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December 2010: National Christmas Tree

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Government Documents News

The National Christmas Tree



National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony December 9, 2010

The tree lighting on the White House grounds has been an annual event since President Calvin Coolidge lit the first tree in 1923. This year, the ceremony will begin at 5 P.M. and will feature nationally known entertainers and the United States Coast Guard Band. Included in the tree lighting are 56 smaller trees making up the "Christmas Pathway of Peace." The trees represent each state, five territories, and the District of Columbia. After the ceremony, the trees will be lit each evening at dusk until 11:00 PM through January 1, 2011.

For more information on the event and to watch a live web stream of the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony, please visit www.thenationaltree.org.

The National Christmas Tree Through the Years



The first National Christmas Tree, December 24, 1923

The first National Christmas Tree was a cut, 48-foot Balsam fir that was erected on the Ellipse, south of the White House, in 1923. It was a gift to President Calvin Coolidge from Middlebury College in Vermont. The tree lighting ceremony began at 5 p.m. on December 24th with activities continuing past midnight.

In 1924, the American Forestry Association donated a living tree for event in memory of those who lost their lives in World War I. The tree was planted in Sherman Plaza, southeast of the White House and the tree lighting ceremony became an annual event.



In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the event to Lafayette Park, north of the White House. Two Fraser fir trees were planted on the east and west to be used in alternate years. The ceremony returned to the Ellipse from 1939 – 1940, using live red cedar trees transplanted from land near George Washington's home in Mount Vernon. During the 1940 ceremony, President Roosevelt announced that the event would be moved to the South Lawn of the White House the following year to make for a "more homey" celebration.

In 1941, two Oriental spruce trees were transplanted from the presidential tennis court to positions east and west of the South Lawn fountain. President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill spoke to the crowd in an address that was transmitted throughout the world by radio.

In 1942, during World War II, city organizers ruled out having a tree ceremony, but First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt reversed the decision. As a compromise, and in order to conserve electricity, lights were not used on the tree. To decorate the tree, Washington school children collected ornaments from citizens throughout the Capital region creating a true community tree. Chimes were substituted for the "lighting" of the tree and observers remarked that the 1942 tree was the most beautiful of all the previous National Trees. War-time restrictions continued and the tree remained dark from 1943 to 1944.

In 1945, the war was over and the lights returned. This year, President Harry S. Truman performed the tree lighting symbolically from his home, because the U.S. Secret Service would not allow the President to light anything over 6 volts.



In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower held the ceremony on the Ellipse with a cut tree. Local civic and business groups created the "Pathway of Peace" leading up to the tree using smaller live trees to represent the 50 states, five territories, and the District of Columbia. Cut trees continued to be used for the National Tree until 1973.



In 1958, Alaska sent 14 reindeer and a caribou to the ceremony as a gift to the nation. The animals and their offspring were kept in the National Zoo and took part in the annual event until 1995.

In 1963, the tree lighting by Lyndon Johnson was delayed until Dec. 22, following a national thirty-day period of mourning for the assassinated President John F. Kennedy.



In 1973, responding to hundreds of letters written by environmental groups asking for an end to using cut trees for the ceremony; President Richard Nixon requested a live tree for the Ellipse. A 42-foot Colorado blue spruce was donated by the National Arborist Association, to serve as a permanent "National Christmas Tree." The tree lasted for a few years but was unable to survive the Washington heat.



In 1977, the tree was replaced by a 34-foot Colorado blue spruce. Sadly, the new tree was blown down in heavy winds the following January. The National Park Service found a suitable replacement tree in the front yard of William E. and Helen Myers of York, Pennsylvania and had it transplanted in time for the 1978 celebration. The tree had been planted as a Mother's Day gift for Mrs. Myers by her children and grandchildren. After discussions with the NPS horticulturalists, the Myers agreed to let the tree go to become the nation's Christmas tree.



In 1979, during the Iran Hostage Crisis, the National Christmas Tree was only partially lit. When President Jimmy Carter's daughter, Amy, pushed the button, only the top of the tree and the surrounding state trees were illuminated. "Amy has lit fifty trees" President Jimmy Carter stated, "one for each American hostage." "We will turn on the rest of the lights when the hostages come home."



The tree remained unlighted in 1980; however, in a special tribute sponsored by the National Broadcasters Association, the tree was fully lighted for 417 seconds--one second for each day the hostages had been in captivity. On President Ronald Reagan's Inaugural Day January 20, 1981, the hostages were released. The tree was decorated and lit in time for their return.



In 1989 President George Bush illuminated the tree with thousands of red, white and blue lights symbolizing his "thousand points of light" speech.

In 1995, private funds kept the tree lit by solar energy despite a Government furlough. However, children watching and attending the event in 1995 were disappointed to hear that in response to animal protesters, the reindeer would no longer take part in the ceremony.



In 1999, the tree was decorated with more than 75,000 lights in customary holiday colors of red, green and clear. On New Year's Eve, at 10 pm, the multicolored lights on the tree turned to all white in honor of the Millennium.



In 2007, LED Christmas lights were used and were installed in the tree topper.



The National Tree lighting continues to be a holiday tradition and the 2010 event promises to be bigger and better than ever! Tune in Thursday at 8:00 P.M. to join the festivities.

For more information see:

National Parks Service:

<http://www.nps.gov/whho/historyculture/history-of-the-national-christmas-trees.htm>

The National Tree:

<http://www.thenationaltree.org/>

Decorate a virtual National Tree and send to a friend:

<http://www.thenationaltree.org/decorate-tree/>

Winthrop University Christmas Tree



1958 Winthrop University Christmas Tree

We now have a famous tree of our own at Winthrop University! Our annual Christmas tree has been selected as the South Carolina 2010 Heritage Tree!

On Friday, December 10 at 11:30 a.m., on the Tillman Hall front lawn, Karen Hauck, director of the Trees SC organization, will present Winthrop President Anthony DiGiorgio a plaque for the tree's selection as the 2010 Heritage Tree.

"As early as 1935, the Winthrop community decorated and hung lights on the 40-foot-tall magnolia during December. From 1955-69, Winthrop students, faculty and staff would gather around the lighted tree to sing Christmas carols on the evening before they were to leave for the holidays. The official holiday campus tradition began in 1969, with student groups performing carols and locals strolling through the luminary-lit campus."

For more information see: <http://www.winthrop.edu/news-events/article.aspx?id=13742>

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