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The Christmas Tree...

A tradition rooted in New Jersey

By Sharon Hazard

WHO WOULD HAVE guessed that a symbol of love and peace had its American origins during time of war and in the state of New Jersey? The Christmas tree was not always a traditional part of the holiday celebration in America. The first sighting of a lit and decorated live tree occurred on Christmas Eve during the Revolutionary War when a group of Hessian soldiers carried on their German tradition

near the Trenton Battlefield in 1776. Hessians were German mercenaries hired by the British to defeat George Washington and his troops camped along the Delaware River on this cold and bitter night. Not to be distracted by thoughts of the upcoming battle, they used a lit tree as a backdrop for their holiday celebration, a event that proved to take its toll on their soldiering

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Tree

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capabilities. They were defeated the next day.

After the war, some of these German soldiers stayed in America and the idea of the Christmas tree slowly took root but very few carried on the tradition

With the prominence of the Christmas tree as the undisputed symbol of the holidays today, it is hard to believe that in the beginning of the 19th century, Christmas was just another day and bringing a live tree into the house was an almost unheard of tradition in most of the world.

We have Prince Albert and Queen Victoria of England to thank for taking up where the Hessians left off and helping to make the Christmas tree the centerpiece of the holidays here in America. German-born Prince Albert can take most of the credit. When he came to England as the consort of the queen, he brought with him many of his country's customs, the most enduring being the Christmas tree. Due to a drawing in an 1848 issue of *The London News* showing the royal family gathered round a live tree lit with candles and decorated with dolls and delicacies, within ten years Christmas was the most celebrated holiday in England.

Some years later, Charles Dickens helped carry the tradition to America with the publication of a Christmas Carol, giving the world a Romantic glimpse of a Victorian Christmas.

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Each decorated tree highlights a different region or aspect of New Jersey's rich

heritage.

Presented by the Friends of Monmouth Museum, the "Lighthouse Tree" pays homage to New Jersey's maritime history and the role these historic structures played in guiding ships and protecting its 127 miles of shoreline.

The Holly Club of Sea Girl's "Crops of New Jersey Tree" is decorated with fruits and vegetable grown in New Jersey, and enhanced with photos taken of New Jersey produce.

Birds of New Jersey are perched all over the tree decorated by the Navesink Garden Club. The abundant bird life in the state is well-represented in this color creation.

The Shrewsbury Garden Club's tree was inspired by the Lenape Indians, the Native Americans that once populated New Jersey. Ornaments include at tee-pee shaped tree topper made of reeds and natural grasses.

"Getting to Know New Jersey, A Road Trip on the Highways and Byways" is the theme for the Ocean Township Garden Club's offering. Visitors to the exhibition can take a drive through the Garden State while admiring the decorations that include the state flower; fruit; bird; tree and animal. A popcorn and cranberry garland celebrates New Jersey's local produce.

The Bayberry Garden Club of Brielle celebrates New Jersey music with a tree covered with photos of the state's most famous musicians, singers and rock stars. Visitors will enjoy trying to see how many of New Jersey's musical celebrities they can recognize.

The Highlands Garden Club's tree gives visitors a tour of all things New Jersey. Ornaments include representations of lighthouses, amusement parks, historical sites, museums, beaches, boardwalks and fishing.

The Garden Club R.F.D., headquartered in the Little Red Schoolhouse in Middletown presented a tree that looks back on the club's 70 years of horticultural knowledge and design with ornaments having a gardening theme.

The exhibit runs through Dec. 31. For more information call the Monmouth Museum at (732) 747-2266.