Hello, my name is Kelly Ryan, and I'm a volunteer here at the Minnesota Historical Society. I specialize in antique and vintage Christmas.

The Christmas tree as we know it today got its beginning in Germany. The earliest decorations used on trees consisted of fruit, nuts and candy. During the 1840's Germany began producing glass ornaments in their glass factories and they became extremely popular with hundreds of shapes and designs being blown for an eager public. The idea of a decorated Christmas tree traveled from Germany to England with King George I, and Prince Albert's marriage to Queen Victoria firmly set the practice. German and English immigrants brought the custom to America and to Minnesota.

The Victorians pushed Christmas decorations to a hey-day of extravagance and elaborate design. In their home decor and in their fashion dress, the idea of “less is more” was practically unheard of. The Victorians liked over the top design, and Christmas followed the “more is better” practice.

The Victorians believed in embellishing almost everything, their home items, their decorating, their fashion, and Christmas ornaments were no exception. This is an example of a Victorian wire wrap ornament. It has a base of a blown glass ornament with a pike going up the back, and on the front they've added a Victorian chromograph or lithograph scrap of an angel, millinery flowers, and the wire wrapping. Sometimes the wire is called lamatta wire, and also bullion wire. It’s stretched out and wrapped around the ornament, and they create very elaborate and detailed items.

This airplane is an example of a simple cigar-shaped ornament that's been turned into an airplane with the use of wire wings, a Santa scrap, and decoration wire so it will either sit, or it can hang from a tree.

The Victorians loved ornaments that actually represented things in their house. The umbrella mold was very popular. It has the wire wrapping and some tinsel decoration running around the top.

This ornament is called a double balloon. It is also matte-painted, this time in red. The Santa scrap has been applied to the pike that connects the two double balloons, and the use of wire has made it seem like
there’s the gondola at the bottom with Santa, and the balloon flying through the air.

This is one of my favorite ornaments because I think it represents the Victorian ideal of over-embellishment perfectly. The ornament itself is actually an indented oval. They’ve added wire, both thin and heavy, it has a tiny woven basket with millinery berries and flowers inside, a scrap face has been added onto a pipe-cleaner body with a crepe paper skirt. Ornaments like this were usually made in people’s homes, it was a craft they did sitting around a table, so this ornament got everything that was in the craft box all added onto one object.

You can see more antique Christmas ornaments from the collection at the Ramsey House in St. Paul, Minnesota at their Victorian holiday house tour, or if you’d like to know even more about antique Christmas ornaments in general you can go to the website of The Golden Glow of Christmas Past. Thank you.