

Christmas 1861

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The week of Christmas 1861 was an eventful one, filled more with the agonies of war than with any holiday spirit. It was not a Christmas of truces as some might assume; the war would not take this holiday off. The Trent Affair continued to weigh heavily on the mind of the United States people and her president and skirmishes fought around Christmas showed the length and breadth of the conflict.

The Trent affair was a major diplomatic issue for Union officials and their attempts to keep foreign powers from intervening in what they hoped would remain a War between the States. On Christmas day, James Mason and John Slidell were still in Union hands and the British were threatening war if they were not released. 11,000 British troops were sent to Canada to prepare for action against the United States. This may have been the closest the Confederacy came to gaining support and recognition as a nation in the eyes of Europe.

This in mind, Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward made the final decision to release Mason and Slidell the day after Christmas. This would serve to release the tensions between the United States and Great Britain, as well as help dash the hopes of the Confederacy. Although England and France would to some extent hedge their bets on intervention until the war's victor became more clear, the release of the British diplomats staved off any immediate action.

The war was also not taking a holiday on the battlefield as during this week a total of 14 engagements were fought. Though none had major effects on the outcome of the

conflict, they did show the breadth of the land war. Stretching from Virginia in the East all the way to the Indian Territory in the Trans-Mississippi Theater, the skirmishes even took on a tribal-rivalry as the Choctaws, Chickasaws and a number of other Native American tribes fought alongside the Confederacy against the pro-Union Creek and successfully pushed them to Nebraska. Biloxi, Mississippi received a visit from Union troops who proceeded to occupy the town, destroy a Confederate battery, and leave with attempting to hold the town. But in general the war was going too slowly for the Union for the taste of President Lincoln. He started to become frustrated with the lack of action by Major General George McClellan. This was a pattern that would continue until Lincoln was forced to remove McClellan from command the next year after the battle of Antietam.

Christmas was celebrated in the White House by the Lincolns, who entertained many guests and the attempt was made, if only for a moment, to forget the war outside, and to try and enjoy the holiday. Even on this day there was fighting, though, with skirmishes in western Virginia and Maryland and a blockade runner was seized off of Cape Fear, North Carolina.

This last week of 1861 was a point for both sides to reflect on the events of the year, and to look forward. It had become obvious to all that this war would not be a short one. The Confederacy had managed to survive its first year, the Union was frustrated by a lack of success, and the world stood back and watched.