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The Freedom Seeker

Winter 2010

Dramatic Slave Rescue in Troy, New York

By: Scott Christianson

April 27 marks the 150th year anniversary of the most dramatic slave rescue in American history, which was one of the boldest episodes involving the Underground Railroad in the Capital District. Occurring between John Brown's raid and the outbreak of the Civil War, the actions turned out to be one of Harriet Tubman's defining moments.

The object of the epic struggle was a fugitive coachman from Culpeper County, Virginia: Charles Nalle. The chief antagonist was the government of the United States, which, through its enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, stood on the side of slavery.

Nalle had opted to run away to join his wife and children, who had been manumitted by another master. He probably would not have succeeded in getting north without the brave assistance he received from members of the underground.

In mid-October of 1858, Nalle left home for Washington via a train baggage car, carrying a one-week travel pass from his master, Blucher W. Hansbrough. But instead of visiting his wife, he headed for the Georgetown docks and boarded a vessel that

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took him to Philadelphia where he appeared at the Vigilance Committee office run by famed black abolitionist William Still. Still arranged to have him



First and State Streets, Troy, New York



escorted to Albany, where Stephen and Harriet Myers placed him in a local safe house.

Nalle ended up in tiny Sand Lake, Rensselaer County, roughly equidistant from Albany, Troy and the Massachusetts border, where he hid out from slave catchers and hauled wood for wages. While he was learning to read and write, however, a proslavery lawyer named Horatio Averill – who later would become the namesake of Averill Park and its school district – betrayed the suspect to Hansbrough for a reward.

On April 27, 1860 a slave catcher from Virginia and federal deputy marshals apprehended Nalle and took him before the U.S. commissioner at First and State Street in Troy, where he was quickly processed

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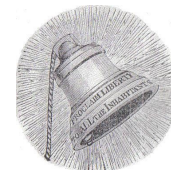
The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, P.O. Box 10851, Albany, New York 12201. Email at info@ugrworkshop.com.

9th Annual UGR History Conference

REGISTER NOW!

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***Gender, Class, Race & Ethnicity in Abolitionism,
on the Underground Railroad, and in the Struggle Since***

February 26, 27, 28, 2010

Don't miss this great opportunity to learn more about the Underground Railroad movement and its legacy - Weeksville, Phillis Wheatley, the Shakers, Matilda Joselyn Gage, Black Freedom Struggle in the 1930s, Sanctuary for Immigrants, Tubman and Social Network Theory, National and International Heritage Tourism, and so much more.

Guest speakers Rhonda Y. Williams and Rosemary Sadlier will set the tone for us, with Vanessa Johnson and Matie Massie contributing their energy and spirit. Vendors and poster displays will enrich our learning experience while we renew old friendships and make new ones. Mark Priest's artwork of the Charles Nalle rescue and Scott Christianson's newly published book, *Freeing Charles*, enliven the Saturday reception at Rensselaer County Historical Society, while Sunday's bus tours of Troy's UGR and African American heritage sites fill out the weekend. 🎶 Get on board! 🎶

Welcome to new URHPCR Board Members

Seven new board members were welcomed onto the board of Underground Railroad History Project in January 2010. Each new member brings skills and expertise that will benefit URHPCR as it seeks to fulfill its mission. Board members are asked to be an ambassador before the public for the organization, actively participate in one of the various committees that organize and sustain URHPCR programs, contribute financially, and participate in monthly board meetings.

Joe Cavazos brings experience in organizational development, facilities management, and marketing. Joe has masters degrees in Public Administration, History/Political Science and is completing a Masters degree in Facilities Management.

Mildred Chang, PhD, presently a Spanish teacher in the Schenectady City School District, holds numerous degrees, has authored two books, and is actively involved in community activities and her church.

Paul Murray, PhD, has been teaching for 31 years in the Sociology Department at Siena College. Paul has authored

many scholarly works, specializing in the areas of race relations, collective behavior and research methods, and he is on the advisory committee for Siena College's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Lecture Series.

Michael O'Brien, a lawyer working in the NYS Health Dept., has been an Albany City Council Person since 2001. He serves on other organizational boards and has been actively working on community improvement issues for many years.

Sharon Robinson, PhD, having been at Sage since 1978, is Dean of Russell Sage College and was instrumental in arranging for URHPCR to have office space at the Sage Troy campus.

Erin Tobin, with a masters degree in Historic Preservation, brings with

her many years of experience in the management, execution, and funding of preservation services.

Leroy Twiggs, now retired, brings to URHPCR Board experience in student recruitment, business management, and community service. WELCOME ALL!



Over the Past Months

The Myers Residence is warming up - following the recommendation of the architects at Stephen Tilly architectural firm, heat is being put into the basement of the Myers Residence. In an effort to keep ice from forming in the basement walls, the heat will keep the basement temperature just above freezing. Additional sealing of a variety of air access spaces was provided by the volunteer services of Student Leaders from the College of St. Rose.



In other news, funding is being sought to support the completion and publication of a Master Plan that will, among other things, prioritize the work tasks that need to be addressed at the Myers Residence, review zoning, life safety and building codes, and design a graphic site plan that integrates the Myers Residence into the larger vision of the UGR campus. Also, an EPF grant application has been filed with NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation requesting funding support for continued restorative construction work

Thank you to retiring board members Eileen Kawola and Alethia Jones for their work on behalf of URHPCR.

