Christmas Tree Lightings at St. John's

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Christmas at St. John’s: a bright tradition that has also had some darker moments, as we shall see. *I am the ghost of Christmas Past,* come to share your history!

Christmas at St. John’s image 93.07.00 05-017 slide 1 Great Hall exterior with tree
One of the first tree lightings of significance to St. John's wasn’t actually at St. John’s – it was at the White House, in 1962, when the Men’s Chorus was invited by President John F. Kennedy to sing for the “Christmas Pageant of Peace” tree lighting ceremony.

Dec. 7, 1962 p. 1 The Record
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33364/rec/40
See also Nov. 28, 1962 p. 1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33374/rec/42
“All major American radio and TV networks broadcast it, giving St. John's a lot of publicity.” (This was 7 years before Axel Theimer became the Men’s Chorus Director.)

1963-01-16, The Record p. 4
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/33392/rec/1322
Inset: 2021-01 Saint John’s Magazine p. 45
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/50006/rec/52
Back on campus, no mention is made in *The Record* in 1971 about a Christmas tree lighting ceremony, but this photo appears in the Dec. 13 issue. It was a bit tricky to say where it was located, but the lambs painted on the Great Hall wall are just barely discernable to the left.

Image: Dec. 13, 1971 *The Record* p. 2
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/34754/rec/1446
The lambs are more visible in this Christmas photo from the 1972 yearbook, proof that there was indeed a Great Hall Christmas tree and some kind of concert in 1971. 1972 Sagatagan yearbook, p. 50
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/33181/rec/55
Br. Leonard Chmelik was in charge of the Information Desk in the Great Hall in those days, and Christmas was a special time of year for him. He was known for his “Cookie Christmas Trees” in the monastery, and is credited with getting the Great Hall tree lighting ceremony started in 1971 – to expand upon a monastery tradition that always took place a couple of days before Christmas, after students had already left campus. Then-president Fr. Michael Blecker agreed to host a seasonal celebration near the start of Advent that would include students and everyone in the community.

*Abbey Banner* Winter 2001 p. 9

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/23738/rec/6

By the mid-1970s, as this 1976 schedule shows, the tree lighting had become a big deal, involving instrumental and choral performances and the presence of both the Abbot and SJU’s president.

1976 Schedule with scribbled prayer
Box 594:5 (reportedly in Michael Blecker’s handwriting)
These scribbled notes are reportedly in President Michael Blecker’s handwriting: “Light is a symbol of life, darkness of death. As we light this Christmas tree, let it be a pledge to work together to bring light and life to our world.”

1976 Schedule with scribbled prayer
Box 594:5 (reportedly in Michael Blecker’s handwriting); Blecker photo from SJU Archives
In 1977, Br. Leonard sent this memo to Br. David Erceg, the St. John’s Fire Chief. It’s the schedule for the tree lighting, and he asks for prayers that “the tree will not go up in a puff of smoke when Michael [Blecker] throws the switch”!

1977: Memo to Fire Chief, 594:6
That 1977 tree didn’t go up in smoke, and is pictured here as published in the *Community* newsletter (the “Daily Bulletin” of its time). The big decorations, which graced the Great Hall tree for many years – and still do! – were created by Br. Andrew Goltz, who passed away last month [November 2021]. Br. Andrew had been the last living contributor to the stained-glass window of the Abbey Church.

Tree photo and caption 2017:1 *Community* Dec. 14, 1977, p. 1
Goltz photo from Fall 2018 *Abbey Banner* p. 8
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/48224/rec/4
That 1977 tree made the front page of the *St. Cloud Times*, too.

1977: *St. Cloud Times* article
But Br. Leonard and others received bad news the next year, 1978, when Fr. Dan Ward, the Abbey’s lawyer, informed the community that Minnesota fire regulations prohibit having electric lights indoors on real trees in public places. The size of the crowd – the Great Hall was generally packed with people – was also considered a danger.

1978: Fire Regulations mean no lights on an indoor tree. 594:7
However, the next day, a directive is issued from the President’s Office by Br. Linus, then the Assistant to the President. While stating that it is in St. John’s best interest to comply with the state regulations, and to discourage the proliferation of artificial tress in offices and dorms, he declares that “the Great Hall Christmas tree has been in the planning stage for some time and will, therefore, be lit again this year.”

Recommendations for future alternatives to electric lights are requested.

The 1978 tree in the Great Hall was thus the last real tree to feature electric lights.

PC07 16-31
December 29, 1978

Memo


From: Shirley Zipoy

Re: Great Hall Christmas Tree

A proposal has been made that initiative be taken by some of the people that are familiar with the Tree Lighting Ceremony Event to discuss the future of the Event.

