

Mansfield News Article:

## Riot at the Congregational Church

By Local Resident & Historian, Harry Chase

The pro-slavery yahoos were laying for Charles Burleigh even before he set foot in Mansfield's old Congregational Church on the Common. For some time they dogged him from place to place, doing all they could to keep him from being heard.

Charles Calistus Burleigh was a 26-year-old Connecticut Yankee, an attorney, abolitionist and journalist hired by the American Anti-Slavery Society to lecture in favor of freeing the blacks. Wherever he spoke, he drew a crowd, but the crowd was always friendly.

The local rough stuff began Aug. 29, 1836, when Burleigh lectured in East Mansfield Methodist Church. Shortly after he started to talk, twenty men and boys stampeded in the door and up the stairs to the gallery, trampling as loudly as they could. Then they began a noisy game. Three or four would thunder down the stairs, then back up, then another group repeated the performance.

When this failed to silence Burleigh, they swarmed outside and started yelling and bouncing rocks off the building. One of them heaved a large wooden sign in the door, almost knocking a man out of his seat. Burleigh was used to this kind of ruckus when he spoke against slavery. He managed to out-shout the hecklers, finished his lecture and made a safe exit.

But one man vowed to shoot him if he ever revisited that church. For a few weeks all was quiet on the local front as Burleigh spoke in other towns. But many Mansfield anti-slavery people wanted to hear him, and at their request the Congregational Parish Committee voted unanimously

to invite him to lecture in their church the evening of Oct. 10.

This was too much for the pro-slavery rowdies. They got together in the nearby Mulberry Tavern to plan how to disrupt the gathering. Worried about legal penalties, they were assured by an attorney that the law couldn't touch them if they kept their mob below thirty unarmed men. Just before Burleigh arrived at the church, the Mansfield town clerk locked himself in the belfry, and when the speaker showed up, began tolling the bell.

That was the signal for a dozen men and boys to erupt from the tavern lugging a bass drum, a smaller drum and a bugle. They crossed the Common, poured into the church, mounted to the gallery and waited.

The instant Burleigh stepped up to the pulpit, the gallery gang began pounding the drums and blating the bugle, while the clerk continued to yank the bell rope. The town constable ascended to the gallery and demanded order. When told where he could go, he called for help and several men stormed up the stairs to seize the bass drum. The result was a brawl that ended with ripped clothing and bloody faces on both sides. The constable, wiping his bleeding nose, read the Riot Act to no avail, then retreated across the road to the home of Mansfield's First Selectman to seek his support.

This distinguished-looking man, whose local cotton mills depended on southern slave labor, entered the church, removed his tall silk hat, mounted to the pulpit, looked away from the gallery and claimed he saw no problem. Burleigh then gave up and was smuggled out the back door by friends. Afterward, the bass drummer was fined for assaulting the constable. But at Mansfield's next town meeting the bell-ringing lookout was elected moderator.