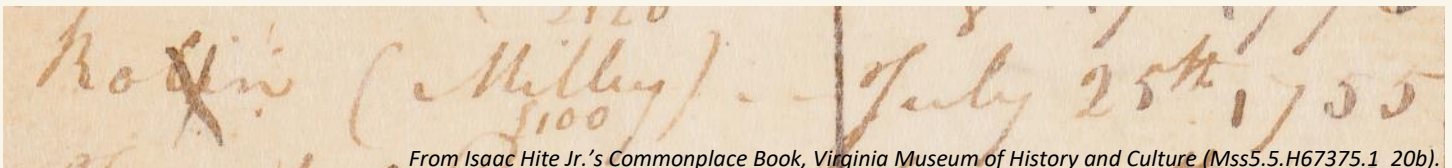


ROBIN

BORN JULY 25, 1755

July 2021



From Isaac Hite Jr.'s Commonplace Book, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_20b).

Robin comes alive in letters written by future President James Madison Jr. to his father, James Madison Sr., while he was Virginia's Congressman for the First, Second, and Third Congresses in Philadelphia. Madison wrote instructions every autumn concerning readiness for planting crops in the new year at Montpelier, lining up the seeds, plow horses, and equipment. The absent Madison relied on his father to relay his wishes to the overseers and enslaved workers.

On November 28th, 1790, just one year after he wrote the Bill of Rights, Madison wraps up a letter home with:

I hope you have not forgotten to pay Majr. Lee, and that Robin & the shop will have given Sawney the aids necessary for the jobb I left unfinished.¹

His mention of Montpelier enslaved people in letters is fairly rare. Sawney is the exception. This talented man had traveled with Madison to the College of New Jersey, and was now the only Black overseer of a quarter (farm) at Montpelier. The mention of Robin is exceptional and "the shop" useful.

Not until the review of a letter written four years later could the puzzle of "the jobb" be solved.

Writing on November 10, 1794, Madison lays out a plan to boost his grain yields on a particular farm by a deadline:

By a vessel which sailed yesterday for Fredg [Fredericksburg port] I have sent you . . . a barrel with 1 ½ bushels of Red Clover seed, which I wish you to make Sawney sow in Feby, on the old mountain field. There will be eno' for the whole field whether in Wheat or Rye, and he will so distribute it as to make it hold out. It is to be sown on the top of the Wheat or Rye, taking advantage of a snow if there be one particularly just before it melts. But this circumstance is by no means essential, and ought not to retard the sowing beyond the last of that Month.²

Montpelier researchers regard "the shop" as the blacksmith shop, run during this time by Moses. Robin was likely his assistant, a man respected, capable, and trustworthy, charged with the responsibility of timing his work to have a plow, or some accessory, forged

Clover fixes nitrogen in the soil, reducing weeds and creating better yields. Farmers of the period understood the impact of soil improvements like clover, manure, and lime.

and ready to use for sowing this vital crop. He was a man on whom the future president counted to navigate the heavy workload of the blacksmith's shop to meet a deadline.

America in the 1700s lacked retail sources of household, kitchen, farmyard, and field equipment. Every plantation operated a blacksmith shop to fashion such tools, from forks, to harnesses, wheels, and plow shares. Besides manufacturing necessities for the plantation, a blacksmithy was a profit center, also serving locals from whom the workforce could earn tips—one of the few enslaved occupations with that opportunity.

The smithy placed Robin at the heart of life at Montpelier and its surrounding communities of smaller farmers, schoolmasters like Mr. Maury, churches, and ordinaries. A plantation blacksmith shop was a key social gathering place for the exchange of news, gossip, and casual chat. Not only did neighboring white farmers bring and pick up commissioned work, but trusted enslaved workers from other plantations were sent on that errand. Robin had a set of friends and acquaintances with whom he was accustomed to socially interact and also probably had his own

Letters were the primary form of communication in this era. James Madison Jr. remained close to his sisters after their marriages. He and his brother-in-law Isaac Hite Jr. corresponded for decades on family and farm matters.

