



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## WHHA PRESS ROOM | *Background Info : Christmas at the White House*

The White House observance of Christmas before the twentieth century was not an official event. First families decorated the house modestly with greens and privately celebrated the Yuletide with family and friends. President Calvin Coolidge was the first chief executive to preside over a public celebration of the Christmas holidays with the lighting of the National Christmas Tree in 1923. Today, the Christmas Pageant of Peace, a major event held annually on the Ellipse since 1954 includes the lighting of the National Christmas Tree. This celebration respects the holiday worship of all faiths and features the appearance of the first family to light the tree and host live musical and dance performances.

The White House at Christmas traditionally has been a magical place for children. From the earliest times memorable parties have been held for the president's children or grandchildren. One of the most elaborate was President Andrew Jackson's "frolic" for the children of his household in 1834. This party included games, dancing, a grand dinner, and ended with an indoor "snowball fight" with specially made cotton balls.

In 1889, President Benjamin Harrison, his grandchildren, and extended family gathered around the first indoor White House Christmas tree. First Lady Caroline Harrison placed the tree, decorated with candles and toys, in the second floor family parlor and library (today's Yellow Oval Room). In 1894, three years after electricity was introduced in the White House, the first electric lights on a family tree delighted the young daughters of President Grover Cleveland.

President Theodore Roosevelt, an avowed conservationist, did not approve of cutting trees for Christmas decorations. However, his son Archie defied the ban and smuggled in a small tree that was decorated and hidden in a closet in the upstairs sewing room. First Lady Lou Henry Hoover established the custom of decorating an official tree in the White House in 1929. Since that time, the honor of trimming a principal White House Christmas tree on the state floor has belonged to our first ladies. Today, the main tree stands in the oval Blue Room, an elegant space honored as the center of holiday splendor in the White House.

