

## THE FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE IN NEW ENGLAND

The Christmas customs of the English settlers in America did not include the Christmas tree. In fact, during much of the early history of New England, the Puritans strictly forbade the celebration of Christmas. It is from Germany that Americans have derived the custom of decorating the home with an adorned evergreen tree, the Tannenbaum. Unrecorded German immigrants may have first introduced the Christmas tree to German settlements in Pennsylvania and the South. In New England, however, the honor most likely goes to the Rev. Charles Follen, a liberal German immigrant and Unitarian minister.

During the Christmas season of 1835, Follen was in Boston where he had secured a temporary professorship of German Literature at Harvard College in Cambridge. He was at that moment completing a book, *Religion and the Church*, that argued that religion starts in the human mind, that religious institutions and theological systems much evolve with human society, and that a greater theology must transcend even the best insights of Christianity to become a synthesis of the truest elements of all faiths. Such sentiments placed Follen within the Transcendentalist movement then sweeping through Unitarianism.

Follen's wife, Eliza Lee Follen, was an accomplished writer of children's stories. She is perhaps best known for her nursery rhyme about the "Three little kittens who lost their mittens."

It had been a wish of Charles Follen to acquaint Americans with the charming customs of his homeland. And now his youngest son Charley was just two years old, and ready for the wonders of the Christmas season. So Eliza and Charles Follen decided to bring the Christmas tree to Boston, which had known nothing of the custom. A young fir tree was planted in a tub and the base decorated with moss. The branches of the tree sparkled with gilded egg-cups, bright paper cornucopias filled with comfits, lozenges, and barley-sugar. The brilliant English Unitarian, Harriet Martineau, was a guest in the Follen home and recorded the scene. "Smart dolls and other whimsies glittered in the evergreen, and there was not a twig which had not something sparkling upon it." Then the gathered adults lit candles, opened the doors, and the children poured in. At the sight of the glow, all voices hushed. "Nobody spoke, only Charley leaped for joy." Soon the children discovered the sweets, and "the babble began again." For Eliza and Charles Follen it was the happiest day of the year.

Ref.: Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, vol. 2, pp. 178-179; Wm. R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers*, pp. 49-50.