

ELIZA

BORN FEBRUARY 17, 1750

February 2021



The midwife at Montpelier Plantation, in Orange County, earned 10 shillings to deliver the babies of (Negro) “Wenches in 1750.”¹ The parents’ names of the healthy baby girl arriving February 17, 1750 are not recorded, but they named her Eliza.

Like both generations before her at Montpelier, all the Black people around Eliza were likewise enslaved and kin she knew as aunts, uncles, and cousins. Growing up in the familiar surroundings of the big plantation, the Blue Ridge in the distance, in the midst of nurturing kinfolk, young Eliza had no idea her name would echo for generations.

Isaac Hite Jr. and his bride, Eleanor “Nelly” Madison Hite, founded Belle Grove Plantation in 1783. They owned the land, the animals, and enslaved people. Neither owned enslaved people before their marriage and none came with the land.

At the same time, the 15 people given away to move with Nelly from Montpelier founded Belle Grove’s Black enslaved community in 1783. They were Eliza and her four children, Truelove and her five children, Sally, Milley, Jemmy, and Jerry. As founders, they also established their cultural traditions and work ethic from Montpelier.

¹ *Montpelier papers, payments noted to wife of overseer for delivering “wenches.”*

WHY WAS ELIZA NEEDED AT BELLE GROVE?

Raised relying on enslaved servants, 23-year-old Nelly’s greatest needs in establishing her new household were a cook, another woman who could double as her personal maid while performing other work, and a small group of household workers. New to the full responsibility of managing a household, Nelly needed experienced people, not beginners, to responsibly perform the functions that made a warm and comfortable home for her husband and their expected children.

Eliza appears in James Madison Sr.’s lists of enslaved people hired out short term to

neighbors in 1767, 1771, and 1773. While she could have helped in the field, she once went alone, so she likely helped in a kitchen busy with a social event. That she was asked back, over three years, testifies she performed well.

The oldest in the group and no stranger to new situations, a decade later this strong 33-year-old woman was likely good at organizing people and tasks—just what the new bride needed.

Her five children, Joanna, Diana, Demar, Pender, and Webster, came with her to Belle Grove, aged two to ten years, most old enough to help with minor tasks and to take on more work as they grew.

WHO NAMED ENSLAVED NEWBORNS IN VIRGINIA?

Generations of records show few African names among the growing enslaved population. Latin and Greek names were briefly popular, but tried-and-true English names soon dominated. These were chiefly endowed in nick-name format, to emphasize the respective difference in social position. So: Dick and Dickon instead of Richard; Eliza, Betty, and Betsy instead of Elizabeth. It was unusual to bestow first names of the white enslaving families on their enslaved.

Slave traders or owners changed the names of newly arrived Africans. Perhaps initially,

individual enslavers named newborns. But over the decades at Montpelier and Belle Grove, while never explicitly stated, it emerges that so long as enslaved parents used acceptable names for their newborns, they had some choice, perhaps with permission from the enslaver.

African tradition, however, was strong on naming newborns after ancestors, especially prominent ones, and statistics at Montpelier show an 83% rate of reuse of English-based ancestral names within that closed community.

The image of Eliza’s name above is from Isaac Hite Jr.’s Commonplace Book, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_19a).



WHY WERE SO MANY GIRLS NAMED ELIZA?

While the ancestors at Montpelier were not forgotten, the enslaved community at Belle Grove became its own cosmos and forged its own heroes and heroines. Belle Grove voices determined who to honor by naming children for them—even if not direct descendants and even if they never met them—because their legend was so powerful. They chose to honor Eliza, a pattern just recognized by researchers. Sixteen children over 65 years bore a version of her name.

Five generations testify to the love and respect accorded to a woman who must have done something to earn it. Perhaps she was their founding mother? Perhaps she used her influence as cook to raise others up, intervene for advancement, or share extra food? Perhaps naming a child with an “Elizabeth” name placed that child firmly within the enslaved community of Belle Grove, for whatever love and protection it could offer one of its own.

Learn more about “historical” name usage in the Belle Grove community in March.

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise



WHAT ABOUT ELIZA’S OWN FAMILY?

More is known about Eliza’s direct descendants than many of Belle Grove’s enslaved persons. She had five known children born at Montpelier and seven grandchildren born at Belle Grove, one of whom died as an infant. Her family remained intact initially, but the realities of slavery began sundering them apart about 1790.

Eliza, two daughters, a son, and grandson remained at Belle Grove until their deaths. Though no death dates for the family are known, the son and grandson were still alive in 1837.

Her grandson Charles and daughter Pender, mother to two of Eliza’s grandchildren, were all gifted to Isaac’s son, James Madison Hite at his Guilford Plantation in White Post, Virginia. Guilford records have not yet been traced to know the further lineage of Eliza’s family.

DAUGHTERS OF ELIZABETH NAME AT BELLE GROVE

Name	Birth Year	Birth Month & Day	Mother if known
Eliza	1750	February 17	Likely Betty at Montpelier
Betty	1784	August 8	unknown
Betty	1795	Unknown	Truelove
Eliza	1796	April 26	Joanna
Eliza	1802	November 8	Kate
Betsy	1803	January 4	unknown
Betsy	1805	December 15	Abby
Elizabeth	1816	October 25	Nelly
Elizabeth	1817	Unknown	Nelly
Betsy Ann	1820	May 13	Hannah
Eliza	1822	June 21	Suze
Betsy	1824	February 24	Winy
Elisabeth	1828	March 3	Sally
Sarah Elizabeth	1828	March 31	Halley
Ann Eliza	1850	January 23	Maria
Ann Eliza	1859	October 27	unknown
Betsy	Unknown	February 15	unknown

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

**Lucy born
March 16, 1806**

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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