

# The history of holiday lights

Holiday celebrants employ holiday lights in various ways. Certain individuals may be content to hang lights on their Christmas trees and call their decorating complete. Others may get their holiday jollies by making sure each square inch of their home is covered in twinkling lights. Still, other people prefer the more subdued effect of lights framing one picture window of the house.

The tradition of Christmas lights stretches back to early modern Germany when people used candles to decorate Christmas trees in Christian homes. Those candles were harbingers of what would come when electric lights replaced gas and other open flame illuminating devices that were commonplace prior to the 20th century.

Thomas Edison, the inventor of the first successful practical light bulb, also created the



first strand of electric lights that would be used in holiday decorating. By 1880, Edison had standard incandescent light bulbs well sorted out and desired a way to better advertise his invention, so he decided to make the most of the holiday season and put his light bulbs on display. According to a 2003 article in American Heritage magazine titled “The Wizard of Your Christmas Tree,” Edison strung incandescent bulbs all around the compound of his Menlo Park, NJ, laboratory. Edison constructed an eight-mile underground wiring system in order to power this grand light display. Because the laboratory was situated along the railroad that passed between Manhattan and Philadelphia, thousands of people were able to see the display.

The concept of electric holiday lights took a bit of time to catch on. Edison’s friend and associate Edward Johnson was tasked with stringing together colored lights in 1882 and placing them on an evergreen tree. Johnson hand-wired 80 red, white and blue light bulbs. In 1895, President Grover Cleveland requested the White House family Christmas tree be illuminated by multi-colored electric light bulbs.

In 1903, when General Electric began to offer pre-assembled kits of holiday lights, stringed lights were reserved for the wealthy and electrically savvy. For example, in 1903 a single string of electric lights cost \$12, or around \$300 today.

It would take several more years before holiday lights became a national tradition. On Christmas Eve 1923, President Calvin Coolidge began the

country’s celebration of Christmas by lighting the National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse located south of the White House with 3,000 electric lights. Today, illuminated strands of lights have become a large part of holiday celebrations and have even been adopted for use during various year-round events. Such lights can be a beautiful and festive addition to many celebrations.



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