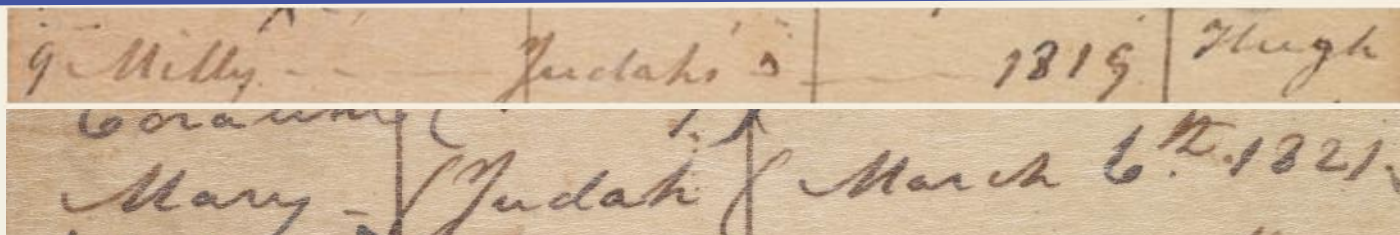


MILLY BORN 1819

MARY BORN March 6, 1821

March 2022



Sisters Milly and Mary were born two years apart at Belle Grove Plantation, the first girls born to Judah, who eventually bore twelve children. (Judah's story will be told in June.) They had three older brothers, the youngest being born at Belle Grove, as Judah arrived here pregnant. Her first girls, they were probably doubly welcome to Judah, because female children could help a busy mother with family chores in a way boys did not. This issue explores four points in the lives of these enslaved sisters.

HOW DID THEY GROW UP?



It's likely Judah came from somewhere in the region and was forced to leave behind her boys' father. Evidence points to Judah forming an attachment with Anthony, an enslaved man at Belle Grove five years her senior. They named their first child together after his mother Milly. The next son they named Anthony. Anthony's family was the founding group of enslaved people at Belle Grove, could trace their roots back to at least 1720, and provided Judah and her little ones with a new family.

Mentioned in 1836 family correspondence as the cook, Judah was probably initially purchased to be the wet nurse to the last three Hite babies. Once they weaned, she was likely a nursemaid or attendant to the half dozen Hite children then in the nursery, and later

transitioned into the kitchen, part-time to full-time. This same pattern happened with the enslaved woman Abba, thirty years earlier (see August 2021 issue).

Enslaved children, like Milly and Mary, helped with simple tasks beginning around age three, and progressed steadily into more difficult and important work. In our society, this three-to-five-year-old age group is called "preschool." In the early 1800s, there was no preschool for anybody, period. Milly and Mary likely prepared vegetables, brought a fresh diaper, or rocked a younger child's cradle.

Judah had status as a house worker, and in rural areas without large labor pools, it was a common custom to train the cook's daughters in kitchen skills, with an eye to training the future cook.

As school-aged children of five to 12 years old, Milly and Mary

might have received such training. Enslaved children did not normally attend school or receive basic education. Three more baby brothers and sisters arrived during these years, further polishing their caregiving skills. Judah, busy full time in the house, pregnant, and tired enough after a day's work, needed Milly and Mary's help with the domestic chores in their family cabin. This fell to the two girls, making them unlikely to have had much free time for the games of childhood. This family's intimate utility to the Hites may have saved them from being sold when sixty Hite slaves were put up for sale in 1824.

The image of Milly's name is from Isaac Hite Jr.'s Commonplace Book, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_25a and Mary on page 23b).

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise with proofreading from Craig Morris.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



Between 1832-1834, another two babies arrived, a boy and a girl. Growing up at Belle Grove, now teenaged Milly and Mary understood the patterns of life there, and as they neared their twentieth birthdays, probably had expectations of partnering with a Belle Grove boy and soon having babies of their own. Milly's cooking skills should have advanced, and perhaps Mary was still able bodied. They certainly assisted with Sunday night hair washing, combing, and styling, bathing, feeding, tending minor scrapes, and managing the younger

children. They helped shape their siblings to meet the expectations of the Hites, for the child's well-being and the family's safety, because they all lived entirely and constantly under the eyes of their enslavers.

Following the horror and disruption of the slave sale, and the dispersal of some enslaved people to the eldest children of Isaac Hite Jr., the next decade was comparatively stable at Belle Grove. Enslaved communities prized stability and there was a thin margin of security in the predictable annual routines on these isolated, large, agrarian Virginia plantations.

THEIR HEALTH

Milly and Mary diverge in their health. Mary is noted in 1837 as being "diseased," referencing a physical health issue. (Mental infirmities had different terminology.) In an era where measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria raged through adults and children alike, a survivor could be left with a weakened heart or decreased stamina, unable to work. There are no records indicating how or when Mary may have fallen ill or been injured. There are also no notes on Mary's death date and if she had any children. Likely, Mary helped her family as she was able.

WHAT WAS THEIR FATE?

Major change could come at a moment's notice. An enslaved person could fall out of favor and be sold, as punishment, to raise money, or to adjust the labor mix. The master's death could cause the legal title of every enslaved person to change, and distributing the inheritance could result in people being given or sold away from a life they knew and kin they needed. Enslaved people were ready cash and were more readily disbursed to settle debts than land holdings.

1836 was a horrible year for Milly and Mary. That winter, an influenza epidemic took lives throughout Frederick County. Judah was now 42 and gave birth to Jonathan on February 28; sadly

he died before age one. Judah was ill for weeks with pneumonia and died April 2, 1837. She was universally mourned.

Milly, now 16, wearing a woman's headwrap and dress—not a child's—and Mary, just turned 14, immediately stepped up to adulthood. The full burden of the sorrowful family's household and childcare operations fell on their slim shoulders. Perhaps another woman wet nursed baby Jonathan. They had responsibility for him, as well as the two, four, and six-year-olds Emily, Elijah, and Elias, all too young to care for themselves. Westly and Maria, age eight and ten, contributed some help, but the family had to turn inward to get themselves through this. At age 12, Anthony was old enough to be useful, but

was gone within the year, probably to the farm of Hite son Walker Maury. Of the three elder brothers, only 17-year-old Marcus still lived at Belle Grove.

In the January 1837 inventory of Isaac Hite Jr., a "snapshot" of the family taken for probate purposes shows them together, perhaps for the last time. Milly was eventually given to Hite son Hugh Holmes, along with Franklin and Robert, young men purposely near her age. They probably joined Hugh's household in Prince William County when he married around 1840, and there is no further record of Milly at Belle Grove. Perhaps, if she had dreamed of forming her own family at Belle Grove, she adjusted to circumstances and joined Franklin or Robert to start her own family there.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

**Emanuel Jackson
born April 1, 1815**

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 P.O. Box 537, Middletown, VA 22645 or online at www.bellegrove.org/support/donate.

Belle Grove Plantation

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