A **charter** is a [document](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Document) that gave colonies the [legal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legal) rights to exist. A [charter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charter) is a document , bestowing certain rights on a [town](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town), [city](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City), [university](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University) or an institution. Colonial Charters were empowered when the king gave a grant of exclusive powers for the governance of land to proprietors or a settlement company. The charters defined the relationship of the colony to the mother country, free from involvement from the Crown. For the trading companies, charters vested the powers of government in the company in England. The officers would determine the administration, laws, and ordinances for the colony, but only as conforming to the laws of England. Proprietary charters gave governing authority to the proprietor, who determined the form of government, chose the officers, and made laws, subject to the advice and consent of the freemen. All colonial charters guaranteed to the colonists the vague [rights and privileges of Englishmen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rights_of_Englishmen), which would later cause trouble during the revolutionary era. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Crown looked upon charters as obstacles to colonial control, substituting the royal province for corporations and proprietary governments.

The Massachusetts and Virginia charters were given to business corporations. Regular meetings of company officers and stockholders were the only governmental institutions required. The Virginia charter, issued in 1606, was revoked upon bankruptcy of the [Virginia Company of London](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Company_of_London) in 1624. The second colonial charter was granted to Massachusetts in 1629. In 1684, the Chancery Court in England voided the charter and changed it to a royal colony. [Charles II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_II_of_England) placed Massachusetts under the [Dominion of New England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominion_of_New_England) in 1685. After [William III](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_III_of_England) came to the throne, he issued Massachusetts Bay a new liberal charter in 1691.

Charles II granted Connecticut its charter in 1662 with the right of self-government. When [James II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_II_of_England) ascended the throne in 1685, he tried to revoke the Connecticut charter and sent Sir Edmund Andros to receive it for the Crown. [Joseph Wadsworth](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Joseph_Wadsworth&action=edit&redlink=1) stole the charter and hid it in a hollow oak tree, the "[charter oak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charter_Oak_incident)," until James was overthrown. Connecticut temporarily lost the right of self-government under the [Dominion of New England](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominion_of_New_England) in 1687, but it was reinstated in 1689. The last charter by Charles II was issued to Rhode Island in 1663. Connecticut and Rhode Island attained colonial charters as already established colonies that allowed them to elect their own governors.

As a result of political upheavals, most colonies surrendered their charters to the Crown by 1763 and became royal colonies. By 1776, Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania remained proprietary colonies under a charter, Connecticut and Rhode Island continued as corporation colonies under charters, and Massachusetts was governed as a royal province while operating under a charter.