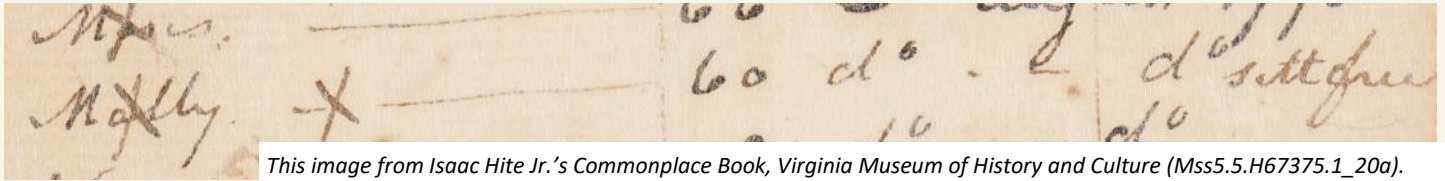


MOLLY

BORN c. 1737

September 2021



This image from Isaac Hite Jr.'s *Commonplace Book*, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Ms5.5.H67375.1_20a).

The glimpses of Molly's life come from careful parsing of three sets of records from 1794 to 1796. They seem to indicate protective measures that were set in place at a critical transition time between the passing of the estate of Isaac Hite Sr. to Isaac Hite Jr., and reveal she had a special importance to both men. She became the only enslaved person to ever be granted free status by either. Furthermore, she must be recognized as being among a tiny contingent of enslaved Africans who pioneered settlement of the Shenandoah Valley alongside Europeans in the 1730s.



WHAT ARE THE CLUES ABOUT MOLLY?

Molly first appears in the Shenandoah Valley historical record in an October 16, 1794 codicil to the January 4, 1794 will of Isaac Hite Sr. In these legal documents, he allocates to heirs only six of his more than 40 enslaved persons. Molly is mentioned along with Lewis and the blacksmith Daniel, as allocated to his only son as part of his inheritance.¹

When Hite Sr. died on September 18, 1795, 39 enslaved persons, including Molly, were inventoried.² Virginia law declared enslaved persons over 60 "untithable,"³ meaning they could step away from a normal work schedule. A separate small group of elders constituted a side deal with zero monetary value but serious obligations. Isaac Sr. enjoined his son to care for Bob, Dinah, Jane, Moses, and others. It is likely Molly was not turning 60

until later in 1796, after all financial transactions were completed. These protections guaranteed she would not be sold away from the Hites even when 22 other enslaved people were earlier that year.

As the estate probate concluded, Isaac Jr. dutifully scribed the names of the twenty people he took to Belle Grove on page 20a in his *Commonplace Book*. Molly's line reads "60 in August, 1796" and "sett free." Over five decades, he enslaved 276 persons and freed only Molly.

¹*Abstracts of Frederick County, Virginia Will, Inventories and Accounts 1743-1816*, by Dee Ann Buck, pp. 107-109.

²Will of Isaac Hite Sr., Inventory page listing enslaved property. J.A. Keith County Clerk, Frederick County, Virginia Wills Inventories, Book 6, p. 164.

³The state considered elders no longer able to work long or hard enough to contribute to the plantation's wealth, so the enslaver paid no property tax on them.

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise

HOW DID MOLLY COME TO THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY?

In the 1730s, the Shenandoah Valley was uninhabited wilderness. The 16 families in Hite's "wagon train" were the first permanent residents in hundreds of years. Only a path connected today's Frederick and Shenandoah Counties to Pennsylvania in the north and all of Virginia eastward.

In 1730, Jost Hite sold 500 acres and a grist mill he owned in Perkiomen Township, Pennsylvania to a slave owning family, John Pawling, for £540, today's equivalent of \$127,000.⁴ It seems unlikely Hite, his wife, teenage daughters, and young sons were single-handedly maintaining and operating a commercial gristmill and farm complex, especially with Jost himself absent for months in 1729 to reconnoiter his Virginia claim and validate its terms in Williamsburg. Hired hands or enslaved people appear a necessity.

