The Rescue of Charles Nalle


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By Steve Silverman 10/25/2015

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When escaped slave Charles Nalle was arrested in Troy, NY on April 27, 1860, no one could have anticipated what would happen next. With the help of Harriet Tubman, Nalle is believed to have been the only person in United States history to have been rescued from slavery four times.

Useless Information Podcast Script
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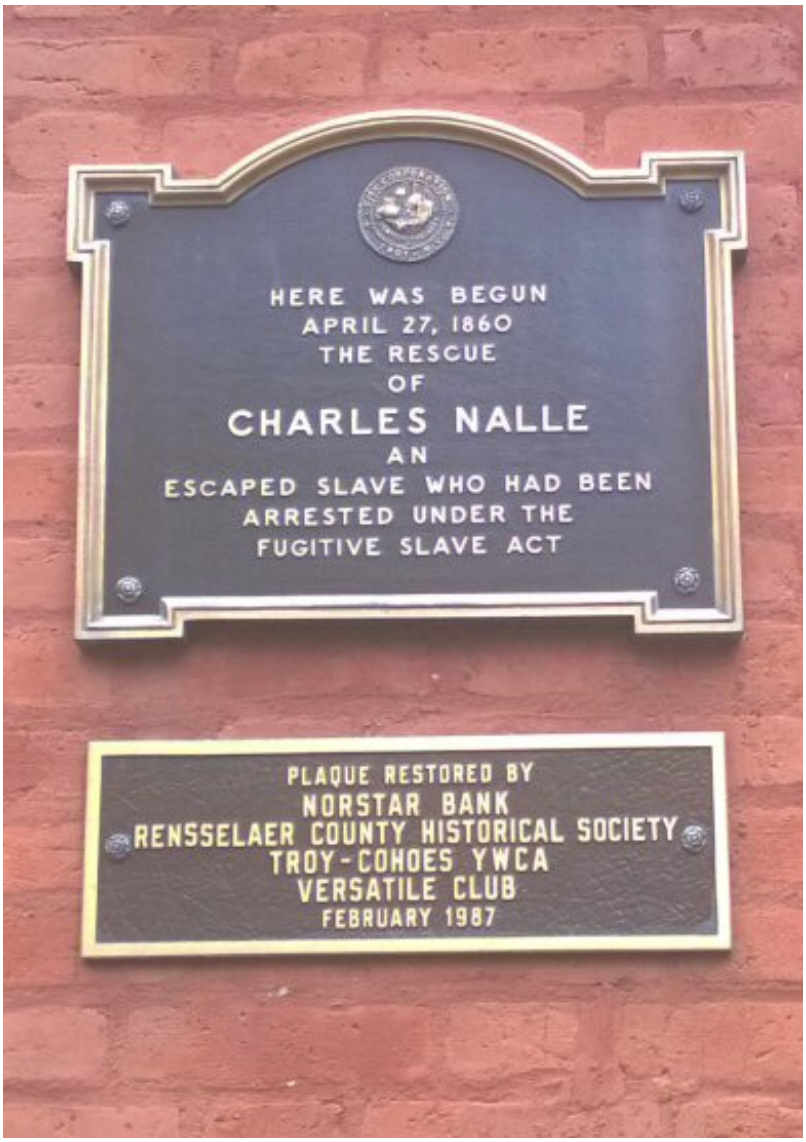
About two months ago, my wife and I were in downtown Troy, New York for their monthly Troy Night Out. The architecture of downtown Troy makes it among our favorite small cities to walk around in. And since it is just a few miles from our home, we are there fairly often.

What I was looking for that evening was a plaque that hung on the wall of a building. Of course, I never bothered to bring the exact address with me, but I told my wife that it was around here somewhere.

And there it was. The small plaque near the corner of First and State streets simply reads “Here was begun April 27, 1860 the rescue of Charles Nalle an escaped slave who had been arrested under the fugitive slave act.”



That doesn't say very much, and I would guess that few people know of the amazing story that occurred right there on the spot that we were standing.

And to tell this story, we must go all the way back to 1821 when a plantation owner in Culpeper County, Virginia named Peter Hasbrough purchased a slave at auction. Her name was Lucy and the sale included her four children, the youngest of which was named Charles.

While it cannot be said with certainty, it has long been believed that Charles was Peter Hasbrough's illegitimate child, one of many, many that he was thought to have fathered.

On January 31, 1831, the elder Hasbrough transferred ownership of Charles to his son Blucher. Yes, Charles was now owned by his half-brother. It was said that they bore a strong resemblance to each other.

