

The Christmas Pageant of Peace and National Christmas Tree

The origins of the national tree lighting ceremony date to Christmas Eve, 1913, when an elaborate "civic Christmas" was held on the east plaza of the U.S. Capitol. A huge crowd attended the pageantry featuring the U.S. Marine Band, 1,000 singers and a costumed group portraying the Nativity. President Woodrow Wilson wanted the community Christmas tree placed at the Capitol so the program would be recognized as a national event.

The ceremony moved to near the White House in 1923. Calvin Coolidge became the first president to light the tree by pushing the button on a switch box that still is used today. For several years following, a living tree was decorated in Sherman Plaza east of the White House. Coolidge also began the tradition of delivering the President's Christmas message. In 1925, his speech was broadcast coast to coast on radio.

In 1934, the ceremony was moved to Lafayette Park using live Fraser fir trees planted on either side of the statue of Andrew Jackson in the center of the park. A live red cedar from George Washington's original estate was planted on the Ellipse in 1939; then, two live Oriental spruce trees were planted on the White House south lawn where they were used for all the ceremonies through the war years.

The 1941 tree lighting, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, witnessed a surprise appearance by Sir Winston Churchill at President Franklin Roosevelt's side on the south portico. Wartime blackouts kept the tree unlit from 1942 until 1944.

Following World War II and the Korean War, it was decided to use "peace" in the title and give direction of the program to the Christmas Pageant of Peace, Inc. On Dec. 17, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower presided over an expanded program symbolizing America's desire to maintain peace around the world through the spirit and meaning of Christmas. It was the first time the program had not been held on Christmas Eve.

The practice of using fresh-cut trees from various places around the country continued until 1973 when a live tree was transplanted to the Ellipse. The tree in use today, a live Colorado blue spruce, was transplanted to the site in 1978. It came from a farm in York, Pennsylvania, the gift of Mrs. William E. Myers who had received it as a Mother's Day gift 15 years earlier.

Chronology of Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremonies

1913 East Plaza, U.S. Capitol

President Woodrow Wilson insisted that the first tree lighting be at the Capitol so it would be recognized as a national event. Wilson and civic leaders planned it for Dec. 24, but Wilson and other presidents did not at first attend. Newspapers described the ceremony as a "civic Christmas" with an elaborately costumed nativity pageant, 1,000 singers and the U.S. Marine Band playing before an audience of 20,000.

1923 The Ellipse

A cut fir tree was carried to the Ellipse to use as the first "community Christmas tree." It was lighted by President Calvin Coolidge on Christmas Eve, 1923. The tree was a gift to the President from Middlebury College in the President's native State of Vermont.

1924-1933 Sherman Plaza

The first living Christmas Tree, a Norway Spruce, was planted in 1924 in Sherman Plaza, near the east entrance to the White House. This tree was presented by the American Forestry Association to President Coolidge and the nation.

In 1925, the first Christmas message and the official program was first broadcast coast to coast on radio. This tree served as the National Community Tree until 1934.

1934-1938 Lafayette Park

Two Fraser Fir trees were planted--one on each side of the Jackson Statue in Lafayette Park. They were supposed to be used alternately each year, although the same one was actually used each year.

1939-1940 The Ellipse

The program was again moved to the Ellipse and cut trees were used.

1941-1953 On the Executive Mansion grounds

Two living Oriental spruce trees were used on alternate years for the purpose.

1954-1972 The Ellipse

In 1954 to the Christmas Pageant of Peace Inc. was organized and the scope of the National Community Christmas Tree Celebration was broadened to emphasize the desire for peace through the spirit and meaning of Christmas. President Dwight D. Eisenhower lit the first National Christmas Tree for the Pageant of Peace.

In 1963, the tree was not lighted until Dec. 22 by Lyndon Johnson following a national thirty-day period of mourning for the assassinated President John F. Kennedy.

Cut trees were used each year through 1972.

1973 The Ellipse

A 42-foot, living Colorado Blue Spruce from northern Pennsylvania was planted to serve as a permanent National Christmas Tree. The National Arborist Association donated the tree.

1974 The Ellipse

The first living tree was commemorated with a bronze plaque by John W. Dixon, President of the Christmas Pageant of Peace Committee, Inc. The 214-pound plaque was designed by Giannetti's Studio, Washington, D.C.

