



Charters of Virginia and New England (1606, 1620)

The first permanent English settlements in the Americas were established during the reign of James I (for whom the King James Version of the Bible is named). In the charters excerpted below, James lays claim to certain territories in North America and grants to certain English investors monopoly rights on planting colonies there. The charters give religious rationales for these colonial ventures.

The 1606 charter laid claim to a swath of territory, dubbed Virginia, between the 34th and 45th parallels north, running from the present-day Carolinas up into Maine. Two colonies were launched there, as mandated by the charter, in 1607: the first was Jamestown, Virginia; the second was a failed venture in what is now Popham, Maine. To encourage renewed settlement in the northern half of the territory, the 1620 charter renamed that region New England and expanded its boundaries. Per this charter, New England started at the 40th parallel (which passes just north of present-day Philadelphia), extended north to the 48th parallel (thus including present-day New Brunswick), and ran west from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the Pacific (as did also, by then, Virginia's territorial claim). The Puritan colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay were founded under the auspices of the 1620 charter.

1. Charter of Virginia, 1606

James, by the grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc.

Whereas our loving and well-disposed subjects Sir Thomas Gates and Sir George Somers (knights), Richard Hakluyt (clerk, prebendary of Westminster), Edward Maria Wingfield, Thomas Hanham, and Raleigh Gilbert (esquires), William Parker and George Popham (gentlemen), and divers others of our loving subjects have been humble suitors unto us that we would vouchsafe unto them our license to make habitation and plantation and to deduce a colony of sundry of our people into that part of America commonly called Virginia and other parts and territories in America, either appertaining unto us or which are not now actually possessed by any Christian prince or people, situate[d], lying, and being all along the seacoasts between thirty-four degrees of northerly latitude from the equinoctial line and forty-five degrees of the same latitude [...]; and to that end, and for the more speedy accomplishment of their said intended plantation and habitation there, are desirous to divide themselves into two several colonies and companies [...]—

We, greatly commending and graciously accepting of their desires for the furtherance of so noble a work, which may, by the providence of Almighty God, hereafter tend to the glory of his Divine Majesty in propagating of Christian religion to such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God, and may in time bring the infidels and savages living in those parts to human civility and to a settled and quiet government, do, by these our letters patent, graciously accept and agree to their humble and well-intended desires —

And do, therefore, for us, our heirs, and successors, grant and agree that the said Sir Thomas Gates, Sir George Somers, Richard Hakluyt, and Edward Maria Wingfield, adventurers of and

for our city of London, and all such others as are or shall be joined unto them of that colony, shall be called the first colony; and that they shall and may begin their said first plantation and habitation at any place upon the said coast of Virginia, or America, where they shall think fit and convenient between the said thirty-four and forty-one degrees of the same latitude; and that they shall have all the lands, woods, soil, grounds, havens, ports, rivers, mines, minerals, marshes, waters, fishings, commodities, and hereditaments whatsoever [...] within one hundred [square] miles [...], and shall and may inhabit and remain there, and shall and may also build and fortify within any [of] the same [territory] for their better safeguard and defense, according to their best discretion and the discretion of the council of that colony; and that no other of our subjects shall be permitted or suffered to plant or inhabit behind or on the backside of them, towards the mainland, without the express license or consent of the council of that colony thereunto, in writing, first had and obtained.

And we do likewise, for us, our heirs, and successors, by these presents, grant and agree that the said Thomas Hanham, Raleigh Gilbert, William Parker, and George Popham, and all others [...] which are or shall be joined unto them of that colony, shall be called the second colony; and that they shall and may begin their said plantation and seat of their first abode and habitation at any place upon the said coast of Virginia and America where they shall think fit and convenient between thirty-eight degrees of the said latitude and forty-five degrees of the same latitude; and that they shall have all the lands, soils, grounds, havens, ports, rivers, mines, minerals, woods, marshes, waters, fishings, commodities, and hereditaments whatsoever, [etc.]

