

Freeing Charles: The Struggle to Free a Slave on the Eve of the Civil War.

Robert E. McGlone

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Review

McGlone, Robert E.

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Christianson, Scott *Freeing Charles: The Struggle to Free a Slave on the Eve of the Civil War..* University of Illinois Press, \$65.00 ISBN 978-0-252-03439-8

Examining Flashpoints on the Road to Civil War

A novelist could scarcely have contrived a more harrowing tale than *Freeing Charles*. Charles Nalle was a fugitive Virginia slave whose capture and tumultuous rescue in upstate New York by an abolitionist mob in April 1860 created a nationwide sensation. Charles's mysteriously acquired surname implied no relationship to the respected white Nalle family of Culpeper County in piedmont Virginia, where Charles was born in 1821 to a slave mother and an unacknowledged Caucasian father.

Given a rare one-week pass to visit his sick, pregnant wife in Washington, D. C., in October 1858, Charles Nalle decided to escape. With another fugitive, he made contact with the Washington Underground Railroad network, which smuggled him via Georgetown to Philadelphia. There he found William Still, a long-time station-master and early chronicler of the movement, who had coordinated complex escapes for hundreds of fugitives like Charles. Still sent Charles to Albany where the "agent and superintendent," momentarily too short of cash to forward Charles on to Canada or to board him, found him temporary employment as a teamster in the small, nearby town of Sand Lake (66).

About seventeen months after his escape, Charles felt secure enough to move to Troy, the prosperous manufacturing "City of Iron" on the Hudson River which, unlike Sand Lake, had an active black community (89). Learning of Charles's identity, an ambitious white Sand Lake attorney offered his services to Charles's owner, Blucher W. Hansbrough, the son of a "planter aristocrat" whose farm sprawled across the piedmont near Stevensburg in Culpeper County (8).

Charles was arrested in Troy on April 27 by Hansbrough's hired slave catcher and a deputy U. S. marshal who brought him before the local U. S. commissioner at his office above the First Mutual Bank to conclude the paper work for his return. But Charles's sympathetic landlord and other members of the Troy Vigilance Committee quickly obtained a writ of habeas corpus, and, presenting it to Charles's captors, demanded his release. A physical struggle resulted as the marshals and Troy police tried to take Charles in handcuffs from the building. The crowd quickly grew into a mob of hundreds whose determined leaders wrestled a bloodied Charles from the authorities and put him on a skiff about to cross the Hudson to West Troy. Warned by telegraph of his coming, authorities there promptly recaptured Charles only to lose him once again to his incensed defenders, one of whom was shot three times in the struggle.

Soon after, residents of Troy and West Troy bought Charles's freedom from Hansbrough for \$650, slightly more than the planter had been offered when he briefly put Charles up for sale in Richmond eleven years earlier. The purchase made legal what had been achieved by "stealth and force" (1).

A year after the Civil War, Charles moved his family from Troy to Washington, D. C., where he and his wife "Kitty" raised their eight children and the family lived until his death in 1875. In 1932 Charles's son, John C. Nalle, who was just four years old when his father was freed, visited Troy briefly and, in a letter to the *Troy Times*, expressed his gratitude to the citizens for his father's historic rescue.

Such, in brief, is Charles Nalle's story. A master storyteller, Christianson has a novelist's eye for picturing the places, events, and forgotten people who figured in his narrative. His cast is not without stars. Harriet Tubman, already the legendary "Moses" of her people, was coincidentally in Troy, perhaps visiting a cousin, as the rescue began (4). She promptly squeezed her diminutive body into the stairwell of the Bank Building where Charles was being held and fought her way to his side as authorities attempted to drag him forcibly through the crowd. She hung onto Charles's clothing until he was finally ripped free from the police by others, then helped to commandeer the steam ferry that took the angry mob to West Troy after Charles was captured once again.

In a somewhat digressive chapter, Christianson invokes the memory of John Brown, who had stayed occasionally in Troy when returning from his travels to his farm in the Adirondacks. Despite conservative opposition, Troy had been the

only city to display Brown's casket as his widow took it to the Brown farm for burial in December 1859. But if Brown's "martyrdom" five months before the fight to free Charles may have had a "spurring effect" on Tubman, as Christianson postulates, it is difficult to see how his memory otherwise "figure[s] prominently" in the rescue (4, 148).