1975 The Ellipse

The 45-foot Colorado Blue Spruce was lighted by President Gerald Ford.

1976 The Ellipse

The 45-foot Colorado Blue Spruce, which had been the National Christmas Tree since 1973 was dying and this would be its last year. President Ford did the honors.

1977 The Ellipse

A 30-foot Colorado Blue Spruce was transplanted on the Ellipse to replace the previous tree.

1978 The Ellipse

The tree in use today, a Colorado blue spruce from York, Pa., was planted on the Ellipse. President Jimmy Carter and his daughter Amy, pushed the button.

1979-1980 The Ellipse

The nation's Christmas tree was not lighted during the 1979 season, except for the top ornament. This gesture was made by President Carter in honor of Americans being held hostage in Iran.

In 1980, for the second year in a row, the tree remained unlighted. However, in a special tribute sponsored by the National Broadcasters Association, the tree was fully lighted for 417 seconds--one second for each day the hostages had been in captivity. When the hostages finally were released on President Ronald Reagan's Inaugural Day Jan. 20, 1981, the tree was hastily decorated and lighted just as the aircraft carrying the former hostages home cleared Iranian airspace.

1981 The Ellipse

President Reagan illuminated the red, white and blue lights of the National Christmas Tree on December 17 by pushing a remote button in the East Room of the White House.

1982 The Ellipse

The National Christmas Tree was lighted by President Reagan on December 16 from the White House. Andy Williams and top members of the touring company of "Annie" headlined the opening of the Pageant of Peace.

1983 The Ellipse

The National Christmas Tree was lighted from the White House by President Reagan and seven-year-old Amy Benham, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Benham, of Westport, Washington. Amy wrote to the "Make A Wish" program and asked to participate in the tree lighting ceremony. The program was to help make dreams come true for children with disabilities or life-threatening illnesses.

1984 The Ellipse

The National Christmas Tree was lighted by the President's wife Nancy Reagan on December 13 from the South Portico of the White House. With temperatures above 70 degrees, it was one of the warmest tree lightings in history.

The nativity scene (creche) was reinstated as being historically and legally appropriate for display during the Pageant of Peace in light of a U.S. Supreme Court decision. The tradition of displaying the nativity scene had been discontinued in 1973, following a decision of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit which decided an argument based upon U.S. Constitutional rights of religious freedom.

1985 The Ellipse

Vice President Bush's wife Mrs. Barbara Bush topped the National Christmas Tree November 25.

President Reagan, accompanied by The First Lady holding her dog "Rex," turned on the Christmas tree lights from a remote on the South Portico of the White House on Dec. 12.

In his broadcast Christmas address, The President mourned the deaths of a planeload of U.S. 101st Airborne Division servicemen whose homeward-bound plane had crashed in Newfoundland.

This was the first year since 1959 that reindeer, donated to celebrate Alaska statehood, were not included in the Pageant. A traditional nativity scene was erected as it had been in 1984.

On Christmas Eve at 6:15 p.m., the President directed that the lights on the tree be turned down momentarily in support of American hostages in Lebanon and their families at home.

1986 The Ellipse

Nov. 24, Vice President George Bush's wife Mrs. Barbara Bush started decorating for the Pageant of Peace by topping the National Tree, with a 4-foot-tall starburst ornament.

For the opening of the Pageant, Dec. 11, President Ronald Reagan delivered his Christmas message by video remote and then, along with The First Lady, was joined by 8-year-old Byron Whyte and "Big Brother" Francis Hinton of the National Capital Area Big Brothers and Big Sisters who helped the President throw the remote switch to light the National Christmas Tree.

A crowd of 6,500 braved rain to attend opening ceremonies with Jim Nabors, television's Gomer Pyle, and Willard Scott, NBC "Today" show weatherman, as headliners.

Reindeer, a nativity scene, and burning yule log were included as a part of the traditional displays.

1987 The Ellipse

The National Christmas Tree lighting program was held Monday, Dec. 7, earlier than usual because of the President's impending four-day summit meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

President Ronald Reagan and a 5-year-old cystic fibrosis patient from New Jersey lit the tree by remote control from the White House. On stage on the Ellipse, the program headlined The California Raisins and Ted E. Bear & Patti Bear from "The Bear Who Slept Through Christmas."

