

## Charles Nalle's Story

The story of Charles Nalle is one of the well remembered stories for our region from the time of the underground railroad. Charles Nalle was a fugitive from slavery who lived in the Rensselaer County around 1860. He had come to the area on his flight to freedom and decided to remain in the area as it was felt to be satisfactorily safe. The Troy area had many supporters of John Brown and significant support for the efforts called the underground railroad. Troy itself had an active vigilance committee and a small but significant community of African descendency.

Charles Nalle was born in 1821 in slavery in Stevensberg, Virginia. At 16 he was given over to Blucher Hansborough, the son of a Virginia planter. Hansborough also acquired other members of Nalle's family. At a later time, when hard times had befallen Hansborough, he decided to auction off his slaves. At this time Nalle chose to flee, rather than risk being sold south and away from the family and relations he had developed. Nalle and another slave, Jim Banks, arranged a plan that they felt would allow them to escape and later be reunited with their families in freedom. They made their escape in October 1858.

The fugitive slave act of 1850 required all citizens to assist in the recapture of fugitive slaves and put in place a system of U. S. Commissioners who supposedly were not judicial officials but who would hear the arguments of claimants who captured escaped slaves as to if they should be appropriately returned to slave owners. This system was widely resisted in the north, but it did have its supporters. Anyone assisting fugitives from slavery was subject to fines and jail time under this law, but many resisted it regardless.

Nalle found work with William Scram in Sand Lake. Unable to read and write, he sought the assistance of an unemployed lawyer and local newspaper man named Horace Averill (Averill Park is named after Horace Averill). He wanted Averill to help him write letters that might help free his family members. Unfortunately Averill had southern sympathies and betrayed Nalle to his former enslaver.

Nalle later found work with Uri Gilbert. Gilbert was a leading industrialist in Troy. Nalle began living in Troy with the family of William Henry. Henry was a black grocer in Troy. He was also a member of the Vigilance Committee.

Nalle was on his way to the bakery when he was arrested by U. S. Deputy Marshall John W. Holmes and Henry Wale, a slave catcher from Stevensberg, Virginia in the employ of Blucher Hansborough. This was April 27, 1860. When friends noticed his disappearance they searched for him and quickly discovered what had happened. He had been taken before the U. S. Commissioner to get authorization to take him back south.

The local vigilance committee swung into action and a crowd quickly gathered at the U. S. Commissioner's office. They were looking for an opportunity to free Nalle. As it happened, Harriet Tubman was in the area to visit relatives. She took aggressive steps to engage the situation. The ensuing struggle is recounted in local newspapers of the time and in Harriet Tubman's biography by Sarah Bradford. It is also shared in a well researched article by local writer Scott Christianson in the Winter 1997 issue of American Legacy Magazine, a magazine of African American History. Nalle was freed by the intervention of Tubman and the Vigilance Committee. He escaped to Niskayuna where he stayed in a secret location until it was regarded as safe for his return to Troy. Friends raised funds to buy his freedom.