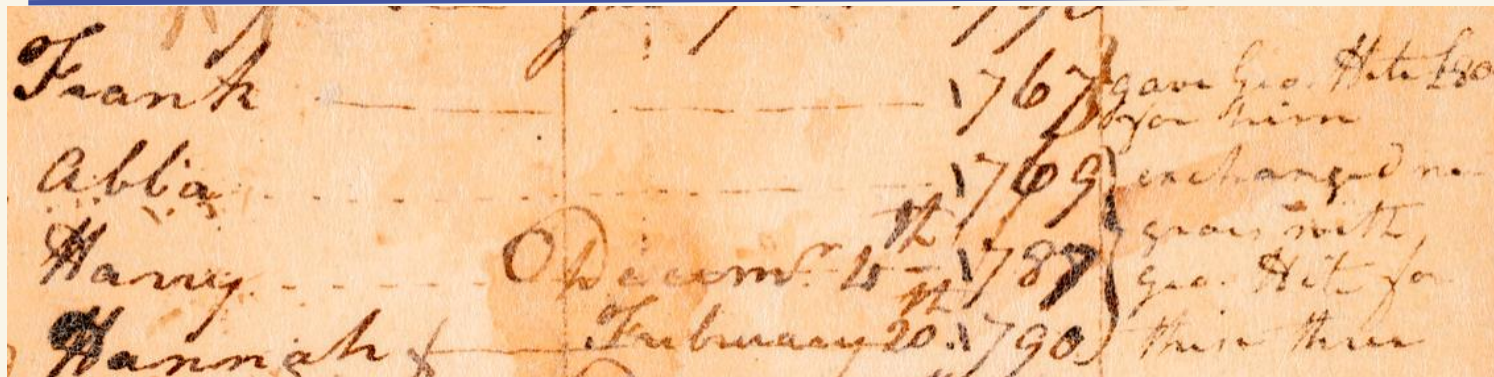


ABBA BORN 1769

August 2021



When Abba's enslaver George Hite announced he was trading her and her little family to Isaac Hite Jr. of Belle Grove¹, the young woman undoubtedly hoped the plantation forty miles south would be a calm, safe place. She worried, too, about their acceptance there—her three-year-old Harry was half-Cherokee.

In the autumn of 1790, Abba was the centerpiece of an exchange of enslaved people between the two cousins, and the sale of her spouse Frank Thornton, for £80, netted George the equivalent of two year's war pension for his maimed sword arm.² Twenty-year old Abba was nursing Hannah, her infant daughter, and Nelly Hite's infant girl needed a wet nurse. Belle Grove became the fourth place she was enslaved. With her previous owners, Abba had known much sorrow, upheaval, and trauma. Her parents were among a group of people enslaved by Jacob Hite of Berkeley County, now West Virginia. Jacob was Isaac Hite Jr.'s uncle, a man of passionate temper and frequently on the losing end of local political disputes.

Jacob married twice and fathered children from both marriages. He was the second husband to his second wife, Frances Madison from Montpelier. At the end of 1775, having sold off his Berkeley County lands, Jacob moved all his enslaved men, women, and children, and his own

blended family, to the South Carolina frontier, where he finished building their home on Old Indian Boundary Line Road. The Hites were the second permanent resident family in what would become Greenville.³ Jacob's youngest son, George Hite, remained in Virginia to attend William and Mary College with his cousin, Isaac Hite, until war moved onto its doorstep and both men joined the Continental Army.

Approximately seven years old, Abba was very likely part of Jacob's enslaved community who had no choice about forced migration to a treacherous new frontier with an enslaver with a volatile personality. Jacob Hite was her first enslaving owner.

Alas, the deeds to Jacob's new lands were tainted by illegal occupation of Cherokee Nation land. New white settlers were encroaching on the resident Cherokee, the Kituwah people, and the British military, hoping to destabilize this colony on the eve of the Revolutionary War, allied with certain groups of Cherokee to attack randomly to push the settlers out. On July 1 and 2, 1776, Jacob Hite's family and homestead was attacked in a guerilla-style raid, with most of the family gruesomely murdered and the house burned. Frances Madison Hite was kidnapped, likely for ransom, and endured a five-week forced march to Georgia, where she was killed as the

colonial militia sent to rescue her closed in. This Hite family disappears from the historical record, though rumors about their fate persisted in Berkeley County.⁴

The Southern Cherokee were adopting the racially based enslavement practices of their white neighbors, and the Hite enslaved people captured by the Cherokee were taken away as war booty to work on their farms.⁵ Abba may have remained with her parents, but life was uncertain, frightening, and bleak. Escape was not possible, and no rescue party was on the way for her in her second enslavement.

South Carolina was a tinder box during the Revolutionary War, preventing search and rescue; afterwards, the State government sold off all land grants around Greenville to recoup war expenses, so any efforts made to regain

1 The image of Frank, Abba, Harry, and Hannah's name above is from Isaac Hite Jr.'s Commonplace Book, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_19b).