This supposed family relationship brought Charles privileges that few slaves would ever have. He was a coachman, a detail that he will make good use of later in the story, and was able to travel with Blucher to many places far and wide. When he wasn't traveling, Charles tended to the stable.

Upon reaching adulthood, Charles was allowed to marry another slave named Catherine Simms, or Kitty for short. Since it was typically forbidden for married slaves to live together, Kitty resided on a farm about 3 miles (4.8 km) away.

In 1847, Blucher decided to sell some of his slaves. In what was assumed to be an act of retaliation for this move, one of Blucher's barns was set ablaze. And, as history has always shown, perceived retaliation is countered with even greater retaliation from the other side.

Charles and five other slaves were ordered to enter the mill on the farm, its doors shut, and were beaten. Next thing you know, all six were handcuffed and shipped by boxcar to a Richmond, Virginia slave mart. Two of the darker skinned slaves were sold, but the other four were not. The highest bid placed for Charles was $650 (about $16,000 today), which I'm guessing was far below what Blucher had thought he was worth. The next day the four unsold men were taken back to Blucher's farm.

In May of 1855 something shocking happened. Kitty's owner Colonel John Triplett Thom died. His will called for a number of his slaves to be manumitted. Kitty was one of them. Not only that, but the four daughters that she had with Charles were also free.

For most slaves, it would be the ideal dream, but it was really a nightmare for Charles and Kitty. That's because Virginia law at the time required that all freed slaves had to leave the state within one year or risk being re-enslaved. That could mean being sold down the river and never seeing Charles again. At the same time, if she moved to a free state, the distance would be so great that there was an equally good chance that they would be unable to ever get together again.

The couple realized that there was only one solution and it was a risky one. On May 21, 1856, Kitty and their children moved to neighboring Washington, DC, which still had slavery but allowed freed slaves to live there as long as they carried their free papers. Lose those papers for even a moment and one could be right back in slavery.

In October 1858, Blucher received word that Kitty was very sick and could die. This was a time of great turmoil in the slave states, but Blucher cautiously gave Charles and another slave named Jim Banks a one week pass to head to D.C.

They never got there. On October 15, 1858, the two men were able to give their chaperones the slip and begin their escape to freedom. Charles Nalle ended his dangerous journey in Albany, NY, which is about fifteen minutes from my home.

It was later learned that Charles had arranged for his escape with a man named Minot S. Crosby, a 26-year-old missionary from Massachusetts. Crosby was teaching school in Culpeper, but in reality was working as part of the Underground Railroad. Right around the time of Charles' escape, Minot's actions came under suspicion and he was also forced to flee.

And here's where things really start to get interesting. The Underground Railroad found Charles a job in nearby Sand Lake, NY. His coachman skills came in handy as he trucked lumber from the mills there. As for a place to live, he was staying with a family that had also just relocated to Sand Lake. That was the family of Minot S. Crosby.

In his spare time, Charles was determined to learn how to read and write, skills that were denied by law to slaves. This would prove to be a big mistake.

Somehow, the contents of a letter that Charles had sent to his family came to the attention of a 25-year-old lawyer named Horatio F. Averill, who had been previously forced to leave a NYC law firm for suspected embezzlement. This scoundrel decided that he should contact Blucher and let him know that he knew where his runaway slave was. And, in exchange for retaining his council, Averill would assure the return of Charles.

By this time, Charles had moved to nearby Troy. One only has to spend a few minutes walking around the downtown of Troy today to realize this was once an incredibly prosperous city. And it was a wealthy man named Uri Gilbert who hired Charles to be the coachman for his wife.

On April 27, 1860 Charles was sent to get bread a few blocks away from the Gilbert's mansion. While sitting on his wagon outside the bakery, two men came up from behind and grabbed him. One man was Deputy US Marshal John L. Holmes and the other was a guy named Jack Wale, a slave catcher hired by Blucher to bring Charles home.

They took Charles to the Mutual Bank Building – the building in Troy where you will find the plaque that I read to you at the beginning of the story – and took him to the second floor office of the US Commissioner. There he was greeted by that scoundrel Averill and another lawyer hired by Blucher named William Beach. As for the commissioner who would decide Charles' fate, he just happened to be William Beach's son, Miles Beach. Charles didn't stand a chance.

In reality, it didn't make any difference that the two men were related to each other. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, it didn't matter if Charles was in a free state or not. Federal law treated escaped slaves as the property of their owners, no matter where they resided.

