Charles Sebrell

(1769/1770–7 Sep 1831)

of

Blackwater Swamp, Surry County, Virginia,

by Timothy Dean Hudson

Charles Sebrell was likely born in 1769 or early 1770, probably to one of Lina, Lydia, or Elizabeth, the three enslaved women of childbearing age then owned by Nathaniel Sebrell Sr. of Surry County, Virginia. Charles Sebrell almost certainly grew up working on the Sebrell farm, which lay on the north side of the Blackwater Swamp in southern Surry County, Virginia.

By the time Charles became a young adult, his home lay near The New Design, a large plantation with a small village, stores, and tavern that served as a gathering place for locals. He would have made occasional visits there, but he spent the bulk of his time on Nathaniel Sebrell's old farm. Today, the region encompassing it lies across the Blackwater Swamp from the Dendron Swamp Natural Area Preserve, a few miles northwest of the village of Dendron, Virginia.

Although enslaved peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were typically assigned only given names, his 1806 manumission record identified him as *"Charles alias Charles Sebrell."* This was typical of the Surry County Clerk, whose standard practice was to assign the surname of the owner who manumitted the slave as the now free person's surname.

Charles' father is undocumented, but he could have been the son of either Harry or Peter, the two adult male slaves owned by Nathaniel Sebrell during this period. Since records described Charles as *"a dark Mulatto,"* another possibility is that Charles had a white father [1].

Like most farmers of southern Surry County, Nathaniel Sebrell focused his efforts on the cultivation of corn, wheat, cotton, flax, and perhaps a small amount of tobacco. The swampy areas along the Blackwater Swamp were filled with large cypress trees, many probably hundreds of years old. In the off season, Sebrell's farm produced cypress shingles, undoubtedly hewn from trees on the Sebrell farm laying along the Blackwater. Charles probably spent much of his time in the 1780s and 1790s on this work [2]

As Charles entered adulthood, the county's tax records began to document his presence with increasing regularity. Nathaniel Sebrell paid taxes on Charles each year between 1782 and 1795 [3]. In 1787, Nathaniel included Charles among his enslaved workers mortgaged to Jacob Faulcon & Co., the mercantile firm operated by his brothers-in-law, Jacob Faulcon and Nicholas Faulcon Jr.

[4]. Nathaniel did not pay taxes on Charles in either 1798, 1799, or 1800, suggesting that Nathaniel had sent Charles to work elsewhere.

In 1801 and 1802, local farmer and sheriff Thomas Peter paid taxes on twenty enslaved people aged sixteen and over, including one named *"Charles"* [5]. Neither Nathaniel Sebrell nor Thomas Peter paid taxes on Charles in 1803, while the tax records from 1804 and 1805 failed to list them by name.

Charles Sebrell appears to have learned a skill or trade that made him capable of earning his own living, and he may have earned the money used to purchase his freedom. On 25 February 1806, Nathaniel Sebrell signed a bill of sale for Charles to Thomas Peter, and on this same date, Thomas Peter manumitted Charles Sebrell:

> *I Thomas Peter do by these presents emancipate and set free Charles alias Charles Sebrell, a dark Mulatto, aged about thirty six years, five feet eight inches high. The said Charles being purchased by me from Mr. Nathaniel Sebrell as pr. Bill of sale of this date. And I do hereafter relinquish to the said Charles, all right or title to him either by me or my heirs...*

Two weeks later, Charles Sebrell registered as a *"free negro"* with the Surry County Court. The clerk described him as

> *…well made, short hair for a mulatto, has lost two of his fore teeth (one upper and one under), has a scar a little above the outward corner of his left eye, has lost the first joint of the fore finger on the right hand"* [6].

It is unclear why Nathaniel Sebrell transferred ownership of Charles to Thomas Peter rather than manumitting Charles himself. Records show that Peter interacted closely with Surry County's large free black community, apparently in his capacity as a county official.

As a free black man in early nineteenth-century Surry, Charles Sebrell navigated a world in which freedom offered opportunity but remained constrained by legal and social boundaries. He lived the rest of his life in Surry County, paying his own poll tax regularly through 1827. He is probably the *"other person"* (non-slave) listed in the 1810 household of Nathaniel Sebrell in [7], and he may be the *"free colored"* male living in the 1830 household of Capt. David Sebrell, the only surviving son of Nathaniel Sebrell [8].

By 1830, Charles Sebrell was about sixty years old. On September 7th, while still a resident of Southwark Parish, Surry County, Sebrell was found *"lying dead."* Coroner John Nicholas Spratley convened a jury to hold an inquisition, which issued this report:

> *Charles alias Charles Sebrell on the night of the Seventh day of September…at the parish and in the County aforesaid at the Lot of Walter Spratley in Cabin Point was found dead that he had no*

marks of violence appearing on his body and died by the visitation of God in a natural way and not otherwise, and the Jurors further say that the said Charles Sebrell has property of Some value.

This reveals that Charles Sebrell died on the Cabin Point lot belonging to Walter Spratley Sr., the eldest grandson of Nathaniel Sebrell Sr. Spratley's parents died when he was a young boy, and he grew up on his grandfather's farm. With Spratley only a dozen years younger than Sebrell, the pair would have known each other well. Spratley had operated a tavern and mercantile store at Cabin Point for the past twenty years [9].

No records survive to show whether Charles Sebrell married or fathered children.

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Notes

1. Surry County VA Deed Book 3 (1804–1811), p. 127: Thomas Peter emancipation of Charles Sebrell, 25 February 1806. Peter stated that Charles Sebrell was aged thirty-six. If his age given is accurate, Charles was born in 1769 or early 1770.
2. Surry County VA Wills, Etc. Book 4 (1822–1827), pp. 203–205: Inventory of the Estate of Nathaniel Sebrell Sr., made 10 December 1816, filed with Surry Court by David Sebrell, executor, on 27 October 1823. At his death, Nathaniel Sebrell had 40,000 cypress shingles on hand.
3. Surry County VA Personal Property Tax Books, 1782–1795.
4. Surry County VA Deed Book 12 (1783–1787), pp. 320–322: Nathaniel Sebrell to Jacob Faulcon & Co., 4 May 1787.
5. Surry County VA Personal Property Tax Books, 1801, 1802.
6. Surry County VA Deed Book 3 (1804–1811), p. 127: Thomas Peter emancipation of Charles Sebrell, 25 February 1806. Surry County VA Register of Free Negroes (1803–1847), p. 15, #44; LDS Film #8249456, Image #189 *"Charles alias Charles Sebrell,"* registered 12 March 1806, renewed 17 September 1819.
7. 1810 Surry County VA Federal Census, p. 615, line #13: Nathl. Sebrell.
8. 1830 Surry County VA Federal Census, p. 170, line #1: David Sebrell.
9. Surry County VA Miscellaneous Records, Vol. 1 (1784–1942), LDS Film #4126722, Images #1298–1299 Inquisition Regarding Death of Charles Sebrell, 1830.

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