Madison's letters often refer to the prices of staples like wheat and sugar. Most acreage was allocated to the tobacco cash crop, but grain was needed for home consumption, and was increasingly an important cash crop for Virginia.

“clientele,” who took their work to him instead of Moses, because he was skillful, perhaps faster, and possibly cheaper. His reassignment away from Montpelier cost him all that, even the notice of the Madisons Junior and Senior. At age 46, Robin had to reestablish himself.

¹ From James Madison to James Madison, Sr, 28 November 1790 and 10 November 1794” *Founders Online*, National Archives: <https://foundersonline.gov/documents/Madison/01-13-02-0226> and <https://foundersonline.gov/documents/Madison/01-15-02-0286>

² Ibid.

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise

WHAT HAPPENED TO ROBIN AT BELLE GROVE?



In transferring Robin to Belle Grove as part of the inheritance settlement to Nelly Hite and her husband, Major Isaac Hite Jr., the Madison family acknowledged his talent and training as well as the growth of Belle Grove in southern Frederick County, where his talent, valued at £100, could grow that operation.

The state of blacksmithing at Belle Grove in 1801 is unclear. In 1797 Isaac Hite Jr. inherited Daniel, his father’s 24-year-old blacksmith, who brought all his tools from “the shop” at that nearby plantation. Did Daniel remain there in support of the operations of those lands, which were still in production? Had Isaac Jr. set

up, or aspired to set up, his own or another shop at Belle Grove as he expanded his business interests? Into which role would Robin go—as lead blacksmith or secondary? Despite his skills, experience, and faithful service, his enslaved status guaranteed Robin had no say in these matters. Hopefully, he established as comfortable a social and profitable niche for himself and his family in his new location.

Unfortunately there are no further records about Robin’s life at Belle Grove, including when it ended. He is not listed on Isaac Hite Jr.’s estate inventory in 1837. He also is not listed as “given to” any of Hite’s adult children as some other enslaved persons are.

ROBIN’S FAMILY

Robin’s record in Isaac Hite’s Commonplace lists “Milley” as his mother. The dates are right for him to be the son of a woman, Milly, listed as a child in the Montpelier’s 1733 inventory, when the Madisons owned 29 men, women, and children. This woman named Milly was the daughter of newly arrived enslaved Africans and she was in the first generation of Virginia-born-enslaved. She would have been at Montpelier when General Lafayette visited on his famed 1824 tour and she was still alive in 1825, aged about 104.



An informal document in Montpelier records can be interpreted as a list of enslaved men, women, and children hired out locally by James Madison Sr. and Robin, Granny Milly, and “her children” are in this list for 1770.³ Milley’s longevity also means that if Robin was her son, she was still alive when he was ordered to leave for Belle Grove.

No Belle Grove records contain clear-cut evidence about Robin’s family there. Sarah, was 11 years younger than Robin, and came in the same 1801 group as he. She was listed with three children including an infant, Milley, who is noted to have died, though we don’t know when.

Sarah is of the age that she could have been a spouse of Robin. They may have been a family group, with the baby named for Robin’s mother and allowed to stay together when being willed to the Hites.

Sarah used other family names for her children: Sinar (her mother), and Truelove (perhaps her elder sister, who had come to Belle Grove eight years earlier). Belle Grove researchers are investigating whether family names repeat in the families of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

³ James Madison Sr. Miscellaneous Loose Notes from Unknown Account Book, image 7/scrap 8, and image 28/scrap 28, Miscellaneous Reels, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, accessed July 6, 2021, MRD-S 26491, Montpelier Research Database.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

Abba born 1769

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

Physical address: 336 Belle Grove Road • Mailing address: P.O. Box 537 • Middletown • VA 22645
info@bellegrove.org • www.bellegrove.org • 540-869-2028