Beach had issued the order for the arrest the day before. It read, in part, "In the name of the President of the U.S. of America, you are hereby commanded to apprehend Charles Nalle, now alleged to be in your district, a colored person charged with being a fugitive from labor, and with having escaped from service in the State of Virginia…" The order continues, but that gives you a general idea of tone of the document.

Now that Charles was in custody, Commissioner Beach signed additional papers and ordered Charles sent back to Virginia on the next train out of the city.

What no one had anticipated was the reaction of the citizens of Troy. One of Uri Gilbert's sons was the first to notice that Charles was missing and within minutes the Underground Railroad sprang into action. Suddenly a large crowd began to form outside the commissioner's office. And it grew and grew.

No one was exactly sure what was going on up there in the commissioner's office, but there was one woman who had snuck upstairs and acted as a lookout. As long as they could see her, they knew that Charles was still in the building. That woman was the one and only Harriet Tubman.

Around 3:30 PM, Charles nudged a window open and attempted to jump to the crowd below, but he was quickly pulled back in.

Shortly after this, Martin Townsend, the local lawyer for the Underground Railroad, presented the commissioner with a writ of habeas corpus. It was just a bit of stalling on their part until they could come up with a rescue plan, but now Charles was required to appear before Judge George Gould a couple of blocks away in the area where modern day Russell Sage College now stands.

By this time the crowd had grown to an estimated 2,000 people, so leaving the premises was not going to be easy. Charles was brought downstairs and as he emerged from the building, Tubman screamed "Here they come."

She grabbed onto Charles and refused to let go. Tubman was quoted as saying, "Drag us out! Drag him to the river! Drown him! But don't let them have him."

Charles was getting pulled in all directions, but the mob basically forced him toward the bank of the Hudson River down the street. He was placed aboard a small boat and was rowed across to the other side.

Authorities had telegraphed ahead that Charles Nalle had escaped and almost as soon as the boat ran came ashore, he was immediately arrested. His freedom lasted just ten short minutes.

He was taken to the 3rd floor office of a nearby building to await the arrival of the federal marshal. The McDonald's restaurant in Watervliet, NY now stands on that site.

Call it intuition or whatever, but a large portion of the crowd felt that they also needed to get across the Hudson.

They filled the ferry and just about any other boat that they could find to get to the other side.

The crowd gathered around the building while Tubman and a small group went upstairs to the office where Charles was being held. Shots were fired by officers and two men were injured, but it was soon realized that they were overpowered by the mob. Fearing for their safety, the decision was reluctantly made to set Charles free.

His rescuers took him down the road to the U.S. Army's Watervliet Arsenal, which is there to this day. Charles was then loaded on a wagon and ultimately taken approximately forty miles (65 km) to hide out in Amsterdam, NY.

One month later the citizens of Troy raised $650, the same amount that was bid for his purchase at auction years earlier, and they purchased his freedom.

Charles Nalle returned to Troy on May 25, 1860 and was reunited with his family a few weeks later. For the first time ever, they could all live together under the same roof.

Shortly after the Civil War ended, Charles, Kitty, and their eight children moved to Washington, DC. Charles worked as a postal carrier and Kitty as a seamstress. He lived there until his death on July 13, 1875.

Jump forward to August 9, 1932. Charles' son, 77-year-old John C. Nalle, happening to be passing through Troy on his way to vacation in Saratoga Springs, NY. He was asked to be the guest of honor at the dedication of a plaque in father's honor – at the same location where his father had been first rescued – and heard the story of his father's escape for the first time ever. It turns out that his dad had never told his children anything about the events that secured his freedom.

Needless to say, John was stunned by what he had just learned and upon returning home started to write a book about his father's life. It was never to be completed. He died less than two years later on July 29, 1934.

I do want to add one last detail to the story. It's about that scoundrel lawyer Horatio Averill who turned Charles in. The very next town over from where I live is named Averill Park. Yes, it is named in his honor, although I doubt there are many that live there who know what Averill had done. It will never happen, but maybe they should change the name of the town to honor Charles Nalle. Maybe Nalletown, Nalle Park, or Nalleville. I like that last one best. I can tell you this, however. I will never be able to drive through Averill Park, NY again without thinking about the rotten thing that he did.

Now, if you want to learn more about this story, I suggest that you read the book *Freeing Charles* by Scott Christianson. It was his hard work and research that helped me fill in many of the gaps that I had while putting this story together. Both my wife and I enjoyed the book. Well worth the read.

Useless? Useful? I'll leave that for you to decide.