[...] Also we do, for us, our heirs, and successors, declare, by these presents, that every and all the persons, being our subjects, which shall dwell and inhabit within every or any of the said several colonies and plantations, and every [and all] of their children which shall happen to be born within any of the limits and precincts of the said colonies and plantations, shall have and enjoy all liberties, franchises, and immunities within any of our other dominions, to all intents and purposes as if they had been abiding and born within this our realm of England or any other of our said dominions.

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2. Charter of New England, 1620

James, by the grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, etc., to all to whom these presents shall come: Greeting.

Whereas upon the humble petition of divers of our well-disposed subjects that intended to make several plantations in the parts of America between the degrees of thirty-four and forty-five, we, according to our princely inclination, favoring much their worthy disposition, in hope thereby to advance the enlargement of Christian religion to the glory of God Almighty, as also by that means to stretch out the bounds of our dominions and to replenish those deserts with people governed by laws and magistrates, for the peaceable commerce of all that in time to come shall have occasion to traffic into those territories, granted unto Sir Thomas Gates and Sir George Somers (knights), Thomas Hanham and Raleigh Gilbert (esquires), and their associates, for the more speedy accomplishment thereof, by our letters patent, [...] free liberty to divide themselves into two several colonies [...]—

And forasmuch as we have been certainly given to understand, by divers of our good subjects that have for these many years past frequented those coasts and territories between the degrees of forty and forty-eight, that there is no other, the subjects of any Christian king or state, by any authority from their sovereigns, lords, or princes, actually in possession of any of the said lands or precincts, whereby any right, claim, interest, or title may, might, or ought by that means accrue, belong, or appertain unto them or any of them—

And also for that we have been further given certainly to know that within these late years there hath, by God's visitation, reigned a wonderful plague, together with many horrible slaughters and murders committed amongst the savages and brutish people there heretofore inhabiting, in a manner to the utter destruction, devastation, and depopulation of that whole territory, so that there is not left for many leagues together, in a manner, any that do claim or challenge any kind of interests therein, nor any other superior lord or sovereign to make claim thereunto; whereby we, in our judgment, are persuaded and satisfied that the appointed time is come in which Almighty God, in his great goodness and bounty towards us and our people, hath thought fit and determined that those large and goodly territories, deserted as it were by their natural inhabitants, should be possessed and enjoyed by such of our subjects and people as heretofore have been and hereafter shall be, by his mercy and favor and by his powerful arm, directed and conducted thither—

In contemplation and serious consideration whereof, we have thought it fit, according to our kingly duty, so much as in us lieth, to second and follow God's sacred will, rendering reverend thanks to his Divine Majesty for his gracious favor in laying open and revealing the same unto us before any other Christian prince or state, by which means, without offence and (as we trust) to his glory, we may with boldness go on to the settling of so hopeful a work, which tendeth to the reducing and conversion of such savages as remain, wandering in desolation and distress, to civil society and Christian religion, to the enlargement of our own dominions, and to the advancement of the fortunes of such of our good subjects as shall willingly interest themselves in the said employment, to whom we cannot but give singular commendations for their so worthy intention and enterprise.

We therefore, of our special grace, mere motion, and certain knowledge, by the advice of the lords and others of our privy council, [...] do, for us, our heirs, and successors, grant, ordain, and establish that all that circuit, continent, precincts, and limits in America lying and being in breadth from forty degrees of northerly latitude from the equinoctial line to forty-eight degrees of the said northerly latitude, and in length by all the breadth aforesaid throughout the mainland, from sea to sea, with all the seas, rivers, islands, creeks, inlets, ports, and havens within the degrees, precincts, and limits of the said latitude and longitude, shall be the limits and bounds and precincts of the second colony.

And to the end that the said territories may forever hereafter be more particularly and certainly known and distinguished, our will and pleasure is that the same shall from henceforth be nominated, termed, and called by the name of New England in America; and by that name of New England in America, we do, by these presents, for us, our heirs, and successors, name, call, erect, found, and establish the circuit, precinct, limit, continent, islands, and places in America aforesaid; and by that name [they shall] have continuance forever.

Sources:

1. Francis Newton Thorpe, comp., *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories, and Colonies Now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1909), 7:3783-3789, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015056795043>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

2. Thorpe, *Federal and State Constitutions*, 3:1827-1840, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015001567711>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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