It is felt that it is important that this discussion take place before the current tree is taken down. We should review the topic while it is still fresh in our minds.

The purpose would be to discuss other options of lighting, location, etc. It would be a benefit to have varied opinions that are strong in nature so that many ideas may be discussed.

With tree lights outlawed, a committee formed after Christmas to discuss other lighting or location options. Shirley Zipoy in Special Events (the Jeff Wubbels of those days!), solicited the help of Br. Leonard, Br. Andrew, fire chief Br. David, Br. Linus and others to discuss it while the Great Hall tree was still up.

818:17
The January 1979 “Christmas Tree Committee” minutes reflect appreciation to Brothers Andrew and Leonard, notes the cost of an artificial tree large enough for the Great Hall space to be a deterrent, and puts forth options that include using a large tree outside and using a small tree or crib scene inside the Great Hall. “It was stressed that the Great Hall speaks for the Community for the entire Christmas Season, not just on the night of the tree lighting,” so the Great Hall “should in some manner continue to tell the Christmas story even if a large tree is used outside as part of the Event.”

818:17
Events Coordinator

September 21, 1979

To the Christmas Tree ad hoc Committee:

There is a meeting scheduled at 10:00 AM, in the President's Conference Room on Wednesday, Sept. 26th.

Time is slipping by and we must again address ourselves to the issue of forming a new format for the Christmas Tree Blessing and Lighting.

The date of the event is December 3rd, 1979.

Br. Leonard Chmelik, Br. Andrew Goltz and I have a proposal to present to the rest of the committee. This will be a beginning point and hopefully save time for all of us.

Your attendance will be appreciated.

Shirley Ziegler

Come September, the committee reconstituted to get serious about what to do. Shirley, Andrew and Leonard had a proposal...

818:17
...to have an outdoor tree on the church mall, and a decorated tree, lit with flood lights, in the Great Hall. A musical program would take place in the Abbey Church, followed by a tree blessing and lighting outside, with refreshments afterwards.

818:17
The event was noted in the *St. Cloud Times*. One thing had changed from the proposal: the outside tree was erected between the church and the Great Hall, not on the mall between the church and the library.

1979: A tree is lit outside; the music moves to the Abbey Church. 1979 Dec. 4 St. Cloud Times, p. 21  106:14
More photos appeared in an issue of the *Community* newsletter...

Dec. 5, 1979 *Community* p. 3

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/47471/rec/7
...and in the 1980 CSB/SJU yearbook.
1979 tree, in 1980 Saints yearbook, p. 62
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/39124/rec/9
The 1979 tree *inside* the Great Hall was pictured on the cover of the Winter 1979 issue of *Saint John’s magazine*.  
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/5507/rec/7
Plans for the next lighting, issued by Chaplain Fr. Michal Naughton, called for what became the established schedule of Christmas carols, choral performances, brief remarks from the President, a blessing by the Abbot, and an outdoor tree lighting. A pre-arranged group was assigned to break into a “spontaneous” carol.

1980: 819:1
Fr. Michael notes that the Abbot, President and Chaplain would hopefully not be “swept away by the marauding hoards” fighting to get outside.

1980: 819:1
The schedule for the 1981 ceremony adds a student choir to sing around the tree, to be located this time just east of Mary Hall, as people come out of the church. The plan also cautions the president that “the switch has a delay of a few seconds – don’t panic”! But that year, those seconds turned out to be more than a brief delay, because...

1981 Tree Blessing Schedule, 751A:29
...the 1981 TREE DID NOT LIGHT.

751A:29
The next Chaplain’s Letter sadly documents what had happened: someone cut a line and stole a junction box, so the tree could not light up until an electrician (my father-in-law, in fact) crawled through the Mary Hall “catacombs” to manually switch on the lights.

1981 Chaplain’s Letter, 751A:29
The location of the outdoor tree used over the next several years varied from a live tree growing by Mary Hall, to one harvested from the St. John’s woods and placed in front of the Great Hall, or in front of Sexton Commons, or off the northeast corner of Tommy Hall.

[see 2016-17 Winter Abbey Banner p. 6-7
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/47685/rec/51]
On right: Dec. 13, 1984 The Record p.1
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/36088/rec/4
In 1984, Axel Theimer moved the music back into the Great Hall, with a concert there the evening after the tree lighting, and ticketed seating to limit the crowd size. The Record writer noted that “the success of the show will determine its longevity in the Christmas seasons to come.”