1988 The Ellipse

Mrs. Barbara Bush, wife of then Vice President Bush, and puppets "Rex and Rita Readasaurus," stars of a nationwide Reading is Fundamental program topped the National Christmas Tree on December 1.

A crowd of 12,000 attended opening ceremonies featuring Johnny Mathis, Shari Lewis & Lambchop, The Dayton Hudson Santabears and Santa Chops and the California Raisins. President Ronald Reagan said, "thanks for a free America," as he threw the switch at the White House to light the National Christmas Tree for the eighth and last time as President.

1989 The Ellipse

President and Mrs. Bush and their granddaughter Marshall pulled the switch which illuminated the National Christmas Tree with thousands of red, white and blue lights symbolic of the President's "thousand points of light" speech during his election campaign. The First Family was watched the opening ceremonies from a box near the stage.

A crowd estimated at more than 12,000, watched the program featuring popular music singers Marilyn McCoo, Billy Davis Jr., and country-western singer Loretta Lynn.

1990 The Ellipse

For the first time, trees grown on reclaimed surface coal mine land were used to form the Pathway of Peace comprised of 57 small scotch pine trees representing the 50 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. territories.

For the second year, President and Mrs. Bush watched the opening of the Pageant of Peace from a box near the stage and turned on the lights on the National Christmas Tree. The show Dec. 13 featured actress Jane Powell, country western singer Ricky Van Shelton, the California Raisins and Chip'n Dale & Baloo the Bear.

1991 The Ellipse

Mrs. Barbara Bush kicked off the Pageant of Peace preparations Nov. 25 by placing the top ornament on the National Christmas Tree. She and pageant head Joseph Riley, along with her grandchildren Lauren and Pierce Bush, rode to the tree top in a hydraulic lift.

President George Bush was joined for the tree lighting, Dec. 12, by Terry Anderson, the last hostage to be released from Lebanon, and four other former hostages Alann Steen, Thomas Sutherland, Joseph Cicippio and Jesse Turner. A estimated crowd of 12,000 attended the opening ceremony. Headliners for the show included opera singer Marilyn Horne, jazz vocalist Joe Williams, and Larry Gatlin and the Gatlin Brothers. The program featured the Tucson Arizona Boys Chorus and Ginger and Spice Plush dolls and dancers.

The live National Christmas Tree was decorated with red, white and blue lights and garland symbolizing the theme *charity*. For the second year, trees grown on reclaimed surface coal mining land were donated to the Pageant by the National Coal Association to use to form the *Pathway of Peace* representing the 50 states, territories and District of Columbia each with a separate tree and ornaments.

1992 The Ellipse

For twelve years the Vice President's wife and then First Lady Barbara Bush had been the one to kick off the Pageant of Peace by placing the top ornament on the National Christmas tree. After making her last ride to the top of the tree, National Park Service Director James Ridenour presented Mrs. Bush with a plaque for her years of enthusiastic support of the Pageant.

President Bush pressed the switch to turn on the Christmas tree lights during a rain-drenched stage program that still attracted an audience of estimated 7,000 to see actress Lucie Arnaz, singer Lee Greenwood, actress Keshia Knight Pulliam and the venerable Willard Scott playing Santa. *Exploration*, this year's theme, was expressed in the tree decorations and the ornaments donated from the States and Territories to be hung on the 57 trees that formed the Pathway of Peace.

1993 The Ellipse

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton participated in the topping ceremony Nov. 29, riding to the top of the tree in a lift with Pageant of Peace president Joseph Riley to crown the 38-foot Colorado blue spruce with a fiber-optic starburst ornament. Ornaments for this year's Pageant of Peace followed the theme *Unity*.

Headliners for the tree-lighting ceremony were actress **Sandy Duncan**, country music artist **Charley Pride**, musician **Phil Driscoll** and **Willard Scott** as Santa Claus. President **Bill Clinton** gave his Christmas message to the nation and then threw the switch to light the National Christmas Tree. An estimated crowd of 9,000 attended the ceremony under clear, balmy weather.

