The Vermilionville that William Britton Bailey returned to in 1865 was markedly different than the one he left at the start of the Civil War.

Bailey, a young printer who had worked for the Teche Courier in St. Martinville and L'Echo de Vermilionville before the war, had served the Confederacy honorably, fighting in the 19th Louisiana Infantry and participating in some of the war's legendary battles: The Seven Days, Second Bull Run, Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg — clear Confederate victories.

He fought at Gettysburg, too, where Lee was turned back in a Northern invasion, and the Wilderness, a savage encounter, part of Union Gen. Ulysses Grant's Overland Campaign, waged as he pushed his way toward Peterburg, Va., where he laid a final siege. Bailey walked home to Lafayette from Appomattox Court House, Virginia, where Lee
surrendered.

Bailey left defeat and a Lost Cause behind him as he trekked back to Louisiana. Back in his hometown of Vermilionville, he would write a new story, creating a small weekly newspaper, the Lafayette Advertiser, that would one day become The Daily Advertiser, 150 years old today.

The Vermilionville Bailey had left was a prosperous community with some 156 lots. It had a Catholic church, a courthouse, a few stores that served both townspeople and “planters” from the parish, who comprised the vast majority of the Lafayette Parish population. Roads connected the town to nearby towns like Royville, now Youngsville, and Carencro.

Little Vermilionville, formed in the 1820 and 1830s around the Catholic church, was cosmopolitan in its community make-up. Betty and Shelby Mier, who compiled a list of homes and residences from the 1860 Census, revealed an industrious population with peddlers, tailors, bakers, surveyors, doctors, lawyers and shoemakers.

J. Philip Dismukes in A History of the Development of Lafayette, characterized Vermilionville as a “middle-class town,” where education, progressive government, occupational success and civic improvement were valued. Bailey embraced and represented those values. Not three months after he returned to town, five months after Lee’s surrender, Bailey opened the weekly Lafayette Advertiser, publishing the first edition on Sept. 22, 1865.

Politically conservative, Bailey espoused the principles of the Democratic Party and opposed Republican rule, but operated as a gentleman conservative. He bristled under Carpetbagger and Scalawag rule; after the contested governor’s race of 1872, he sided with the Democrats he believed were unfairly excluded from their political seats and urged people to withhold taxes. For a time, he lost the contract to print government notices — those contracts often kept small weeklies afloat — because of a shift of political winds.

“We all know that the protestations of that spurious government are founded on fraud and perjury and that it is corrupt and rotten to its core,” he wrote in the April 12, 1873, edition.

But he also opposed the violent eruptions that marked Louisiana towns large and small, from New Orleans to Colfax.

Bailey loved his town and his family, a wife and six daughters. The town government tried to make middle-class Vermilionville more polished, but, alas, the times were what they were. Streets were unpaved, saloons present and animals might roam the streets. The March 13, 1869, edition noted that $5 fines were in places for these transgressions: tying your horse to the sidewalk or marketplace, public intoxication, disturbing the peace. The following year, Vermilion’s town fathers passed a resolution to allow hogs to roam the streets — provided the hogs had a ring in their nose.

Bailey promoted his hometown and its advancement not only as a newspaper proprietor but also as a public official. He served as clerk and treasurer for the City Council, and in 1884, the year Vermilionville took the name Lafayette, he was elected to his first of four consecutive terms as mayor. In 1892, he stepped down as editor and eventually sold the newspaper after Gov. Murphy J. Foster, appointed him clerk of the District Court.

Death came at 58 on July 26, 1896, after his return from a vacation to the Texas coast.

A family historian said his vocabulary was good; his editorials were well written. But family recollections were more of his personal kindness than his newspaper or political work. He was always ready to read to his children, the family history said. He smoked a pipe; he loved to sit on his porch and talk with neighbors.