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?/CSBArchNews,36022  The Record Nov. 29, 1984 p. 9
This concert evolved into the very successful “Christmas at Saint John’s” event that came to be held both on campus to a packed audience...
1990: Great Hall concert, 76/4 binder 10/57
...and in the Minneapolis Basilica, as “Celebrating the Seasons” – with musicians from both CSB and SJU. That tradition began in 1987.
Right image from IA O drive: basilica-139.jpg
The Christmas tree lighting tradition itself continued in the 1980s and 1990s…

...with lights *shone onto* the tree *inside* the Great Hall, and lights *on* the tree *outside.*


On right: 1986 Dec. 5 *St. Cloud Times* p. 1
Notices in The Record’s “Briefs” column alerted everyone to the date of the tree lightings. The crowds were “standing room only.”

Dec. 3, 1987 The Record p. 2
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/36979/rec/18

Dec. 1, 1988 The Record p. 2

Image from IA O drive: Christmas tree.jpg (no date)
With the completion of Sexton Commons in 1993, the tree lighting relocated outside the new student center.

The lighted tree stands adjacent to Sexton Commons. US West donated their time and placed all the lights on the tree with a “cherry-picker” truck. The tree contains a total of well over 1,000 lights.

Inset from Dec. 7, 1994
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/3839/rec/2
...but by 1998, the ceremonial tree lighting took place on an artificial tree, inside Sexton Commons.
(Noteworthy? Shirley Zipoy, SJU’s Events Coordinator, left SJU in 1997.)
And that was the last tree lighting ceremony. There would still be a tree in the Great Hall every Christmas...

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?CSBArchNews,39918 Dec. 12, 1999 The Record p. 2

...and it would still be the backdrop for the holiday concerts and “Santa Day,” but the tradition of a tree lighting ceremony at St. John’s came to a halt after 1998.

http://cdm.csbsju.edu/u/?/CSBArchNews,39918 Dec. 12, 1999 The Record p. 2
Image: 1990s 76/4 07-011 (right)
Nov. 27, 2012:

**St. Ben’s to begin a Christmas tradition**

By Lindsey Grache
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CSB/SJU students have grown accustomed to Christmas at St. John’s, but this year a new tradition is beginning.

The Joint Events Council teamed up with staff to create a new Christmas tradition for the St. Ben’s campus after Thanksgiving break.

“It is truly memory making; it will never again be the ‘first time’,” SALD Director Maribeth Overland said.

On the evening of Nov. 27, bells will chime at 5 p.m., and the women of St. Ben’s will emerge from their residences, led by a representative from their year carrying a torch. They will meet in the mall, and standing on the platform between Anselm Science Center and Clements Library will be a 25-foot tall pine tree.

The CSB Women’s Choir will sing selections of Christmas music as President MaryAnn Baenninger flips the switch to turn on thousands of lights.

“It will be Bennies celebrating the joy and mystery of Christmas together,” Overland said.

“It will be Bennies celebrating the joy and mystery of Christmas together.”

-Maribeth Overland, SALD Director

“It sounds like a great tradition, and I’m excited to be a part of it,” CNS senior Rachel Hopping said.

After the ceremony, students can gather in the Glass Lobby of the RAC where there will be Christmas treats like sugar cookies, apple cider and a hot chocolate bar. There will also be a scene set up where students can take group pictures to be picked up later, after being turned into greeting card hobbes.

“This is an opportunity for students to capture a moment of friendship and joy with their friends and to create memories that they will have forever,” Overland said.

“This is a wonderful idea. I wouldn’t miss it,” CNS senior Marie Mayer said.

The theme of the ceremony is the school’s motto “Luceo Lux Vestra” or “So Let Your Light Shine.” This will be shown by the torches that lead students to the gathering place and the

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But, 14 years later, in 2012, as CSB was approaching its centennial, St. Ben’s started its own tree lighting tradition. A donated tree was placed on the plaza in front of the library, and, with the Women’s Choir providing the music, CSB president MaryAnn Baenninger flipped the switch to turn on the lights. Carols and refreshments followed.

*The Record* Nov. 11, 2012 p. 1


Image from Dec. 4, 2015 *The Record* p. 1

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/42930/rec/35
Then, in 2015, the Saint John’s tradition was re-established, thanks to the advent of environmentally-friendly LED lighting, and a decision to forgo cutting a live tree.
Dec. 4, 2015 The Record p. 5
https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/CSBArchNews/id/42934/rec/35
An investment was made in this huge artificial tree – sustainably re-useable – which now graces the Great Hall.

2016-17 Winter Abbey Banner p. 6-7

https://cdm.csbsju.edu/digital/collection/SJUArchives/id/47685/rec/51
Thus the tree lighting tradition resumed at St. John's, and now continues on both campus.
Dec. 2, 2016 p. 7 *The Record*
Merry Christmas!

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Photo by Robin Pierzina, 2015-16 Winter Abbey Banner, p. 31.