

# The Rescue of Charles Nalle

From *Blast the Trumpet of Liberty: African Americans in Troy in the Nineteenth Century* by Ilene Frank and Jaclyn Stewart for the Rensselaer County Historical Society.

Charles Nalle was a twenty-eight year old runaway slave who escaped from his master, Mr. Hasbrough in Virginia. He escaped using the Underground Railroad and ended up in Rensselaer County, New York. Nalle worked as a teamster, with a Mr. Schram in Sand Lake, and as a coachman for Uri Gilbert in Troy. When he worked in Sand Lake, Nalle met a lawyer named Horace Averill. Because he could not read and write, Nalle asked Averill to write his letters for him. Through this letter writing Averill learned that Nalle was a fugitive slave. Knowing that according to the Fugitive Slave Act he could be fined and put in jail if he did not turn Nalle in, Averill wrote a letter to the slave master telling him where Charles was. When Hasbrough learned of Nalle's whereabouts, he sent someone from Virginia to work with the United States Marshals to arrest him as a fugitive slave.

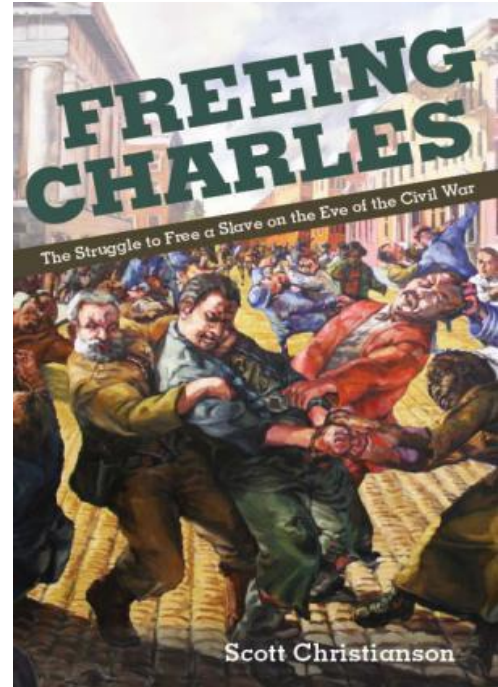
On the morning of April 27, 1860, Nalle went to get some bread for Gilbert. While he was out, a United States Marshal arrested him as a fugitive slave. Nalle was taken to the Commissioner's office on State Street in Troy, New York. In that building, Nalle waited while his fate was tried in court. Quickly, it was decided that according to the Fugitive Slave Act, he was a fugitive slave and should be sent back to Virginia.

Meanwhile, one of Gilbert's sons thought it was strange that Nalle hadn't returned. He asked Nalle's landlord and friend, William Henry if he knew where he was. Henry, an African-American who lived in Troy and owned a grocery store, often knew community news. Henry did not know where Nalle was and began to fear that something was wrong. They soon learned of Nalle's arrest and that a crowd was gathering outside the Commissioner's office. Members of the Vigilance Committee rallied supporters to join the mob outside chanting for Nalle's freedom. People from around Troy came to save him – rich people and poor people, black and white, businessmen and workers. All came, united in their hatred of slavery.

Harriet Tubman, abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor, was in Troy that day. When she heard the news that a fugitive slave was captured, she pushed through the mob outside the building and forced her way inside. She climbed the stairs to where Nalle was being held. When the authorities tried to remove him from the building, Harriet Tubman leaned out of a window and alerted the mob below that Nalle would be coming down the stairs and that the mob should try to get him away from the authorities. Harriet then held on to Nalle as he was pushed and pulled down the stairs. She held on to him even as part of his clothing was torn off.

An eyewitness who watched the excitement from across the river reported: "It was about four o'clock in the afternoon . . .when I suddenly saw a great crowd running down along the dock on the opposite side . . .in pursuit, apparently, of a black man, without any hat or coat, running as if for his life. There must have been four or five hundred in the crowd, if not more. He reached the shore, jumped into the skiff, and the ferryman put off immediately into the river. Those leading the pursuit, who appeared to be officials, endeavored to stop him, and even pushed a few steps into the water after the boat. But they were too late."

Charles Nalle was taken by boat to West Troy, where he was again arrested. Another crowd gathered and got him away from the authorities. They put him in a wagon and took him to Schenectady, where friends hid him. A month later fifty-one citizens of Troy purchased his freedom from his former owner. Nalle stayed in Troy throughout the Civil War. Later, he and his family moved to Washington D.C.



