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Christmas at the White House

How have the holidays been celebrated by our presidents?

By Gleaves Whitney

To our visitors, holiday greetings from the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies! Around Grand Valley I have run into several people who have asked if there would be something on the website talking about how our presidents have traditionally celebrated the holidays.

It surprises many Americans to learn that Christmas was not celebrated by every community in the early years of the United States. Some descendants of the New England Puritans, for example, avoided placing special emphasis on the Yuletide season. But in states like Virginia, Christmas enjoyed more popularity. At Mount Vernon on Christmas morning, the festivities organized by George and Martha Washington began at daybreak with a fox hunt. A hearty midday feast followed in a celebration that included Christmas pie, music, dancing, and visits with friends and relatives that sometimes continued for a week.

One of the most unusual Christmas celebrations was hosted by James Buchanan, our nation's lone bachelor president. In 1857 he threw a party for 30 American Indians representing the Ponca, Pawnee, and Pottawatomie tribes. An eyewitness account reported that while the Pottawatomie arrived in "citizen's dress," the Pawnee and Ponca "were in their grandest attire, and more than profuse of paint and feathers."

Half a century later, Theodore Roosevelt almost forbade bringing a Christmas tree into the White House. A staunch conservationist, TR didn't believe in cutting down conifers for decoration. Two of his boys, Theodore Jr. and Kermit, got into a bit of trouble when their father caught them dragging two small trees into their rooms. After the incident, Roosevelt spoke with Gifford Pinchot, the famous forester, who persuaded TR that selectively cutting down trees helped forests thrive. That was enough for TR, and the first family kept the trees Theodore Jr. and Kermit had dragged in, and every year thereafter brought a Christmas tree into the White House.

In 1923 First Lady Grace Coolidge accepted the gift of a large Christmas tree given by the District of Columbia Public Schools, and it became the first cut tree ever displayed on the grounds outside the White House. The balsam fir was decorated and displayed on the South Lawn. To dazzle citizens with new technology, President and Mrs. Coolidge were able to light the tree by merely pushing a button -- a feat that we take for granted today but that caused wonderment then!

The idea of having themes for official White House Christmas trees was championed by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961. A tree decorated with ornaments reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite stood in the Blue Room. Some of the ornaments were reused on the next year's tree and included brightly wrapped packages, candy canes, gingerbread cookies, and straw ornaments crafted by disabled persons and older citizens from all over the United States.

With the growth of the environmental movement in the late 1960s and early '70s, President Richard Nixon took an environmentally friendly step. In 1972 he planted a Colorado blue spruce on the Ellipse south of the White House. By 1978 the spruce was large enough and sturdy enough to be designated the National Christmas Tree. It is lit up every year in early December and tended by the National Park Service.

Back in the residence, topping the official White House Christmas tree has become another holiday tradition, and that feat has been accomplished by former First Lady Barbara Bush a record twelve times. She had the honor from 1981 to 1992, during President Reagan's and her husband's combined three terms.

Increasingly, American presidents have been sensitive to the fact that the holiday season is not just celebrated by Christians, but by believers of other faiths and people from other traditions. For instance, several presidents -- among them Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton -- have participated in Hanukkah celebrations. In 1998 President Clinton joined Israel's President Weizman in Jerusalem to light the first candle of Hanukkah. And in 2006 a 100-year old menorah, borrowed from the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York, was lit in the White House residence for the first time. President and Mrs. George W. Bush celebrated the holiday with staff members and their families again this year by lighting the second candle on December 15th.

As Americans, we have much to celebrate this holiday season among our family, friends, and colleagues, and we at the Hauenstein Center wish you a happy holiday and productive 2009.



Happy Holidays from your friends at the Hauenstein Center!



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Presidential historian Gleaves Whitney is director of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at GVSU. [Ask your question.](#)

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