1994 The Ellipse

Hilary Rodham Clinton officiated Nov. 28 at the traditional *Topping -of-the-Tree* ceremony. Some 6,500 persons attended the Dec. 7 lighting of the National Christmas Tree. President and Mrs. Clinton and daughter Chelsea lighted the tree. The program included performances by Metropolitan Opera star **Richard Leech**, Queen of Soul **Aretha Franklin**, country singer **Trish Yearwood**, **Willard Scott** as Santa, and the **United States Marine Band**. Ambassador **Hattie Babbitt** and NPS Deputy Director **John Reynolds** represented the Department and NPS in the President's box. The ceremony was dedicated to **Joseph H. Riley**, president of the Christmas Pageant of Peace, Inc., since 1979 until this year when leadership passed to **John J. Betchkal**.

Photovoltaic components for lighting the tree were again supplied through the U.S. Department of Energy. Trees grown on reclaimed surface-mined land were supplied through the U.S. Department of Interior's Office of Surface Mining. A garden-sized model railroad display around the tree was added for the first time to the customary exhibits of creche, reindeer and yule log. The Pageant of Peace continued on the Ellipse with nightly entertainment 6-9 p.m., through Dec. with the tree lighted through Jan. 1.

Chronology of Presidents and Vice Presidents who have lighted the National Christmas Tree

Calvin Coolidge

1923, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1928

Herbert C. Hoover

1929, 1930, 1931

Charles Curtis

1932

Franklin D. Roosevelt

1933-1942

Spoke from Hyde Park, N.Y., 1943-1944

Harry S. Truman

1945-1950

From Independence, Mo.; 1951 and 1952

Dwight D. Eisenhower

1953, 1954

From Gettysburg, Pa., 1955-1960

Lyndon B. Johnson

1961

John F. Kennedy

1962

Lyndon B. Johnson

1963-1968

Richard M. Nixon

1969, 1970, 1973

Spiro T. Agnew

1971, 1972

Gerald R. Ford

1974, 1975, 1976

Jimmy Carter

1977, 1978

In 1979 and in 1980, only the main ornament was lighted because of the American hostages in Iran. The tree was fully lighted on Inaugural Day, (Ronald Reagan) Jan. 20 1981, when the hostages were released and their homebound aircraft had cleared Iranian airspace.

Ronald Reagan

1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988

George Bush

1989, 1990, 1991, 1992

Bill Clinton

1993, 1994

Christmas Tree Donations

In 1973 the first living National Christmas Tree since the creation of the Pageant of Peace was planted on the Ellipse. The 42-foot Colorado blue spruce from northern Pennsylvania was donated by the National Arborist Association and was meant to serve as a permanent National Christmas Tree. Unfortunately, the tree was dying in 1976 and had to be replaced for the 1977 Pageant of Peace.

A new live tree (Colorado Blue Spruce) donated by an anonymous family in Maryland was used for the 1977 program, but blew down in January 1978 during a violent wind storm.

A replacement tree, planted in October of 1978, has survived to date under care and attention by National Park Service horticulturalists. It was donated by Mr. and Mrs. William E. Myers and transplanted from their farm in York, Pennsylvania. It was first decorated for the 1978 National Christmas Pageant of Peace and has been used ever since.

Prior to 1973, cut trees were donated for Pageant of Peace as listed in the following table.

Year	State Donated by	Type of Tree
1954	Michigan	60' Balsam Fir
1955	South Dakota	65' White Spruce
1956	New Mexico	'65 Englemann Spruce
1957	Minnesota	60' White Spruce
1958	Montana	99' cut to 75' Englemann Spruce
1959	Maine	'70 White Spruce
1960	Oregon	'78 Douglas Fir
1961	Washington	75' Douglas Fir
1962	Colorado	65' Blue Spruce
1963	West Virginia	66' Red Spruce
1964	New York	'72 White Spruce
1965	Arizona	'70 Blue Spruce
1966	California	'70 Red Fir
1967	Vermont	70' Balsam Fir
1968	Utah	74' Englemann Spruce
1969	New York	75' Adirondacks Spruce
1970	South Dakota	'78 White Spruce
1971	North Carolina	70' Fraser Fir
1972	Wyoming	70' Englemann Spruce