



Merry Christmas! How the Christmas Tree Came to Be

“O Christmas Tree” is a popular Christmas carol that evokes images of festooned trees, eggnog and a cozy fire. But it also speaks of an important history. In fact, each yuletide season Cranford is carrying on traditions that reflect times and cultures of thousands of years ago. Quite something for the Cranford Historical Society to honor. In that spirit, we offer up a few seasonal facts:



The winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere falls on December 21, the shortest day of the year. For ancient people solstice greenery symbolized rebirth and renewal, especially important for agrarian cultures. The winter solstice revolved around the idea that a god had fallen ill and brought the winter. Solstice celebrations with lights and greenery would last for days and remind the people that the god would recover and rebirth begin.



In ancient Egypt, Ra was the most powerful god in existence and as such, patron of the sun and heavens. He had the head of a hawk and wore the sun in his crown. During the winter solstice Egyptians filled their homes with green palm leaves to commemorate Ra’s return and immortalize the belief of life over death.



Romans celebrated the solstice as Saturnalia, for Saturn, the god of agriculture. They decorated with evergreens to signify the spring to come. During the week-long festivities, Roman social norms were suspended: There was no business, drunkenness and gambling were encouraged, and slaves were allowed to eat and drink with their masters. Pleasure was the primary purpose of the festival, which for one day was enjoyed equally by all the citizens of Rome.¹



The Celts decorated their temples with evergreens, believing they symbolized eternal life. They gathered mistletoe to ward off evil spirits, decorated with holly wreaths and brought yule logs to community bonfires whose light would persuade the sun, which had stopped during the winter, to move again.



In the fourth century CE, the early Christian church was looking for converts. Recognizing the confluence of various pagan holidays around the winter solstice, Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman emperor, declared the nativity was to be celebrated on December 25. That time coincided with the Roman Saturnalia and was the day the Romans believed that Mithras, the Roman god of light, was born. The following centuries saw much discord by Christians around the absorption of these pagan holidays into religious holy days.



Popular legend has it that in 723 CE English missionary St. Boniface came upon a pagan ritual dedicated to Thor at an oak tree in Germany. Boniface began hacking at the tree before the astonished pagans. Since Thor did not strike him down for doing so, Boniface, now with some authority and likely conversion in mind, said that

¹[Saturnalia: the History and Traditions of the Winter Festival - by Mansi Dhokia \(academuseducation.co.uk\)](https://www.academuseducation.co.uk/saturnalia-the-history-and-traditions-of-the-winter-festival/)

an evergreen nearby was actually a holy tree. From that “Paradise trees” began to appear in Germany decorated with apples to represent the Garden of Eden. December 24th was celebrated as the feast day for Adam and Eve. By sixteenth century Germany the Christmas tree tradition had taken hold. Christians would often bring evergreen trees into their homes to decorate or create trees by piling wood and branches in the shape of a tree. It has been said it was the Protestant reformer Martin Luther who added candles to the Christmas tree after walking through woods and observing the stars twinkling through treetops.



The English colonies had an interesting take on celebrating Christmas. The Puritans of Massachusetts actually banned Christmas from 1659 through 1681.

In a reversal of modern practices, the Puritans kept their shops and schools open and churches closed on Christmas, a holiday that some disparaged as “Foolstide.”

...The noted Puritan Minister Increase Mather wrote that Christmas occurred on December 25 not because “Christ was born in that month, but because the heathens’ Saturnalia was at that time kept in Rome, and they were willing to have those pagan holidays metamorphosed into Christian [ones].”²



Queen Charlotte, the German wife of King George III, came to England in 1761 to be married and brought with her the greenery traditions. By the time of her death in 1818, the Christmas tree was firmly established in England. It was further popularized by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, both of whom had German ties. Queen Charlotte is often forgotten in history as Albert is more widely recognized as bringing the first Christmas tree tradition to English soil.



Where was the first Christmas tree in the United States? While Christmas trees were displayed in public squares by German immigrants since the 18th century, the earliest recorded reference was by Matthew Zahn. According to the Monroe County Historical Association:

Although the Christmas tree tradition was brought to Pennsylvania by early German colonists, the first documented Christmas tree ... belonged to Lancaster resident Matthew Zahn. His 1821 diary entry reads, “Sally & our Thos. & Wm. Hensel was out for Christmas trees, on the hill at Kendrick’s saw mill.”³



Despite the tradition of the Christmas tree by German settlers in America, most other communities still considered the tree a pagan symbol. It wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that the Christmas tree finally was accepted. By this time pictures of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert with their family around a Christmas tree, as well as Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and Clement Clarke Moore’s 1823 poem, “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” popularized Christmas as a holiday.



In 1882 Thomas Edison’s business partner Edward Hibbard Johnson displayed the first tree lit by electric lights in his East 36th Street home in New York, stringing together red, white and blue bulbs powered by a generator.

² [When Massachusetts Banned Christmas - HISTORY](#)

³ [History of the Pennsylvania Christmas Tree | Local History Articles | Monroe County Historical Association \(monroehistorical.org\)](#)



And finally, here's an interesting homegrown fact. According to the New Jersey Christmas Tree Growers' Association:

New Jersey can boast of having the first Christmas tree farm in the country. In 1901, W.V. Galliard planted 25,000 Norway spruce on his farm in Mercer County. Seven years later they were marketed for \$1.00 each to customers who chose their trees in the field, cut them, and brought them home. Arrangements were also made to allow tagging prior to the season and for delivery by a horse drawn wagon.⁴

What an amazing history is celebrated each year in Cranford. As the lights twinkle on Christmas trees in town, Santa's sleigh waits for take-off by the downtown clock, the aroma of evergreens wafts through the streets, homes blaze with holiday lights and children anticipate a very special visitor, let us thank those ancient ancestors whose ingenuity and beliefs gave us the joy of this season.

⁴<https://njchristmastrees.org/join/#:~:text=New%20Jersey%20can%20boast%20of,them%2C%20and%20brought%20them%20home>

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