Christmas celebration in New Orleans during the past century reached a fabulous climax on the eve of the War Between the States. In the largest newspaper ever issued in the South or West up to that time—16 pages—the Daily Picayune of December 25, 1859, reflected the surging prosperity, the bursting confidence of this city of 168,000.

On page 1 a two-column feature saluted Christmas in tinkling verse and ponderous prose illuminated by Biblical references. A story on page 3 described the “tempting profusion of riches” displayed in certain show windows—gifts up to $2000. Another related that “the appearance of our variety stores has been more brilliant this year than we have ever known them to be. . . . These tempting bazaars are crowded all day and until a late hour of the night by ladies and children, and a goodly number of the stern sex, who are performing the solemn duty of buying Christmas gifts.”

A year later, on December 25, 1860, the Daily Picayune, eight pages, put its editorial emphasis on secession. It reported on a mass meeting held on Christmas Eve to congratulate South Carolina on its secession from the Union on December 20 and its defiance of the North. The paper had only two Christmas references: a 4-inch greeting to its readers and an expression of thanks for a “pitcher of egg-nogg . . . sent to our sanctuary last evening.”

Next day’s issue carried a small story on the last page saying that “Christmas Eve and Christmas-day were duly celebrated with much burning of powder and draining of liquor bottles,” and adding, “Quiet folks, nervous old ladies and peevish old gentlemen were startled from their sleep, kept in a state of continual trepidation and alarm, and made most miserable by the successive explosion of fire-crackers, pistols, guns and in fact all the noisy engines invented by a tormenting genius.”

On December 25, 1861, after eight months of war, the Daily Picayune had shrunk to four pages. Page 2 carried a Christmas feature beginning

“So now is come our joyful feast.
Let everyone be jolly,”

and ending with an appeal for “the poor and suffering” and a reference to “our brave soldiers in the field.”

A 12-line note in the “City” column on page 1 said: “CHRISTMAS EVE.—For many a day we had not seen our streets so gay as they were last night. In spite of the stringent times, the shops were full of people buying Christmas gifts; but we noticed that generally the cheapest articles were in greater demand than on any previous evening. The sidewalks were enlivened by the presence of urchins firing their crackers and pistols. In the restaurants, the Germans spent a great portion of the night singing their dearest Weihnachtslieder, and the French, sitting around the festive board, did their best to have as lively a reveillon as it is possible this winter.”

Four months later New Orleans fell to Union forces.