missionary organization of the Church of England), one for the Church of England, one for the first clergyman to settle in the township, and one for a school. The grantees paid an annual rent and had use of the land, provided it was settled and cultivated, but they did not have as part of their grant: all mines of gold and silver, and all white pine or other sorts of pine trees fit for masts of the growth of 24" in diameter and upwards for masts for the Royal Navy.

**Sources:**

Woodstock Historical Society's Guide Books

En.wikipedia.org

[www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com)

Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont, Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, Vermont Historical Society, October 2004.