

This Day in History... December 24, 1923

First National Christmas Tree

On December 24, 1923, President Calvin Coolidge lit the first national Christmas tree outside the White House.

Benjamin Harrison was reportedly the first US president to decorate the White House with a Christmas tree. He set one up inside for his family and White House visitors to enjoy in 1889.

In late November 1923, Lucretia Hardy of the DC Community Center Department wrote a letter to the president asking that he support her idea to place a Christmas tree on the White House grounds. She said, "It seems that the use of the White House grounds for this Christmas tree will give the sentiment and the exercises a national character."

To help entice the president, Hardy arranged for the donation of a tree. The tree was a gift from the president of Middlebury College in Vermont, Coolidge's home state. The college's president also contacted Vermont Senator Frank L. Greene to help encourage the president.

Another party interested in the national Christmas tree was the Society for Electrical Development. They were looking for a way to encourage Americans to use electric lights and more electricity. Vice President Frederick Feiker, who was also a press aide to Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, suggested a national Christmas tree would set the example.

On December 8, President Coolidge accepted the proposal and the plans moved forward. The 48-foot tree was a balsam fir decorated with 2,500 red, white, and green bulbs. At 5:00 pm on Christmas Eve, president Coolidge pressed a button lighting the first National Christmas Tree. That event was followed by a choir of city school children singing carols and the US Marine Band playing.

The tree remained in place for one year, but for the 1924 lighting, they used a live tree at the urging of the American Forestry Association. That year they also began referring to it as the National Community Christmas Tree.

In 1929, First Lady Lou Hoover started the annual tradition of decorating an indoor tree at the White House. Beginning in 1932, loudspeakers were installed in the tree to play Christmas carols, earning it the nickname "The Singing Tree." The lighting of the tree by the president has become an annual televised event followed by a month of holiday festivities known as the Pageant of Peace. Groups

of nearby trees and other decorations leading to the National Christmas Tree are known as the Pathway to Peace. Since 1981, the White House has produced an official ornament and offered replicas for purchase.



The second US Christmas stamp.



Cut evergreen trees were used in 1923 and from 1954 to 1972. Living trees were used from 1924 to 1953 and since 1973.



Coolidge stamp from the Presidential Series



During WWII, the tree was decorated with chimes instead of lights to conserve electricity. Children also collected new and old ornaments to decorate it.



LED lights were used for the first time in 2007, making the tree lighting more energy efficient.



The tallest national tree to date was an 85-foot blue spruce from Arizona.

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