

Christmas in the Confederacy

The excerpts below were written by Varina Davis, the wife of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, describing Christmas of 1864 in the Confederate White House in Richmond, Virginia.

"For as Christmas season was ushered in under the darkest clouds, everyone felt the cataclysm which impended but the rosy, expectant faces of our little children were a constant reminder that self-sacrifice must be the personal offering of each member of the family."

Due to the blockades around Confederate states, families could not find certain types of food and merchandise for their holiday celebrations, and available items were often outrageously priced. Southerners had to find substitutes for many of the ingredients in their favorite Christmas recipes, and they had to make most of their gifts and tree decorations instead of purchasing them.

In Richmond, where Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his family lived, it was discovered that the orphans at the Episcopalian home had been previously promised a Christmas tree, toys, and candy. The excerpt below shows how the people of Richmond creatively worked together to bring Christmas to the orphans in spite of the war's shortages.

"The kind-hearted confectioner was interviewed by our committee of managers, and he promised a certain amount of his simpler kinds of candy, which he sold easily a dollar and a half a pound, but he drew the line at cornucopias to hold it, or sugared fruits to hang on the tree, and all the other vestiges of Christmas creations which had lain on his hands for years. 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 orphan's tree, my little ones rushed over the great house looking up their treasure eyeless dolls, three-legged horses, tops with the upper peg broken off, rubber tops, monkeys with

all the squeak gone silent and all the ruck of children's toys that gather in a nursery closet. Some small feathered chickens and parrots which nodded their heads in obedience to a weight beneath them were furnished with new tail feathers, lambs minus much of their wool were supplied with a cotton wool substitute, rag dolls were plumped out and recovered with clean cloth, and the young ladies painted their fat faces in bright colors and furnished them with beads for eyes."

When the orphans received their gifts, Mrs. Davis wrote, "the different gradations from joy to ecstasy which illuminated their faces was 'worth two years of peaceful life' to see."