THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

In one of the earliest stories relating to the Christmas tree, the eighth-century Catholic missionary, Saint Boniface, is said to have cut down an oak tree sacred to the pagan god Thor. An evergreen, fir tree grew in its place, which Boniface said symbolized the everlasting nature of Jesus Christ.

Germany is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition as we now know it in the 16th century when devout Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. Some built Christmas pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and candles if wood was scarce. It is a widely held belief that Martin Luther, the 16th-century Protestant reformer, first added lighted candles to a tree. Walking toward his home one winter evening, composing a sermon, he was awed by the brilliance of stars twinkling amidst evergreens. To recapture the scene for his family, he erected a tree in the main room and wired its branches with lighted candles.

Most 19th-century Americans found Christmas trees an oddity. The first record of one being on display was in the 1830s by the German settlers of Pennsylvania, although trees had been a tradition in many German homes much earlier.

An illustration from a December 1848 edition of the Illustrated London News shows Queen Victoria and her family surrounding a Christmas tree. The Christmas tree had arrived.

Christmas trees have been sold commercially in the United States since about 1850.

By the 1890s Christmas ornaments were arriving from Germany and Christmas tree popularity was on the rise around the U.S. It was noted that Europeans used small trees about four feet in height, while Americans liked their Christmas trees to reach from floor to ceiling.

In 1923, President Calvin Coolidge started the National Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony now held every year on the White House lawn.

The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree tradition began in 1933. Franklin Pierce, the 14th president, brought the Christmas tree tradition to the White House.

The early 20th century saw Americans decorating their trees mainly with homemade ornaments. Popcorn joined in after being dyed bright colors and interlaced with berries and nuts. Electricity brought about Christmas lights, making it possible for Christmas trees to glow for days on end. With this, Christmas trees began to appear in town squares across the country and having a Christmas tree in the home became an American tradition.

California, Oregon, Michigan, Washington, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and North Carolina are the top Christmas tree producing states.