

RICHMOND

BORN APRIL 25, 1821

April 2021

Richmond was born to an enslaved woman named Philis at Belle Grove. His mother was about thirty-three years old and he was her eighth baby. By the time little Richmond was born, his eldest sister Becca was about fourteen years old and able to help care for him. In all, he had four sisters and four brothers. In 1808, Philis and two daughters came to Belle Grove in exchange for two other enslaved people, and she had six more children while at Belle Grove. They had no kin outside their nuclear family that we can trace, but research is ongoing about who his father might have been. His name, Richmond, may be a clue because the name was not so common by 1821.

It is possible Philis was sought out to work in the nursery at Belle Grove as a wetnurse. Between 1805 and 1819, Ann Hite, Isaac's second wife, bore ten children. The house was so crowded they built on a new wing. With children weaned at about two years old, it was not

unusual in those years for two or three Hite babies to simultaneously require breast feeding, way more than Anne Hite, who also had major domestic responsibilities, could possibly manage.

It was a common, if discrete, practice to “engage” by lease, purchase, or trade, a healthy young mother with proven ability to suckle a child. Belle Grove's research into whether the Hites used wetnurses indicates as many as five women might have had that role over a span of years. This is a little recognized, harsh reality of slavery, that young, enslaved women had heightened commercial value if they were lactating.

It must have been very scary to move to a new plantation on own's one, bringing small children, with no spouse or extended family for moral support. It was to everyone's advantage to have these newcomers succeed, so perhaps they experienced a level of respect or were given privileges within their

stark situation of bondage. Many, elsewhere, did not.¹

If the Hite nursery had crowded cradles, so did too the homes of the enslaved community nearby, for they experienced their own baby boom. From 1819-1823, nineteen boys and girls were born to enslaved mothers. Young Richmond did not lack for playmates when they had free time from chores “suitable” to their age, and the sound of childish laughter floated through the air.

No further information on young Richmond or his mother Philis exists at Belle Grove after the last of the “Philis's babies” was born April 26, 1824. If Richmond survived the childhood and adult diseases common in Virginia, further enslavement, and lived—somewhere—emancipation in 1865, at the age of forty-four, freed him.

¹Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, Chapter 5: Wet Nurse for Sale or Hire. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019.

THE DOUBLE RICHMOND MYSTERY



Image from Isaac Hite Jr.'s *Commonplace Book*, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_23b).

Because the only mention so far of young Richmond is his birth record, the story of his life is a mystery. Twenty odd years before, another Richmond was deeded by the Madison family to the Hites as part of an 1801 inheritance settlement. But though he is part of a group of twelve enslaved people who were deeded, and twelve individuals departed from

Montpelier, only ten were recorded in the ledger at Belle Grove. Richmond seems to vanish; no connection with Richmond born in 1821 can yet be established through any known Belle Grove records. However, because Southern laws denied enslaved

men and women the right to marry, fathers' names were never recorded. Perhaps while an adult at Montpelier, Richmond fathered one of the male children who came to Belle Grove, and that son reused his name years later? It is still a mystery.

WHY WERE SOME ENSLAVED MEN NAMED FOR PLACES?

After the early 1600's, British merchant ships transported to Virginia the majority of newly enslaved men, women, and children loaded from forts on the West Coast of Africa. The captives lost their personal names once imprisoned to await sale to the European slavers, and most remained anonymous in the holds of the ships. The entire process was utterly impersonal, random, designed to strip them of their identity, dehumanize them, and render them more pliable.

Researchers do not know if, in the earliest years, 1715-1720, just-arrived Africans were named on disembarkation by the mariners, brokers, or merchants living at those ports, or the new masters who bought them. Yet a survey of Virginia records shows a subset of enslaved men named for British places where no Virginia planter had set foot. Some examples include York, Sussex, Bristol, Aberdeen, London, Isle of Wight, and commonly, Richmond.² How is this dynamic to be understood?

While rural names like Sussex and York might be the echo of birth places of homesick mariners, new research in Britain suggests there may be a darker side to the others.

African slavery was part of the Triangle Trade of sugar, rum, human beings and tobacco, a multi-billion-dollar enterprise on both sides of the Atlantic. Great fortunes were built, and four of the place names given to en-

slaved men follow the money by commemorating the four financial pillars of that trade.

In England, **London** and **Bristol** competed as home ports for the Africa-going "Guinea man" vessels, fitted out to carry human cargo. Both had massive dock complexes to receive, store, and secure against pilferage, the valuable incoming tobacco and sugar cargos. The quayside environments were bustling, noisy, miasmatic, odiferous, and rat infested.

Richmond-upon-Thames has long had royal connections, most notably as the site of King Henry VII's Richmond Palace, a statement of the first Tudor king's power and prestige. It is just fourteen miles upriver on the Thames from the day-to-day nastiness of London's vast East India dock complex. Richmond remained a favored residence of the Georgian kings of the 1700's, so it became popular as a London suburb where wealthy financiers like Henry and Edward Lascelles and Edward Colston occupied elegant country mansions, built with wealth accumulated in the trade. Learn more here: www.culture24.org.uk/history-and-heritage/art47027



Richmond-upon-Thames by Joseph Nikells. Museum of Richmond

"**Richmond**" was a nod to the billions that supported and organized the African venture, through incorporated companies and individual money lenders like Colston. The Lascelles family, with a consortium of British merchants, set up the infamous "floating factories," the ships moored off the Guinea Coast of Africa to receive slaves collected from the interior and held in nearby forts. They, along with **Aberdeen** investors, maintained these stone fortresses, and lent money to the plantation owners in the Caribbean. In the New World, such topographic names died out in the first generation of enslaved men, turning up only in direct descendants named for them.

² 1790 U.S. Census, Isle of Wight, Virginia

This issue produced by Robin Young (who shares the birthday of April 25 with Richmond), Kristen Laise and the Education Staff of the Museum of Richmond, U.K.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

Molly

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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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