

One inventor's bright idea to light up a Christmas tree

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TOP: Warsaw, Poland, sets up lights for the Christmas season. MIDDLE: Thomas Edison, whose invention of the lightbulb brought us Christmas lights. BOTTOM: An early advertisement for Christmas tree lights. Kevin Moore/Getty Images

Edward Hibberd Johnson was an American inventor and businessman. He lived in New York City in the 1800s. In 1882, Johnson had an idea that would change the look of Christmas celebrations forever.

Johnson worked as a boss at the Automatic Telegraph Company. In 1871, he hired the young inventor Thomas Edison to join the company. Edison was a great worker. He did thousands of experiments and came up with many new ideas.

When Edison left to start his own company, Johnson followed him. He started turning Edison's ideas into money. In 1877, Edison invented the phonograph. It was the first machine that could record and play back sound. It was like a record player. Johnson traveled around showing

people the machine. When Edison invented the lightbulb in 1880, no one knew how much it was worth. It would be years until most homes had the electricity to power it. Still, Johnson and other people gave \$35,000 to start a company to sell the bulbs.

Christmas Trees Become Popular



Before long, Johnson had a bright idea. Christmas traditions may seem ancient, but most of them started in the 1800s. Charles Dickens' popular story "A Christmas Carol" was published in 1843. Thomas Nast's drawings of jolly Santa Claus appeared in 1862. Christmas trees became popular in Britain in the 1840s. Before then, they were mainly displayed in Germany. Soon they became popular in the United States as well. President Franklin Pierce put one up at the White House in 1856. By the 1870s, Christmas trees and ornaments were sold all around the country.

But what really made a tree a Christmas tree were the candles. Flickering flames were perfect for the occasion, but they were also dangerous. They could easily start a fire.



Johnson Lights The First Tree

Johnson saw an opportunity. He set up a Christmas tree by one of his windows. Then he wired 80 red, white and blue lightbulbs and hung them around it. The lights drew a crowd as people on the street stopped to admire the glowing Christmas tree. It was so popular that Johnson turned it into a tradition. Each year he added more lights. An 1884 newspaper story counted 120 bulbs on his dazzling tree.

Johnson's lights weren't cheap. In 1900, a string of 16 bulbs sold for a pricey \$12. That was a lot of money back then, because people made less. In today's money, that's about \$350. But in 1894 President Grover Cleveland put electric lights on the White House tree. By 1914, a string of 16 bulbs cost just \$1.75. By the 1930s, colored lightbulbs were everywhere.

Today an estimated 150 million light sets are sold in America each year. They light 80 million homes. Some of them are now used to celebrate Halloween and Valentine's Day as well. But it all started with Johnson's glowing Christmas tree.

Quiz

1 Read the section "Johnson Lights The First Tree."

Select the sentence that shows how much cheaper the light bulbs had become after a few decades.

- (A) In 1900, a string of 16 bulbs sold for a pricey \$12.
- (B) But in 1894 President Grover Cleveland put electric lights on the White House tree.
- (C) By 1914, a string of 16 bulbs cost just \$1.75.
- (D) By the 1930s, colored lightbulbs were everywhere.

2 Read the section "Christmas Trees Become Popular."

The following sentence is from this section.

Christmas trees became popular in Britain in the 1840s.

Based on the section and sentence above, which of the following conclusions is MOST LIKELY to be true?

- (A) British people did not celebrate Christmas until the 1840s.
- (B) British people were the ones to invent the Christmas tree.
- (C) British people had other Christmas traditions before the 1840s.
- (D) British people were the only people in the world who used Christmas trees in the 1840s.

3 Read the section "Johnson Lights The First Tree."

Which of the following options BEST explains why Johnson wanted people to notice the Christmas tree in his window?

- (A) He wanted everyone to see how beautiful his Christmas tree was.
- (B) He thought he would be able to sell Christmas lights to people.
- (C) He wanted the newspaper to do a story about his Christmas tree.
- (D) He thought it would start an important Christmas tradition.

4 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

What is the main reason why Johnson gave money to start a lightbulb company?

- (A) He believed that the invention would help people in the future.
- (B) He wanted to help because he thought Edison was a good worker.
- (C) He liked Edison and wanted to show that he was a good friend to him.
- (D) He thought Edison's inventions were good and that he could make money off of them.