

Ottawa Journal: a brief history of Christmas lights

Christmas lights are one of the first signs the Christmas season has arrived. There are countless variations and styles of this beloved Christmas decoration and we all have our own ways of using them to uniquely decorate our homes, businesses, and communities. They, without a doubt, enhance our Christmas spirit and remind us of the joy of this special season. It's a Christmas tradition that can be traced back several centuries.

Several sources cite the origins of Christmas lights to as early as the seventeenth century in Germany, when candles were placed on Christmas trees using melted wax or pins. This custom later spread to Eastern Europe. It has also been said that Christians in Europe would place burning candles in the windows of their homes which could be seen from outside. This was a symbol to other Christians that those residing in the home were Christian and fellow Christians were welcome to visit and worship along with the home's residents.

By the late 19th century, candleholders were used for Christmas candles and the tradition of using candles would remain popular into the early twentieth century. It has been said that Thomas Edison gave the world the first electric Christmas light display when he, in 1880, strung his incandescent light bulbs outside his lab, in an effort to draw attention and promote his creation. His associate, Edward Johnson, has been credited with creating the first string of Christmas lights in 1882. He took a string of 80 small electric light bulbs in red, blue, and white and used them to decorate his Christmas tree in New York, which was placed in the window of his home. By 1890, strings of electric Christmas lights were being mass produced and by 1900, department stores began using them in their own Christmas displays. Such public Christmas light displays became increasingly popular for both retailers and government buildings throughout the United States. Initially, the public was skeptical about electric lights as a safer alternative to candles; however, President Grover Cleveland helped change this perception by displaying the first electrically lit Christmas tree in the White House in 1895, which featured more than 100 multi-coloured bulbs.

The popularity of electric Christmas lights for Christmas trees continued to grow, but the custom was often limited to only the wealthy who would host Christmas tree parties. During this time, most people continued to light their trees with candles, as electric lights proved to be too expensive. The trees were lit for only a few minutes at night and just for a couple of days before Christmas, due to fire concerns. Buckets of sand and water were kept on-hand in case of fire.

Several sources cite a teenager by the name of Albert Sadacca for inventing electric Christmas lights safe for home use in 1917. Together with his family, they developed coloured bulbs and by the mid-1920s, the National Outfit Manufacturer's Association (NOMA) was formed by Albert and his family. The company became the largest Christmas light manufacturer in the world until the mid-1960s. NOMA and its competitors have been credited with making Christmas lights more affordable to more people. By the 1940s and 1950s, more and more people were buying them for their trees and decorating their homes with them. In 1970, the mini light was introduced and has remained a popular choice for Christmas lights.

A great deal has changed since the times of when candles were used as Christmas lights; however, one thing has remained constant ? the joy and merriment these long-cherished Christmas decorations bring to the Christmas season. Hopefully you and your loved ones will have the opportunity to view the many outstanding Christmas light displays throughout our own community during the holidays. I also wish you and yours a very Merry Christmas!

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