

*French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota*

# ARTICLE TRIMESTRIEL QUARTERLY ARTICLE

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*First Christmas Tree In North America*

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*Le Petit État du Nord*  
French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

Mission Statement: To preserve and promote the French-American heritage in Minnesota through education and community events.

Website: [fahfminn.org](http://fahfminn.org). YouTube: FAHF Minn.



# FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE

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Decorating the Christmas tree has been a tradition in my family for as long as I can remember. I grew up in the quaint little village of Kiamika in the Province of Quebec. A few days before Christmas Day, my younger siblings, my father and I would gear up, grab the axe and hop on the snowmobile with the sleigh attached, to go hunt for the nicest fir tree. We would scout the forest and dad would explain how to tell a fir from a spruce or pine tree. We were so impressed when dad would chop down the chosen one with just a few swings of the axe. During that time, my mother would clear the space in the living room, retrieve the cardboard boxes with all the lights, decorations and all the things needed to prepare our house to welcome the tree. Once home, we would leave the tree to thaw a few hours before decorating it. Dad and mom would “fix” the tree by taking some branches and putting them where some others were missing. Maman would spray some fake snow on it, and then hang the lights and the ornaments. She would put the fragile ones up high and the childproof ones at the bottom. Then she would hang the “glaçons” or fake icicles, and the last thing to do was put the crèche or nativity underneath with a faux rock painted tarp she made and that we still use.

When my sister and I were in our early teenage years, we entered a nativity making contest organized by the diocese. We won third place, if I remember correctly. We still use, to this day, the same characters that we made with recycled materials we could find at hand. Although this year, my two-year-old niece played with some and now Mary only has one eye. The first night, we would take out our sleeping bags and fall asleep at the foot of the tree, mesmerized by the shining lights.

After Epiphany, it was time to undo all the pretty decorations. It was a very sad time for me and each year, my dad would tell me: “Don’t worry Caro, I am going to replant the tree in the forest.” I believed him



Photo by Caroline Meilleur

until one day, while I was snowshoeing along the forest trails, I found a dried up Christmas tree with the same icicles...

Then I wondered, when and where was the first decorated Christmas tree in North America? To my surprise, I found out that the first one was put up on December 24, 1781, in the town of Saurel (now known as Sorel-Tracy) in the Province of Quebec. It was the Baroness Frederika Charlotte Louise von Massow Riedesel, wife of the Baron Friedrich Adolph Riedesel, who decorated a fir tree with fruits and candles in honor of the German officers that came over to their house. The Riedesel family was also celebrating their freedom. A few months before, they had been incarcerated by the Americans who had just gained their independence from the British Crown.



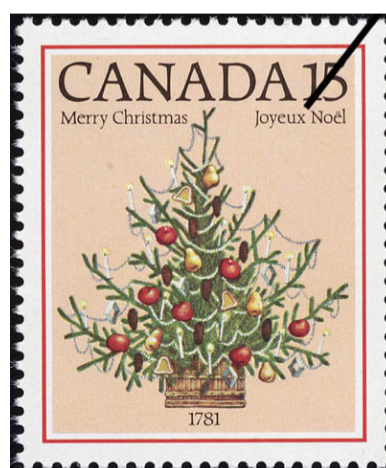
Portrait of Frederika Charlotte Louise von Massow, Baroness Riedesel, 1829  
Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein (1751-1829) [Public Domain] Oil on Canvas

Madam Riedesel was born in Brandenburg, Prussia, in 1746. She was the daughter of a lieutenant general, who served in the Prussian army. In her youth, she followed her father during his war campaigns. She married Riedesel when she was 16 years old. Later in 1776, Great Britain signed treaties with several German armies to help battle the American revolutionaries. Frederika and her children sailed to the Americas to join her husband in 1777. During the Battle of Saratoga, the family was taken prisoner and remained so until

the Congress permitted them to leave and they went back to Canada in 1781. Governor Haldimand had them stationed in Sorel and the Riedesels were the first family to live in the “Maison des Gouverneurs.” That is where the Baroness decided to decorate the fir tree in honor of the German mercenaries and their recent freedom. Frederika is known to have kept journals describing the wars and lives during their stay in the Americas. She described the inhabitants of the Province of Quebec as welcoming, joyful, loving to sing, and smoking all the time. It was on Christmas Eve, in 1781, that the Baroness decorated the first Christmas tree in North America in her dining room and this German tradition remains.

After the American Revolution and with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, of the 30,000 German mercenaries who came at the request of Great Britain, about 1,300 of them decided to remain and settled in the Province of Quebec. Nowadays, many French-Canadian last names have their roots in Germany. Here are some examples of German last names:

- Besserer: Besré
- Maher: Maheux
- Beyer: Payeur
- Schumpff: Jomphe
- Numberger: Berger
- Pauzer: Pauzé
- Wolf: Leloup
- Amaringer: Maringer, Marenger
- Heyberts: Hébert
- Dayme: Daigle
- Dahler: Dallaire
- Quintal: Quintal
- Steben: Steben



Christmas Tree, 1781  
Canada Postage Stamp (1981)