2 Southern Campaign American Revolutions Pension Statements and Rosters, Pension Application of George Hite W5015 Deborah Hite F50VA

3 Mildred Edwards Whitmire, *A Man and His Land, The Story of Jacob Hite and Francis Madison and the Cherokees*; Jefferson County Historical Society, December 1978, Vol XLIV. Pp 37 – 58.

4 Ibid.

5 For further reading: Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*; Harvard University Press, 2010, Chapter 7, [passim](#).

hostages met with little success. Once demobilized from the army, George Hite petitioned the state legislature for restoration of his father's lands and received a token 3%. Nothing is known about efforts to

retrieve the Hite enslaved, only that George is credited with rescuing Abba, then 18 years old and either pregnant or having recently born a half-Cherokee son, and returning her to Virginia. The Cherokee were known

to sell back some enslaved people at well above the going price.⁶ However rescued, George Hite was now Abba's third enslaver—but not for long.

⁶ Ibid

ABBA'S LIFE AT BELLE GROVE

A trio of Frederick County, Virginia historians abundantly discuss how Abba arrived at Belle Grove bringing a three-year-old son. Harry, widely acknowledged as half-Cherokee, bore the nickname "Indian Harry" until his death in 1828.¹ Young Harry's story will be told in his birth month, December.

At Belle Grove, Abba entered the household of her fourth and last enslavers, Isaac Hite Jr. and his wife, Nelly. The new, elegant manor house was already built, and two children were in the nursery, the heir, James Madison Hite, and his younger sister, Nelly, the fruits of a seven-year marriage. New to each other, Nelly Hite and Abba had to work out the details of an intimate, emotional, enslaved/owner relationship, sharing happy times, and consoling each other through sad ones, like the death of Nelly's first son.

Abba lost two young sons, George and Adam, in the years she had to deal with the jubilation of the birth of the new son and heir of the lady of the house, whom she put to the breasts no longer shared by George. Overall, Abba nursed two of Nelly's children, and at least three more of the second wife, Ann Maury Hite, while bearing eight more of her own. A woman could more effectively

function as a wet nurse if her milk supply was guaranteed by repeat pregnancies. Frank and Abba continued to have children through 1810. In these years, Abba established herself as the trustworthy, reliable manager of the nursery and its young children, so much so that James Madison Jr. wrote of having his sister's company annually in Philadelphia, minus children.

Abba herself lost no more children, but Nelly may have. In 1802, the £140 purchase of a second wet nurse, Chloe, the same year 42-year-old Nelly died, suggests Nelly was still capable of pregnancy and that one of them might have been fatal. Abba may have had the physical care of the young heir while Isaac courted a new mother for them.

Very likely she remained in charge of nursery operations as Isaac Hite's new wife, Ann Maury, settled in to begin bearing the first of her ten children. The arrival of a third wet nurse, Philis, in fall of 1809, implies Abba's retirement as active wet nurse after fifteen babes at her breast. By the 1820s, one historian mentions her working as assistant cook in the kitchen, as Harry, in his twenties, occasionally brought in water or plucked fowl to help her.

Perhaps owing to the respect of her enslavers, none of her children were

sold, the family remained intact. However, as young adults some were given to the Hite's grown children. Abba's eldest daughter Hannah's children were freed by sale to their father, Manuel Jackson, a free Black, in the 1830s and 1840s. This will be discussed in future issues.

Vital as Abba was, neither mistress mentioned her in any surviving documents. Her name appears only as the mother of the twelve children in the Hite family records, and again when she reaches age sixty and is considered retired. She, Frank, and three children were alive at Belle Grove in 1837 when Isaac Hite Jr.'s estate inventory was completed. Enslaved for seven decades, without freedom to make life choices, without her voice to tell us, it can only be wished for her that Abba found Belle Grove to be, after all, the calm, safe place she craved after the tragedies of her life.

¹ Samuel Kercheval, *A History of the Valley of Virginia*, 3rd edition, 1903 of the original 1833 edition; pages 182-4. Available online

Louise Perquet du Bellet, *Some Prominent Virginia Families*, Vol IV, 1907. P. 347.

T. K. Cartmell, T.K., *Shenandoah Valley Pioneers and Their Descendants*, 1909 Heritage Press; pp 255-6.

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise

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Molly

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Research is underway about the 276 men, women, and children enslaved by the Hite family at Belle Grove Plantation in Middletown (Frederick County), Virginia. Enslaved individuals made the plantation a success. Since 1967, Belle Grove has been a 501c3, nonprofit historic site and museum. [Understanding and uplifting the contributions of the enslaved community is an ongoing effort and priority.](#) If you wish to help, consider volunteering or donating to Belle Grove, Inc. at the address below or online at www.bellegrove.org/support/donate.

Belle Grove Plantation

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