# The Rescue of Charles Nalle - A Play

**Setting:** Troy, New York, April 1860

**Characters:** Narrators 1, 2, and 3

Charles Nalle, Fugitive slave from Virginia, captured in Troy

Master Hasbrough, Charles Nalle's slave master from Culpepper County, Virginia

Uri Gilbert, Wealthy Troy businessman, Charles Nalle's employer

Horace Averill, Lawyer accused of writing a letter to Master Hasbrough, informing him where Charles was

William Henry, African-American grocery store owner, friend of Charles Nalle

Harriet Tubman, African-American woman who led hundreds to freedom through the Underground Railroad

Narrator 1: Close your eyes and imagine. We are traveling back in time. We are going to a time when there were no cars, televisions, X-boxes or radios. Women always wore skirts and dresses. Grown men never wore shorts. And Slavery was still in existence in the south.

Narrator 2: But we are not traveling to the south. We are traveling to Troy, New York. When we open our eyes in a few seconds we will be in Troy on April 28, 1860 and we will be amazed by an event that has taken place right here in this northern industrial city that lies on the banks of the Hudson River. In 1860, we are a year before the Civil War breaks out and we are ten years after the Fugitive Slave Law has been enacted. And Troy, a great northern city is about to be completely engulfed by the slavery issue. So slowly open your eyes and remember where you are, Troy, New York, April 1860.

Narrator 3: Fine Citizens of Troy, I am here to tell you of an event that will forever change how we northern citizens feel about slavery. This event happened in our town, on the streets near the Hudson River. Twenty months ago, in October 1858, a man named Charles Nalle was a slave in Virginia. While working on the plantation of his Master, Mr. Hasbrough, he began to think.

Charles: It must be a very pleasant thing to own one's self, to be owner of one's own flesh and bones. To be free. I am tired of being someone else's property. It is time for me to claim my freedom.

Narrator 1: On October 19, 1858 Charles escaped from his Master to head north. Now, Charles was worth about \$1000 and his Master needed all the slaves he could have to pick cotton.

Hasbrough: That slave of mine, Charles, owes service to me. I must get him back.

Narrator 1: Hasbrough spent time, money and energy trying to find and recapture Charles.

Narrator 2: Now how did Charles get to Troy? Well, first he went to Pennsylvania and lived there with his wife and children but he was still too close to Virginia. So with the help of his friends and the Underground Railroad he made it to Rensselaer County. When he arrived here in Rensselaer County, Charles worked as a teamster, then with Mr. Schram in Sand Lake and finally as a coachman in Troy with Mr. Uri Gilbert.

Uri Gilbert: Charles is a fine worker. I am glad he is my coachman. He takes excellent care of coaches and horses.

Narrator 2: Thank you Mr. Gilbert, but we are getting ahead of ourselves, for if we jumped right to Charles' time in Troy, we would miss out on a most unfortunate part of Charles' history.

Narrator 3: See, when Charles was in Sand Lake, he met, Horace F. Averill, a lawyer. The newspapers did not have nice names for Mr. Averill. In fact people called him a low-down dirty criminal man.

Mr. Averill: Hey, wait a minute. I just did what the law said to. I have to follow the law.

Narrator 3: Mr. Averill, please, our watchers don't even know what you did yet. [To the audience] Do you want to know? [Pause] Okay. When Charles was a slave he did not go to school so he did not know how to read or write. When he was in Sand Lake he asked Mr. Averill to write letters for him so he could send them to his family.

Through this letter writing, Mr. Averill found out Charles was a fugitive slave and on his own decided to write Mr. Hasbrough a letter.

Master: I was sure glad to get that letter, now I knew where my missing property was.

Narrator 1: So Mr. Hasbrough found Mr. Henry J. Wall to travel to Troy, to meet with Mr. Averill and to procure a warrant to arrest Charles Nalle.

Mr. Averill: I was only following the Fugitive Slave Law. The law says I am supposed to turn in fugitive slaves. Otherwise I could be fined \$1000 dollars or placed in jail.

Narrator 1: Thank you for that explanation but we will still have to get to the rescue of Charles. So my dear citizens of Troy, do you know what happened yesterday? Well at 11:00 am, Charles went out to buy some bread. It was then on the streets of Troy that the United States Marshals arrested him and took him to the office of the U.S. Commissioner located on State Street near the Hudson River.

Uri Gilbert: When Charles did not return home with the bread, I sent my son out to try and find him.

Narrator 2: Mr. Gilbert's son visited Mr. Henry, an African-American grocery shop owner and Charles' landlord but Mr. Henry did not know where Charles was but suspected the worst.

Mr. Henry: I was worried that poor young kid Charles got himself into trouble with the law. So I went to Mr. Townsend, a lawyer, to get his help.

