

SUCKEY BORN 1762

May 2021

"The negro Suckey is about five feet one or two inches high, about 25 years of age, with a pleasant countenance, and has a small scar or dent below one of her eyes."¹

How poignant is it that one of the few times an enslaved person was ever described physically was in newspaper ads, like the one at the right, when they left to seek freedom? The ad alleges she was "carried off" by a red-haired Scotsman named John Rutherford, and offered a reward for either or both.

The ad was placed by Isaac Hite Senior, who in 1786 owned Suckey. His plantation was across modern day Route 11 from his son Isaac Hite Junior's Belle Grove. Few records are known to exist from Hite

Sr.'s lifetime about the enslaved families he owned. The provisions he made in his will mention, by name, those individuals he is transferring to various relatives.

Much is left unsaid in the ad about why Suckey and John chose to secretly depart together. Enslaved people had no rights to leave, and nothing is known about John's status. There are about a dozen men of that name in the period censuses for Frederick County, and it is unknown if he was a resident, and if so, for how long, or if he was just passing through. Were they romantically linked? Did they join forces only to escape? The clues are meager.

¹ Advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette*, October 14, 1789, p. 3.

WHY DID ENSLAVED PEOPLE SEEK FREEDOM?

The condition of being permanently deprived of freedom of action, of choice, of belief, of the opportunity to earn wages, accrue or pass on wealth, and the inability to form stable families or seek an education, was a terrible plight. For the enslaved, hunger was often present, and long work days and weeks eroded body and soul. Punishment could be extreme. Sometimes enslaved people fled their enslavers to reunite with their families if they had been separated, but most often they hoped to pass for free folk or attain the safety of a free

state above the Mason-Dixon line. Women, held back by their children, sought freedom less frequently. During the Hite ownership of Belle Grove, other ads and notations in Isaac Hite's ledger indicate four men fled with unknown results. The odds of success were not great, and the ordeal of hiding out in woods or swamps, traveling by night to escape detection by groups of slave hunters with dogs, was both arduous and terrifying. Seeking freedom was an incredibly brave thing to do.

5 Pounds Reward.

~~RAN~~ away from my house on Shenandoah River, Frederick County, Virginia, a certain John Rutherford, who carried off a negro woman named SUCKEY.

Rutherford is a Scotchman, with an agreeable red countenance, about 28 years of age, well made, about 5 feet 9 or 10 inches high, has long red or yellow coloured hair, when he often wears in a club or cut; had on and carried with him a new dark blue broad cloth coat, with yellow flowered buttons, a spotted velvet vest, a white dimity vest, and a vest and breeches of dark coloured down, of a greenish hue, and several other pair breeches, among which are a pair of brown couduroy, a new hat with long fur, a new pair of shoes, and an old pair with a patch on the toe, plated shoe buckles, several pair of stockings, some of them are white cotton, several white shirts, and an old silver watch.

The negro Suckey is about five feet one or two inches high, about 25 years of age, with a pleasant countenance, and has a small scar or dent below one of her eyes; had on and took with her two callico jackets, and a callico petticoat, one jacket and three striped liney petticoats, a new man's hat, one new linen and one new burg shirt, a pair of shoes with flaps, a new silk handkercher, and several other handkerchers and one apron.

If the said Rutherford and said negro are apprehended and delivered to me, so that the said Rutherford may be convicted of the theft, I will give a reward of five Pounds, for every fifty miles they may be taken from this place (including what the law allows) and in proportion to the distance, besides all reasonable expenses; or for the negro alone, one half of the above reward.

Isaac Hite.

Long Meadows, Frederick County, Virginia, October 10, 1789.

N. B. It is thought highly probable, that Suckey will seek herself in men's cloaths. J. H.

DID SHE SUCCESSFULLY ESCAPE?

The records are silent on Suckey until August 1796 when she was inherited by Isaac Hite Jr. On November 1, 1797 at Belle Grove, she is then recorded giving birth to a son named Reuben. It would seem her escape was not successful, and she was returned to Isaac Hite Sr.'s estate. It was common to punish enslaved people who sought freedom upon their capture and return, but the wording of the ad makes it possible that she was not held liable for her actions. If she dressed in men's clothes as a postscript to the ad states, it does not seem to have helped.

Hite Sr. died the year before Suckey's son was born, and she, and her newborn, were then owned by Isaac Hite Jr. In August of 1796, Hite Jr. recorded her on his own list of enslaved people as being age 34. Thirty-five is late to bear a first

child, but no records concerning Isaac Sr.'s enslaved people have survived. Possibly she had earlier given birth to other children who did not survive. Neither she nor her son appear in the 1836 inventory taken when Isaac Jr. died, so we do not know what happened to them. The possibility exists that Reuben was sold away in the mid-1820s, and that by 1836 Suckey had died.

We also do not know much about whether Suckey or Reuben had family at Belle Grove. Three men named Reuben lived at Belle Grove, each born about 30 years apart—could they have been close kin? In addition, in 1805, another enslaved woman at Belle Grove, Sarah, bore twins, who were named Simon and Suckey. Whether there was a relationship, a friendship or just a coincidence of a common name, is likewise unknown.

AND HER WELL-DRESSED COMPANION?

Had John kidnapped Suckey for nefarious purposes, he could have been charged with a criminal offense that might be found in court records of the time, which we have yet to search. If he was an indentured servant, then Hite would have had a claim on him too. Did a man of the world infatuate a naïve young woman? The ad is purposely vague, except that it implies John is at fault. We are, therefore, left to draw our own conclusions, both about the nature of their relationship and his fate.

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise

is no mention of a cloak; perhaps a missing blanket went unobserved.

In the 1780s, women's outfits were composed of separates. This 1903 drawing shows a petticoat (skirt) of one fabric, and a jacket with peplum of another. Tucked into the neckline is the cited "handkerchief." The wide apron had a flap that pinned to the bosom with straight pins. While this image shows a mob cap, enslaved women more likely wore headwraps. Seven individual pieces could create over a dozen different looks. Osnaburg and linsey referred to in the ad are different weaves of linen, while calico was a patterned fabric.



WHY WAS THE CLOTHING IMPORTANT?

"Had on and took with her two calico jackets, and a calico petticoat, one jacket and three striped linsey petticoats, a man's hat, and one tow linen and one osnaburg shift, a pair of shoes with straps, a new silk handkerchief, and several other handkerchiefs and one apron."

Enslaved persons were always under the observation of white eyes, but that did not mean details about them were noted and remembered. Clothing, on the other hand, was often the thing a casual observer could recall. Runaway ads always mention

what they wore when they sought freedom. If the enslaved person had the opportunity to plot their escape, taking a change of clothes increased their odds of NOT being the person in that ad. That Suckey owned, and could pack, four skirts and three jackets, gave her the option to recombine outfits to escape detection. She was also shod, which increased her aura of respectability and cushioned her feet on the road. Although October in the Shenandoah Valley is often cold and windy, there

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

Frank Thornton

*to read more issues visit
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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