"The prominent men of Providence and adjoining Perkiomen and Skippack Townships did own slaves," a fifty-year old practice there.⁵ John and Henry Pawling of Perkiomen between them owned 10 slaves. It seems logical that Hite brought enslaved people he already owned along with him to Virginia. Perhaps part of the sale proceeds went toward equipping his family for the journey south with wagons, tools, mules, horses, and additional enslaved workers? This was Jost's

fourth move after leaving Germany and he had learned to rely on himself. His own words speak of the logistics of living:

*so far Distant from any settlement but especially from any such as could supply them any Provisions or Necessaries that they could scarce procure any one thing nearer than Pennsylvania or Fredericksburg which were near two hundred miles.*⁶

A birth year of 1737 likely means Molly was born in Virginia to “some slaves” he brought down six years earlier, and puts her among the pioneering, founding group of enslaved persons in the entire Shenandoah Valley. Molly grew up along the Great Wagon Road where

it crossed Opequon Creek, in a small farm complex that included barns, stables, Jost’s stone house, a rudimentary mill, a tavern built in the fort style across the road, and eventually, an adjoining house by son John Hite. Her small community may have consisted of only a few enslaved families. Around 1750, George Washington, the young surveyor, knew the family, stayed here, and Molly might have encountered him.⁷

⁵*The General and his Slaves at the Muhlenberg House* by The Rev. Judith A. Meier, Historian, The Historical Society of Trappe, Colledgeville, and Perkiomen Valley.

⁶41 Pennsylvania Archives, Series II, Vo I. XIX , 730

⁷George Washington's Diary <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/01-01-02-0001-0002-0004>

WHAT WAS HER LIFE LIKE?

Pioneer homesteads were self-sufficient. Pioneers had to make everything they used, and developed a wide array of skill sets. In addition to growing their own food, they had to clothe themselves, and perform all household chores—all processes in which enslaved workers participated.

At some point around 1760, Molly came into the household of Jost’s youngest son, Isaac Hite Sr., who lived a few miles south on a new farm, Long Meadow. In 1758, his long-awaited son Isaac Hite Jr. was born, and it is possible 19-year-old Molly became his nursemaid. This could explain why Isaac Jr. respected her enough to set her free. In 60 years of enslavement, she had lived 23 years with Jost, another 36 with Isaac Sr., where her children, if she had them, had grown up amidst an enslaved population that had as many as 37 people.

WHAT WERE MOLLY’S OPTIONS AS FREEDWOMAN?

Older enslaved people remained in the quarter, still not free, offering advice, telling stories, performing odd jobs like babysitting, raising chickens, gardening, or helping with food preparation. Did being freed mean she had to leave her community? We don’t know. In leaving the property tax records she leaves all Hite record keeping. The law requiring freed persons to leave Virginia was in the future, and there were work arounds. Her need to earn an income probably determined her course of action.

Frederick County’s Freed Blacks Registry provides one name, which may not be this Molly. From 1804-1806, a woman named Molly who was a spinstress—a woman who spun thread with a spindle—lived on

Water Street in Winchester.⁸ This Molly Patterson was also counted in the 1810 Federal Census.

If she needed to leave Belle Grove, Molly could have lived fifteen years in town, with a family or a in rented room, supporting herself with a craft she learned from her time with Jost Hite: taking in batches of flax to spin into thread. The task requires only a chair, a hand-held spindle, or perhaps a spinning wheel, and could be accomplished in a single room. Other options found in the Registry were more arduous professions: laundress, vegetable grower, laborer.

⁸ *Free Blacks on the Personal Property Tax Lists of Frederick County, Virginia 1793-1862*, compiled by Joy MacDonald, New Papyrus Publishing, Athens, Georgia.

DO WE KNOW ABOUT MOLLY’S FAMILY?



The inheritance records from Isaac’s side of the family lack critical details about mothers and children. Without that, there is no way to know which of the half dozen 60-year-olds had children and who they were. The probability is good that Molly had progeny, but we can’t presently trace them. If she did have family, they rejoiced in her freedom and probably gladdened her senior years.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

**ISAAC born
October 6, 1795**

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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