Narrator 3: Mr. Townsend did get involved and went to the Commissioner and found that with only a few hours having passed, Charles had been declared a fugitive slave and was waiting the train to carry him back to Virginia. All this without a trial. The only thing Mr. Townsend could do was to draw up papers to take before Judge Gould.

Narrator 3: While this was all happening, a crowd of people began to gather around the Commissioner's Office. Mr. Henry told the crowd what was happening.

Mr. Henry: In that building, an intelligent, African-American man is being held prisoner, for no other crime than that of not owning himself. If you stand here and look you will soon see him brought out, to be carried off to the plantations of the south where he will be whipped to death. Are you willing to stand quietly by and see that horrible thing done?

Narrator 1: Slowly the crowd began to build. Those who were in favor of honoring the law, even if it was a bad law, were being taken over by those who wanted to free Charles. Several people made it into the Commissioner's Office so they could see Charles and keep his spirits up. In this group was an old woman, a former slave herself, who happened to be in town and knew she had to get involved. Her name is Harriet Tubman.

Harriet Tubman: That's right. I was in the area and when word came to me that they had captured this man and were prepared to send him back to Virginia without a trial I immediately went downtown and became involved. I hatched a plan in my head. I would make my way up to the office. I would get to the window. I would wait there until the officers were ready to take Charles outside to go to the train station. At that point I would lean



out the window and give the signal to the crowd below who would know that Charles was coming down the steps and they should be prepared to attack.

Narrator 2: What a sight! A mob below crying out for Charles' freedom. US Marshals inside trying to do their job. The Mayor was out of town so the next man in charge ordered the entire police force to go to State Street to protect the Marshals and to see that the law was upheld. Time was ticking by and Charles Nalle must have been scared.

Charles Nalle: Scared? I was ready to jump out the window. I knew I could not be sent back to Virginia, I would definitely have been whipped and probably killed by my Master as a warning sign to other slaves. I figured better to die here in Troy by jumping out the window than to die in Virginia. I was almost out the window when Mr. Tillman and Mr. Holmes pulled me back in. Oh, the crowd went wild then screaming and yelling, "Let him down" and "Free Charles. I was so confused and scared. It was horrible.

Narrator 3: That it was. Just before 4:00pm, Mr. Townsend arrived with an order to take Charles before the Judge to get this situation sorted out. The Marshals had to obey. So the police stationed themselves by the stairs to prevent the mob from rushing upon Charles and rescuing him. They handcuffed Charles and held tight to him as they made their way down the stairs to the crowd below.

Narrator 1: But the crowd was prepared and once Harriet Tubman gave the signal from the window the crowd rushed to the stairs. The Marshals, with Charles in their hands, were struck and pulled and pushed so much so that it seemed Charles would be torn in pieces.

Narrator 2: Charles was rushed through this attacking crowd past First Street to Congress. At each corner the fighting was intense. Several people in the crowd wanted to take Charles to the Judge. Others wanted to give him back to the Marshals. Some with Harriet Tubman shouted.

Harriet Tubman: Give us liberty or give us death!

Crowd: Give us liberty or give us death! Give us liberty or give us death!

Narrator 3: A pistol was raised, knives appeared but the weapons were put away before they were used. Finally, Nalle was at the dock. The fighting was at its worst and Nalle was freed from his captors. A group of men took him down to Washington Street and placed him on a boat to carry him across the river.

Narrator 1: Once Charles arrived on the other side in West Troy he began to run up to Main Street but he was again arrested. Again a crowd gathered outside the building where Charles was being held. This time bullets were fired with a man having a hole made in his hat and another taking a bullet in the thigh. Once more, Charles was rescued by a mob. This time the mob had a horse and wagon to assist with the rescue. They fled down Shaker Road with no one pursuing them.

Charles Nalle: I was so bruised and battered. My hands stung after being in the handcuffs. But I was glad to be away from the crowd. I wasn't sure where they were taking me I was so exhausted, but I knew that for a while I was safe.

Narrator 2: He was brought to Schenectady, where friends hid him. A month later fifty-one citizens of Troy, including Mr. Gilbert, purchased his freedom from his former owner. Charles stayed in Troy throughout the Civil War, and after the war, he and his family moved to Washington, D.C.

Narrator 3: So my fine citizens of Troy, what do you think about the events of April 1860. Should the Fugitive Slave Law been honored? Should Charles have been sent back to Virginia? Was it right for the crowd to use violence to rescue him? These are all good questions to think about.

Narrator 3: And now you know that slavery, the Fugitive Slave Law, Slave Rescues and Harriet Tubman are all connected to Troy, New York.