

FRANK THORNTON

BORN 1767

June 2021



Frank arrived at Belle Grove in the autumn of 1790 at the age of 23, as part of a purchase that included his spouse Abba, their infant daughter Hannah, and his son, or stepson, Harry, nearly three. Isaac Hite Jr., owner of Belle Grove, paid his cousin George Hite £80 for Frank, perhaps to keep the family together, and traded three of his own: Peggy (age 14), Demars (age 13), and Solomon (age six). These enslaved people are listed by first name only. Frank actually had a last name, one that tells us something important about his family history. However, since the Hites did not record it, the name remained latent for almost four decades because enslavers ignored surnames.

The complete story behind this enslaved couple, and this exchange, is tremendously complex, and later issues of this newsletter will address it. Isaac Hite Jr.'s primary intent in making the trade may have been to provide his wife, Nelly, with a reliable wet-nurse and caregiver for their son and daughter, both under age two and a half, and future babies.

Abba was the pivotal person in the trade: an experienced mother, a welcome set of extra hands, and the reassurance of sufficient breast milk to nurture the babes. A woman working as a wet-nurse could be-

come a family intimate, and later events seem to indicate Abba, and her spouse Frank, were well respected, valued, and trusted by two generations of Hites.

Details of Frank's birthplace and early life are lacking, but he comes vividly to life in the Hite family papers when he is about age 55. Affectionately mentioned in family letters written in the 1820s, he was the family coach driver and was directed all around the countryside to take people visiting and delivering household items and food delicacies between family members as far away as Woodstock.¹

That Frank and Abba lived their lives together for over 50 years, with no family separation, is a level of good fortune not commonly experienced in enslaved communities. They had 12 children total, the majority born at regular intervals, with none sold, and ten living to adulthood.

The death of Isaac Hite Jr. and the probate of his will required an inventory be made of his possessions. In this 1837 document, Frank was listed as Frank Thornton for the first time, age 69 and "retired." When the appraisers were tallying the enslaved, did Frank say his last

name and finally somebody wrote it down? No last name appears for his spouse.² Oddly, one of their children born in 1808, Sally Ann Thornton, bears the name when the Hites recorded her name in their ledger of enslaved persons. Why this family was allowed to stay intact and finally have their last name acknowledged is a mystery.

The only other record of Frank is on a tally sheet noting chickens the Hites purchased for their own consumption from enslaved men and women. "Old Frank" was paid for twelve chickens sold on May 10, 1835. Retired, at age 67, he raised poultry on his own time and generated income from his flock.³ In the 1837 estate inventory, Frank and Abby are listed with only three of their surviving children. When Ann Hite died in 1851, neither Frank, Abba, nor the children are included on her estate inventory.

The image of Frank's name above is from Isaac Hite Jr.'s Commonplace Book, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_21a).

1 Letters from Ann T. Hite to Ann M. Williams on 10 May 1826, 17 May 1826, and 30 June 1826.

2 Isaac Hite Inventory, Frederick County Clerk's Office, Will Book 19, pp. 433-439.

3 1835 Hite Family Poultry Records.

WHY IS DISCOVERING THE LAST NAME OF AN ENSLAVED PERSON SUCH A BIG DEAL?

As was mentioned in previous newsletters, enslaved people certainly had personal names, and likely clan names, in their African homelands, but they were not allowed to use them in the colonies, where enslavers renamed them. The only way a small number of white enslavers were able to control much larger numbers of Black enslaved people was to control every detail of their lives. Last names were not acknowledged. Perhaps fear always lurked that large group

affiliation could facilitate rebellion.

Although enslaved persons did not normally choose to be known by the last name of their present oppressor, some evidence suggests a dynamic in which enslaved people might have self-described as members of an enslaved community. That dynamic was separation, by distribution of inheritance, which required people to go away from an enslaved community. These individuals had worked

together for decades for one planter family if it was elite enough to have a small village-size group of enslaved workers. It is more of a declaration of being from that working village at the estate of a particular family than honoring that enslaving family. It also helped them bond together in a brand-new environment and signal their birthright. A classic case of “us” versus “others.”

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise

WHAT DOES “THORNTON” TELL US ABOUT FRANK’S POSSIBLE TRAIL THROUGH HISTORY?

Thorntons emigrated from northern England to Virginia during the 1600s and expanded and prospered along with the colony, amassing considerable holdings of lands and enslaved people. They connected with the Madison family, just beginning their ascent through history, near the Rappahannock.

Frank’s personal trail likely began when James Madison Sr. married Nelly Conway. Each brought enslaved people to the marriage and communal wealth—his and hers. Hers had to leave her childhood home in Port Conway and come to Montpelier, where his already were. These 12 to 18 people, and their children, appear to have never relinquished their Conway identity, staying together, working, and living at one farm at a time, and rarely with “his” groups.⁴ Distance did not prevent romance, and over the years the groups mixed and had children.

“Her” enslaved people, from her childhood home in Port Conway, included individuals from her grandparents, whose last names were Conway and Thornton. And from this group, certain enslaved people created her dowry for her marriage to James Madison Sr. Likely Frank’s parents, and perhaps grandparents, came to Montpelier this way. The now Madison-Conway-Thornton community of enslaved people at Montpelier continued the cycle, constituting the Montpelier distribution for divisions of wealth to daughters marrying away or to sons establishing their own plantations.

Frank’s life path may have been determined by his distribution to Madison Sr.’s sister, as her inheritance portion, which followed her through two marriages and, after her death, went to her son George Hite. And in 1790, George concluded a business deal with his relative, Isaac Hite, to swap

enslaved property to better serve their current needs. All this distribution of “property” completely ignored the humanity of the enslaved persons forced into these transactions.

Frank Thornton’s last name reveals the history of his people after being taken from Africa and brought to Virginia, a birthright claimed across three centuries, across Virginia, and perhaps now here at Belle Grove. It is a rare and precious legacy of DNA, legends, and resilience. Oftentimes, such last names have carried on with great momentum, through the freedom years after the Civil War into modern America, where vastly more records of the African American community began to exist after 1900. This provides us with the hope of finding Frank and Abba’s descendants.

⁴ Douglas Chambers, *Murder at Montpelier*, pp. 149, 153-4.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

Robin born July 25, 1755

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bellegrove.org/about/enslaved

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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