

A Signal at Christmas

In "A Signal at Christmas," the atmosphere in South Carolina surrounding Christmas Eve is highlighted by the state's secession convention, which issued a "Declaration" stating its rationale for leaving the Union, primarily around the issues of slavery and states' rights. Delegate Christopher G. Memminger emphasizes grievances against the Union for not honoring slaveholding rights, citing broken contracts and violations of the Constitution. This declaration notably quotes Thomas Jefferson, advocating the people's right to alter or abolish a destructive government.

Memminger points out that the free states have denounced slavery, disrupted Southern peace, and elected a president whose views threaten the institution of slavery. He adamantly asserts that South Carolina is dissolving its ties with the Union, adopting the status of a separate and independent state with the power to engage in foreign relations. On the practical front, South Carolina sends envoys to negotiate for federal property within its borders.

Amid this backdrop, Major Anderson secretly plans to move his military garrison from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter, picking Christmas Day for its discretion. The holiday distracts many, allowing him to execute his plans unnoticed. On Christmas Day, the mood in plantation homes contrasts sharply: fine foods and lavish banquets are served, and special allowances are made for enslaved individuals, granting them moments of social interaction and respite from strict supervision. Some planters ignore the day altogether, while others use it as an opportunity for generosity and celebration.

Despite the festive atmosphere, tensions are palpable as concerns about slave uprisings increase during the holiday season. Stories emerge of potential insurrections, reflecting the unrest brewing beneath the surface. Letters from North Carolina ridiculing South Carolina's secession add to the mix of emotions swirling around during this pivotal time.

Parallely, Edmund Ruffin's departure to join Florida's secession plans on Christmas Eve is impeded by mishaps, delaying him and leading him back to Charleston until the following day. Even as he deals with personal tragedy—the loss of his grandson—he remains tuned into the political climate. On December 26, he hears cannon fire from Fort Moultrie, a sign of the changing tides, leaving him speculating about its significance. This chapter encapsulates a period filled with both festive distractions and looming unrest, influencing the course of historical events.