

# **Trees of Christmas Past: A Brief History of Holiday Tree Traditions**

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The farther we march into a technological, silicon-and-plastic future, the more important simple tradition become. Many family or cultural traditions help us maintain contact with our pasts and perspective for our future. Since the beginning, humans have been emotionally and economically tied with forests and trees. During holidays, trees play an important part in our social and private traditions.

A tree is part of many people's holiday season. Cutting your own tree, selecting one at the local lot, or bringing in a living tree are all part of modern family traditions. To many, the beginning of the holiday season is decorating a tree. The aroma, beauty, and special adventure of having a tree is sensed by all in the home.

Having a tree for the Christmas-time holidays is a relatively new tradition in America. Christmas trees have not always been associated with the winter holidays across the world. The roots (no pun intended) of tree use can be traced back before the birth of Jesus Christ to early Egyptians who would bring palms indoor as symbols of eternal life. Ancient Jewish religious feasts used decorations made of tree boughs.

In the Western world, most experts consider our use of trees during the winter holidays as derived from Rome. The Romans exchanged tree boughs with friends for luck. The Roman winter festival was celebrated by decorating the house with tree boughs and greenery. Trees were paraded around with candles and trinkets attached to the branches.

Many Christian traditions in the home were borrowed from older pagan celebrations. Pope Gregory I around 600 AD told churchmen to encourage harmless folk customs, like the use of greenery and trees, where Christian interpretations could be made. St. Boniface in the 700's encouraged pagan nature worshipers to stay out of the dark forest and take a tree indoors to worship in the light and warmth of the one true God.

Many folk legends have grown around the Christmas tree. Christ's blessing and gift to mankind in the form of a decorated tree remains the central theme of most. Across Europe, people used tree-based folk tales to teach children about the celebration of Christ's birth. The evergreen tree's symbolism of eternal life was strong.

Martin Luther may have begun the Christmas tree tradition in Germany around 1500 AD. It was said that he was walking on a bright snow-covered, star-lit night pondering the birth of Christ. He was enthralled by the evergreen trees, the stars and the landscape. He took a tree inside and put candles on it to try and represent the majesty he felt about Christ's birth.

By the early 1600's many German towns were celebrating Christmas with elaborately decorated trees. Decorations first used were paper flowers, fruits, nuts, gold foil, cakes, small gifts, and candies. German mercenaries used by the British in the Revolutionary War were responsible for bringing the Christmas tree tradition to the United States. Old Puritan doctrine banned a celebration at Christmas. Holiday festivities around a decorated tree took a while to become established in America.

In the 1840's the use of Christmas trees across the Christian world exploded. From the royal family in England to the elite of America, Christmas trees were fashionable. In 1851 the first retail tree lot was set-up on a sidewalk in New York City and sold-out quickly. At the same time, some church congregations had concerns about bringing trees into their religious traditions. An Ohio pastor set-up a tree in church in 1851 and was told by congregation members that it was a pagan symbol with no place in Christianity. Despite these concerns, the pastor continued with the Christmas tree tradition. This tradition became ever more popular.

The White House led the way to trees for the holidays. The first American President to show-off his White House tree was Franklin Pierce. Benjamin Harrison declared his White House tree to be part of an old-fashioned American tradition in 1889. By the 1880's the Christmas tree market was large. In the following decades large numbers of wild trees were harvested from the native forests. Theodore Roosevelt decided for the sake of forest conservation that the White House would not have a tree. His two sons snuck a small tree into their room and were caught, to the embarrassment of their father.

On this continent a tree used as decoration for the winter holidays began simply. In the 1800's many referred to the decorated trees as "German toys". Now the Christmas tree tradition has multi-generational and cultural identity. The sense of identifying holiday trees with family and friends is socially important.

Many people believe this tree tradition has always been with us in the United States. Take a moment to truly look at your tree this year and see the history. For most people, holiday trees represent psychological comfort across time and a changing world. Forests and trees continue to wind their way into all things human -- new or traditional.

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