M&T Bank contributed \$2000 to URHPCR for the 2010 year. M&T Bank's generosity over the past five years has supported the conference, the newsletter, and restoration work on the Myers Residence. URHPCR is honored that M&T Bank continues to partner with us and value the purpose and quality of the work of URHPCR.

The Arts Center of the Capital Region has awarded URHPCR an \$800 grant toward support of the Matie Massie cultural performance that will be part of the 2010 conference proceedings. The Conference planning Committee is most appreciative of this vote of support for the integration of art and history that will be performed in a production titled *Oh, Freedom*.

Annual appeal contributors have very generously offered their financial support during the 2009 Annual Appeal. Thanks are extended to Robert Emery, John Wolcott, Bernard McEvoy, Mimi Mounter, Lynn Ashley, Wendy Lund, Virginia Hayes, Elmer Green, Virginia Goatley, Maryl Ruckterstuhl, Deb Catozzi, Dominick Calsolaro, William Suggs, C.W. Allen, William A. Carter, David Lamphere, Cynthia Seacord, Susan Haswell, E. Joyce Gould, Vera Michelson, Joe Cavazos, Judith Odell, Sharon Calhoun, Richard Conti, Dr. Mary Nell Morgan Brown, Albert DeSalvo, Theodore Olson, and Lewis Greenstein. **Thank you!**

News and Notes

Donations to Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc. are gladly accepted online on the homepage of www.ugrworkshop.com or through postal mail to URHPCR, P.O. Box 10851, Albany, New York 12201.

Welcome and thank you to new and renewing members, Brea Barthel, Eleanora Collins, Suzanne McDermott, Barbara J. and Frank Traver, Beverly Mills, Michael Rice, Marey L. Bailey, Travis Klami, Nell Stokes-Holmes, Ellen A. Picotte, Maurice Thornton, Williams Suggs, Roberta Nunn, Eliza Rohan Sharpe, Dr. Mary Nell Morgan Brown, Fred & Maren Stein, Norma Blake Bordeau, Mimi Mounter, Joan Butcher, Lisa Anderson, Rev. Clinton Dugger, Charles Touhey, Faddegon's Nursery, Behan Planning Associates LLC, Kenneth Matthews, Jane Meader Nye, Devorah Tarrow, Stan Malecki, Enid Mastrianni, Corine Hillard, Effie Bennet-Powe, John Coniglio, Ann Savage, Edward Nizalowski, Preston Pierce, Joe Cavazos, Rosetta N. Crawley, Dora Lee Stanley, Lois Siegel, Isabel T. Mills, Elizabeth F. Wright, Mary Ellen Lee, Lois J. Conklin, Ronald E. Deutsch, Nancy Rosenberg, Maud Easter, Donna Lawrence, Amy Godine. **Thank you!**

Volunteers needed for work of URHPCR Committees. Can you contribute time to the Jazz Event Committee, the Conference Committee, the Finance Committee, or the Property Committee? Do you like to organize files or books? Do you like to maintain databases? Would you like to assist with fundraising? Join us in achieving the mission of URHPCR by volunteering your time and talents.

Mark your calendars for these upcoming events -

- ◆ **Annual URHPCR Membership Meeting** - Saturday, February 27, 2010 at Sage College, Troy Campus, Gurley Hall - 11:15-11:45am
- ◆ **URHPCR Board Meetings** - the 2nd Wednesday of every month, 6-7:30pm at Sage College, Troy - Gurley Hall - Rm.105
- ◆ **Property Committee meetings** - Time and location information available by calling 518-432-4432
- ◆ **Conference Planning Meetings** - the 1st Monday of each month, 7-9pm at Sage College, Troy - Gurley Hall - Rm.105
- ◆ **Jazz Event Planning Committee** - Time and location information available by calling 518-432-4432
- ◆ **Race, Labor and Citizenship in the Post-Emancipation South** - March 11-13, 2010 at the College of Charleston, South Carolina

**UNDERGROUND RAILROAD
HISTORY PROJECT OF THE
CAPITAL REGION, INC.**

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Phone: 518-432-4432
Fax: 518-432-4432
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Dramatic Slave Rescue *(cont'd from p.1)*

to be sent back to bondage. His fate would have been sealed except that members of the underground, including Tubman, led a mob of several hundred persons that forcibly wrested him from the police. Immediately after escaping across the river to Watervliet (then West Troy), however, the fugitive was recaptured. But Tubman and the others would not allow it and they braved police gunfire to rescue him again from a site on Broadway that is now a McDonald's restaurant. Whites and blacks later purchased his freedom for \$650. Some Southern fire-eaters cited the incident as one of their grievances contributing to their decision to secede from the Union.

After spending 18 years researching and writing about the Nalle episode, my book *Freeing Charles: The Struggle to Free a Slave on the Eve of the Civil War* (Uillinois Press) has finally been published. I've learned that the Underground Railroad was more

than a northern network that sheltered refugees as they headed toward the Promised Land. It was a progressive interracial civil rights movement that stood up against slavery in a power structure that was stacked against them. Using intrepid agents who operated in the South as well as the North, its organizers not only schemed to help slaves plot their escape; some committed abolitionists utilized direct action, including force and violence, to defend and protect their passengers. Their Nalle story represents one of the great activist exemplars in American history. His experience offers a window into the battle over slavery.

The Capital District was one of the most active and important areas in the movement. Underground Railroad History Project deserves enormous credit for reviving interest in one of the most inspiring chapters in our freedom-seeking heritage.

*Scott Christianson, Ph.D., author, scholar, journalist,
human rights activist, specializing in crime and punishment,
forensics, politics, and American history*