Despite Christianson's remarkable reconstruction of the rescue, Charles Nalle himself remains somewhat opaque. He gave only one interview to a local newspaper after his rescue, and he did not even tell the story of his escape to his own family. Initially, perhaps, he may have feared exposing those who had helped in his escape or his master's retaliation for his flight against his mother, sister, or two brothers whom Charles had necessarily left behind. John Nalle was "never able to understand" his father's reticence to speak about his rescue, but speculated that Charles's "innate modesty" or his hatred of the "damnable institution" of slavery may have been responsible for it (2).

Nonetheless, Christianson has unearthed "revealing and sometimes puzzling observations" about Charles in William Still's extraordinary records of the many fugitives he aided (63). Charles told Still he had run away because his young master, Blucher Hansbrough, who Charles suspected may have been his unacknowledged elder half-brother, would not hire him out so that he could live near his wife and children. Station-master Still worried that Charles nonetheless acknowledged his master to be a "first-rate man to his servants" and professed to believe himself personally "used very well" as Hansbrough's coachman (63, 163n8). Agent Still suspected that Charles was reluctant to find fault with his suspected blood relation or fearful that criticism of his master might get back to Hansbrough.

Christianson sees in Charles's remarks to Still something more—clues to a complex master-slave relationship. He finds Charles's refusal to blame his decision to escape on his master's ill treatment evidence that Charles "identified with his oppressor, still felt some sort of bond" with Hansbrough (64). Charles took "personal responsibility" for running away, thus opening himself, Christianson theorizes, to feeling "more personal guilt" later for the consequences of his action (64-65). (Because Charles had run away, Hansbrough sold his two brothers and another slave to planters in Alabama). Christianson suggests that Charles's posture toward Hansbrough may have been his way of exercising "what measure of agency was available to him" to shape "his own circumstances" in his precarious strike for freedom (64). Charles did not indulge

in his master's numerous vices, but had striven to be both a good servant and a good father. Christianson cautions that it is difficult to determine how the thirty-nine-year-old runaway and his master, who was just four years older than Charles, felt toward one another. "One is left to speculate about whether there was sibling jealousy, envy, competition, guilt, like disposition, or filial loyalty and affection" between the half-brothers and how such feelings "may have played out," given the "asymmetrical intimacy" required by the social framework. Their relationship, he concludes, was "highly charged" (12-13).

A widely published historian, journalist, educator, and human rights activist, Scott Christianson has focused his scholarship chiefly on the history of crime, imprisonment, forensics, and related topics. His latest book, *The Last Gasp: The Rise and Fall of the Gas Chamber* (University of California Press), is due out this summer. He lives near Troy in upstate New York and has spent seventeen years "piecing together" the facts about Charles Nalle's life. Though "arguably the most dramatic and hard-fought slave rescue in American history," he notes, Charles's violent freeing was only "briefly a significant news event" that attracted limited notice from "political commentators of the day" (5). It has been "little noted by historians" (5).

Yet within hours of the riot, Christianson observes, Alabama fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey, who had grown up in Troy and whose mother still lived there, gave an "impassioned speech" on the floor of the Democratic National Convention denouncing the incident and calling upon the southern states to secede from the Union (5). In December, the delegates to South Carolina's secession convention listed the failure of the northern states to return fugitive slaves even before citing the election of Lincoln as a grievance warranting separation.

Thus *Freeing Charles* is a significant addition to the story of the coming of the Civil War.

It is also an insightful study of the workings of a major line on the Underground Railroad. It contributes to the revisionist scholarship of historians like Fergus Bordewich, David Blight, Catherine Clinton, Stanley Harrold, and James and Lois Horton. As Bordewich has shown, by the 1850s the underground was a "diverse, flexible, and interlocking system with thousands of activists" reaching from the upper South to Canada. It was supported by a "broader infrastructure" of marginal people who helped conceal or forward fugitives,

carried messages into the South, and funded the operations of the system until the Civil War ended its usefulness (Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, 4-5). As Christianson's story confirms, African Americans, slave and free, played a central role in the success of the movement. He has recovered the names of a score of them.

A story of purposeful public violence in the name of a cause, *Freeing Charles* will interest historians studying riots in American history as well as those deciphering antebellum race relations.

Christianson contends that the Charles Nalle story reveals something about the "complexity of Virginia slavery, the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad, and the impact of slavery's aftermath" (3). It is an example of interracial cooperation and commitment to equal justice perhaps "unmatched in local memory" and is a "significant footnote in the nation's history" (2). This reviewer agrees. Christianson has rescued Charles Nalle yet again, this time along with his brave, reckless supporters, from undeserved historical neglect.

Robert E. McGlone is Associate Professor of History at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and the author of John Brown's War Against Slavery (Cambridge, 2009).