

# “O Christmas Tree”

Christmas in early Virginia was a celebration of faith and festivity that varied by region and the cultural and religious heritage individuals brought with them. As reported in the *Alexandria Gazette* in 1865, “We in the South have always kept Christmas as a general holiday – a period especially for the reunion of families, and meeting of friends and acquaintances.” By the time that the English author Charles Dickens published his classic story, *A Christmas Carol*, in 1843, many of the traditions we associate with the holiday season were becoming popular – festive meals, charity giving, carols, and decorations, including the Christmas tree. Virginians who celebrated Christmas quickly embraced these new symbols and customs, and the Old Dominion became the fifth state to make Christmas a legal holiday in 1849.



British Royal Family around tree (left) from the *Illustrated London News*, 1848, which inspired a similar scene in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, 1850 (right).

The tradition of decorating with evergreens for the Christmas season goes back to medieval times, and the religious association of everlasting life that firs, pines, and holly suggested during the bleak winter months. The Christmas tree was a German tradition brought to England in the early 19th century by King George III’s German-born wife, Charlotte, but was popularized by Queen Victoria, whose husband Prince Albert was born in Germany.

In 1850, the American magazine *Godey’s Lady’s Book* published an illustration of the British Royal Family with a Christmas tree that had appeared in the *Illustrated London News* two years earlier. The image had been remade into a very American scene, which then played a significant role in popularizing trees in the United States.

The Christmas tree was brought to America from England and by the many German immigrants who migrated here in the 19th century. It gained popularity in Virginia as the century progressed. One of the first Virginia trees on record was set up in 1842 by Charles Minnegrode, a German instructor at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg. In December 1853, Eleanor Agnes Lee recorded in her diary that her father Robert E. Lee - then superintendent at West Point - had an evergreen tree decorated with dried and sugared fruit, popcorn, ribbon, spun glass ornaments, and silver foil.

By the time of the Civil War, the decorated tree was becoming a holiday tradition, in homes and on the war front. Soldiers sometimes decorated a little camp tree with hardtack crackers, pinecones and pork. Families trimmed the tree with lit candles, home-made decorations, fruit, candies, small gifts, and strands of berries. Illustrations in period publications like *Harper’s Weekly* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* show the tree as the center of family life on Christmas Day. By the 1880s, decorations were becoming mass produced, and tree trimming more elaborate.



Civil War camp tree in Fort Ward Officers’ Hut.



Alexandria Town Hall Christmas Tree.  
Credit: R Kennedy, Visit Alexandria

Into the 20th century, Christmas took on more of a public dimension. Town trees, public tree lightings, holiday store displays, and shopping – all evidence of Christmas’s larger presence outside the home – became traditional, and can be seen and enjoyed during the holiday season in Alexandria today.



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