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Introduction, The Constitution of the State of Connecticut

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INTRODUCTION

Connecticut license plates boldly bear the inscription, “the Constitution State.” This is due to Connecticut’s long and proud tradition of self-government under the protection of a written constitution. Connecticut’s constitutional tradition can be traced to the Fundamental Orders of 1639. Drafted by representatives from the three Connecticut River towns of Hartford, Wethersfield and Windsor, the Fundamental Orders were the very first constitution known to humankind. The Orders were drafted completely free of British influence and established what can be considered as the first self-governing colony in North America. Moreover, Connecticut’s Fundamental Orders can be viewed as the foundation for constitutional government in the western world.

In 1662, the Fundamental Orders were replaced by a Royal Charter. Granted to Connecticut by King Charles II, the Royal Charter not only embraced the principles of the Fundamental Orders, but also formally recognized Connecticut’s system of self-government. So revered was the Royal Charter that the document was secreted in a huge oak tree in 1687 when King James II instructed Sir Edmund Andros, an experienced colonial governor, to consolidate the New England colonies into the “Dominion of New England.” Seizing Connecticut’s beloved charter was a central component of Andros’ radical consolidation plan. However, as legend has it, Andros’ attempt to seize the Royal Charter was foiled when during a heated meeting in a tavern between Andros and several Connecticut colonists, the room was plunged into darkness by a colonist

who purposely upset the candles located on the negotiating table. As the room fell into darkness, the Royal Charter was spirited from the meeting room and hidden in what eventually would become known as the “Charter Oak Tree.”

Although Andros reigned over the New England colonies for a period of three years, Connecticut’s colonists never acknowledged his rule and continued to regard the Royal Charter, albeit in seclusion, as their legitimate self-governing document. Fortunately for Connecticut, England’s Glorious Revolution in 1688 resulted in the abdication of King James II. Andros was thus forced to flee New England, and Connecticut’s government was once again reestablished under the Royal Charter. The Royal Charter would serve as Connecticut’s supreme governing document until 1818, the year in which a new state Constitution was adopted.

Governing concepts from both the Fundamental Orders and the Royal Charter continued to be embedded in the 1818 Constitution. At the same time, the Constitution of 1818 went far beyond what the Orders and the Charter afforded the people of Connecticut with regard to rights and liberties. Voting rights were extended, church and state were legally separated, and power was separated into three branches of government. Changes in Connecticut’s economy, the rise of the Democratic-Republican party vis-à-vis the Federalist party in Connecticut, and the efforts of a reform-minded state governor resulted in the new constitution. The Constitution of 1818, regarded as a major turning point in the history of Connecticut politics, is, in essence, the state’s first constitution in the true sense of the term. It proved to be a very effective state constitution and served the people of Connecticut for close to 150 years.

In 1965, a new state constitution was once again drafted and adopted. The 1965 constitution was written in direct response to the problem of legislative reapportionment. Legislative districts throughout the United States had become extremely imbalanced with regard to population. The reason for such imbalance was due to the fact that town boundaries, rather than population, served as the basis for the size and shape of legislative districts. The result was that the small rural communities had a disproportionate number of seats in state legislatures compared to the more populated urban and suburban communities. However, as a result of litigation, several federal court rulings issued in the early to mid 1960s declared malapportioned legislative districts to be in direct violation of the United States Constitution. States were instructed to redraw their legislative districts in a manner that conformed to the one-person-one-vote principle. Connecticut responded by writing an entirely new state constitution.

What makes the 1965 Constitution such a remarkable self-governing document is how it absorbs principles and governing concepts from the Fundamental Orders, the Royal Charter and the Constitution of 1818, while simultaneously creating a system of government that is responsive to the current needs of the state's citizenry. Such is the beauty of Connecticut's constitutional tradition. It is an enduring and very noble constitutional tradition, which should inspire pride among all residents of Connecticut.

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