

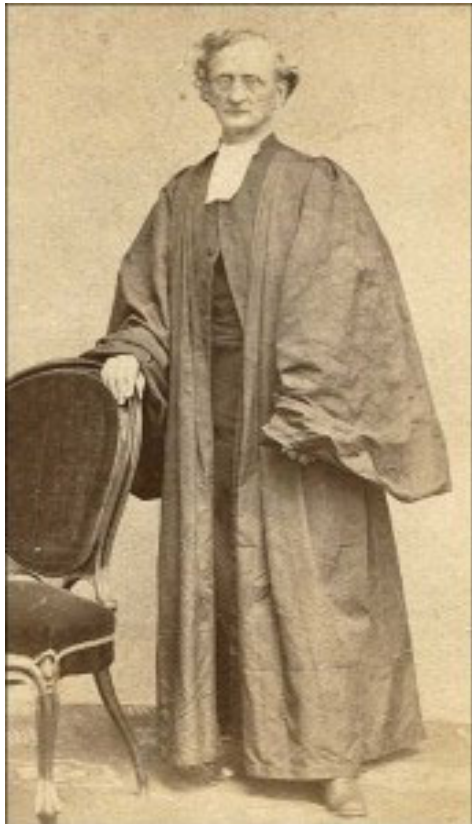
# “The Minnigerode” and the Christmas Tree



by Bill Izard

**Williamsburg, Virginia**

If you took “the tree” out of the average American Christmas experience, the holiday would largely be unrecognizable. And yet did you know that this seemingly dyed-in-the-wool Yuletide element has only been popular in our country since the nineteenth century? The Christmas tree tradition belonged almost exclusively to German immigrants until the mid-1800’s and gradually grew from that point on until we have the multi-million-dollar Christmas-tree mania we know today.



*Left: Dr. Charles Minnigerode as a young minister [Right: “The Minnigerode” in later years]. Minnigerode was rector at St. Paul’s Episcopal in Richmond, Virginia, from mid- to late-nineteenth century*

It was just such a German who introduced the first Christmas tree in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1842. Charles Minnigerode was a “renegade” immigrant from Germany in the late 1830’s, when revolution, democracy, and “man’s rights” were being bravely defended throughout western Europe—and tyrannical power-possessive governments rose up to suppress them. After a cruel year and a half as political prisoner in Germany, Minnigerode fled to America where he found the freedom he was looking for, as well as success and honor as one of the nation’s leading scholars.

Appointed to the chair of ancient languages at William and Mary College in 1842, Minnigerode soon distinguished himself as the greatest classicist in the country—as well as, of course, an immensely valuable professor of the German language and literature. The good doctor almost immediately struck up a close friendship with Judge Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, professor of law, and lived for a time with the Tucker family at what is now the St. George Tucker House in Colonial Williamsburg. It was during their first Christmas together that Minnigerode introduced the Tucker children to one of his favorite homeland traditions: the *Weihnachtsbaum*, or Christmas tree.



Left: The Christmas tree grew in popularity after the 1848 publication of this drawing of Queen Victoria and the royal family—Prince Albert had brought the Christmas tree tradition to England from his native Germany. Right: One legend credits reformer Martin Luther with the introduction of the Christmas tree tradition in 16th-century Germany. Here he is depicted celebrating with his family in Wittenburg, 1536

Evergreens were abundant not far from the Tucker home. Led by “the Minnigerode,” as he was affectionately referred to in later years, the little band hunted for the perfect tree—not above four feet tall—laid it low, and brought it home with fanfare. Next they mounted their prize on a parlor-room table and commenced with the decorations. What decorations? There were none, of course, since there had never been a Christmas tree in the house before. No matter: Minnigerode taught the children to string popcorn for garland and hang candied fruit of various shapes and sizes for (consumable) ornaments. The Christmas tree became a Tucker house tradition from that time forward.

In fact, if you visit the St. George Tucker house in Colonial Williamsburg today—during Christmas season, that is—you will still find a decorated tree in the parlor in good Minnigerode style. The only thing different between the first and the latest is that a “Weihnachtsbaum” is no novelty any more—every house has one!



Left: [Exterior of St. Paul's] Right: Interior of St. Paul's in Richmond, Virginia, where Minnigerode served as priest before, during, and after the Civil War (photo courtesy of Ron Cogswell)

But that is not the end of the story of good Professor Minnigerode—who soon took on the mantle of an Episcopal priest in addition to his professorship. As pastor at St. Paul's in Richmond, Virginia, before, during, and after the Civil War, Minnigerode was a faithful minister to eminent Southerners such as Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis throughout some of the South's most trying years. After all, Minnigerode was no stranger to suffering for a people's right to self-determination and the violent reaction that usually followed.

And that is why we find him at the center of another Virginia Christmas story, that of the last Christmas of the Confederacy in 1864, when things looked grim for the country, and Richmond was only a few months from falling. [First Lady Varina Davis](#) recalled the story for the *New York World* thirty years later:

Like a clap of thunder out of a clear sky came the information that the orphans at the Episcopalian home had been promised a Christmas tree and the toys, candy and cakes must be provided, etc.

Who was behind the Christmas tree for the orphans? The "saintly Dr. Minnigerode," of course, who "preached a sermon on Christian love," no better illustrated than by his own example of setting up this beautiful gift-saturated tree for the many parentless victims of the War. Mrs. Davis continued:

*The ladies dispersed in anxious squads of toy-hunters, and each one turned over the store of her children's treasures for a contribution to the orphans' tree. . . . Christmas Eve a number of young people were invited to come and string apples and popcorn for the tree; a neighbor very deft in domestic arts had tiny candle moulds made and furnished all the candles for the tree.*

*When at last we reached the basement of St. Paul's Church the tree burst upon their view like the realization of Aladdin's subterranean orchard, and they were awed by its grandeur.*

*The orphans sat mute with astonishment until the opening hymn and prayer and the last amen had been said, and then they at a signal warily and slowly gathered around the tree to receive from a lovely young girl their allotted present. The different gradations from joy to ecstasy which illuminated their faces was "worth two years of peaceful life" to see.*

Gifts for the children, popcorn and fruit, tiny candles to light the tree—it's all there just as it had been twenty years earlier in Williamsburg, and not even a war gone bad for the South could stop the esteemed minister Minnigerode from making the best time of the year even better for the most unfortunate around him. Thanks to the Germans for the Christmas tree tradition, and thanks to Charles Minnigerode for encouraging that tradition so eloquently in the South!

<http://porterbriggs.com/southern-christmas-trees/>