

Christmas Traditions

By Trail End State Historic Site Curator Dana Prater; from *Trail End Notes*, November 1999

Christmas at Trail End is really our favorite time of the year and the time when we think the house looks its loveliest. The red carpets and the red and green wallpaper are striking at any time, but they become stunning when combined with our elegant decorations.

Such simple elegance was characteristic of Christmas decorating in the early part of the Twentieth Century. Greenery, ribbons, candles, and red and white flowers of many different kinds were popular decorations. By the turn of the century, decorating Christmas trees had also become a widely practiced custom. The overloaded Victorian tree was no longer in vogue and a new element revolutionized decorating – electric lights!



Figural Christmas Lights, 2006 (TESHS Collection)

Edward Johnson, a partner in the Edison Electric Lamp Company, introduced the first Christmas tree lights way back in 1882. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland had the first electrically lit Christmas tree in the White House. These early light strings were handmade and custom designed for Johnson and Cleveland. The first electric light strings for home Christmas trees however, were not marketed until 1901 (by General Electric) and 1903 (by the Ever-Ready Company). By the 1920s, as more homes were wired, electric lights replaced candles as soon as people could afford them. The lights were new and modern, could be left unattended, and were much more convenient than dealing with clip-on candle holders and dripping wax.

In 1909, figural light bulbs were available from both European and American manufacturers. Like traditional glass ornaments, these small bulbs were shaped and painted to resemble birds, cats, dogs, fruit, nuts, pine cones, Santas and other whimsical forms. We have recently [1999] added four of these bulbs to our collection. They were found in the Trail End attic and we believe they came from a set that belonged to the Kendricks.

If you would like more information about period decorations, George Johnson's *Christmas Ornaments, Lights and Decorations: A Collector's Identification & Value Guide*, was very useful in our research. It is the first volume of a three volume set and is loaded with color pictures.



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