

TRUELOVE

BORN JANUARY 28, 1754

January 2022



Truelove has one of the most unique names in the known world of enslaved people in Virginia. Fewer than a dozen enslaved women are presently known to have that name. Trying to understand its meaning has sent researchers down many blind alleys. It sounds romantic—but there was no chivalry in slavery. Was it a homonym—a sound-alike word—from an African language as pronounced in English? “No,” said the Igbo-language translator we consulted. Was she an adorable, much-wanted-baby? Probably—though her name proved no inoculation against the vicissitudes of slavery. Could it be a last name used as a first name, as happened with Thornton at Belle Grove?¹ Possibly! The name is established in two lists of indentured servants sent from England to America between 1663 to 1774.² Truelove, a Cornish name, with Middle English and Norse roots, occurs from medieval times, spelled Trelaw.³

Two systems of unpaid forced labor existed in America from 1618 to 1865. One was enslavement of Black people based on skin color. The other was lower-class English and Irish men, women, and children, most found guilty of petty crimes, and transported to America to be sold off as bonded servants for terms of servitude for generally 7-14 years. They worked the fields, laundries, and small industrial operations of America, right next to enslaved Blacks. Before the American Revolution, the two groups were often housed together, and sometimes, formed unions and family units.

Could Truelove’s mother have espoused one of the indentured

workers from England named Truelove? And endowed it as a child’s first name to preserve a memory of far-away family roots? Remember, enslaved people were denied last names, so sometimes they made them first names to keep the connection.

There are more mysteries. Truelove came with the group of enslaved people gifted to Nelly and Isaac Hite Jr. at the time of their marriage. Truelove cannot be found on the Montpelier property tax lists—another complicating factor in interpreting her name. James Madison Sr. owned lands in several other counties, and Montpelier staff suggest she probably worked at one of those. The Madison family did not buy enslaved people after 1733; she had to be a descendant of the list of people known from 1733.⁴ Truelove’s use of the name Billy for a son might mean Bill in the 1733 list was a relative. She named her daughter Katy. Perhaps her grandmother? Her use of Peggy for another might be a clue to the Pegg at Montpelier being Truelove’s mother.

Truelove bore children while at Montpelier. When she was transferred to Belle Grove in 1783 at age 29, four children were deeded with her (see the family tree on the reverse). As the only person to come from wherever she lived and worked, this suggests she was heartbreakingly forced to leave her family behind, including possibly the father of her children. It must have been scary to leave a familiar place, with children under age five—children who would not grow up to know their father, and go far away in a little nuclear family unit.

Once at Belle Grove, it was six years until her next child, who died, resulting in a ten-year gap overall before she had Billy in 1792. This suggests a lack of a partner for her for a very long time; she must have been lonely.

The image of Truelove’s name above is from Isaac Hite Jr.’s *Commonplace Book*, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_19a).

¹ See the August 2021 feature on Abba

² *The Complete Book Of Emigrants In Bondage, 1614-1775* by Peter Wilson Coldham; ancestry.com/search/collections/61074/.

³ Coldham, *The Bristol Registers of Servants Sent to Foreign Plantations, 1654-1686*. ancestry.com/search/collections/49090/

⁴ See the February 2021 feature on Eliza



WHAT WAS TRUELOVE’S JOB?

Truelove’s uniqueness continues in her work assignment: a tobacco-field worker. A contract between Isaac Hite and his overseer, Benjamin Little, dated October 17, 1785, assigns a tobacco crew to Little by name: Ned, Primus, Jerry, Truelove, and Sally.¹ She is one of two women amidst three men, spending her days out in the fields in all weather. It appears tobacco was a short-lived experiment at Belle Grove, which was better known for grain. Virginia’s wealth was based on exporting tobacco to Britain from the Atlantic area, not on domestic use. Transporting the Belle Grove crops to the Atlantic seaboard cut into profit margins, and by the war years, the export crop to Britain decreased by 86%.²

(continued next page)



TRUELOVE'S FAMILY

Tobacco farming was both labor intensive and dependent on a timetable. First sown in seed beds in cold weather, by early spring it was transplanted to "hills," dirt mounds whose construction by hoe was "the most arduous task" in the culture.³ Once the dirt was chopped and pushed into place—using the torso muscles—the new seedling was set in place. This involved bending, and probably tamping down by foot, all difficult movements for a woman with a large belly to perform.

This may have come at a high personal cost to Truelove, when on May 5, 1788, she gave birth to a son who lived only a week. Another four years passed before she had another child to cuddle. Was hard labor in the fields responsible?

¹ NT 69.77.9 Belle Grove collection at Stewart Belle Archives, Handley Library.

² accessgenealogy.com/virginia/tobacco-production-trend-of-prices-and-exports.htm

³ www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/tobacco-colonial-cultivation-methods.htm

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise with proofreading by Craig Morris and family tree design by Elizabeth Dalton.

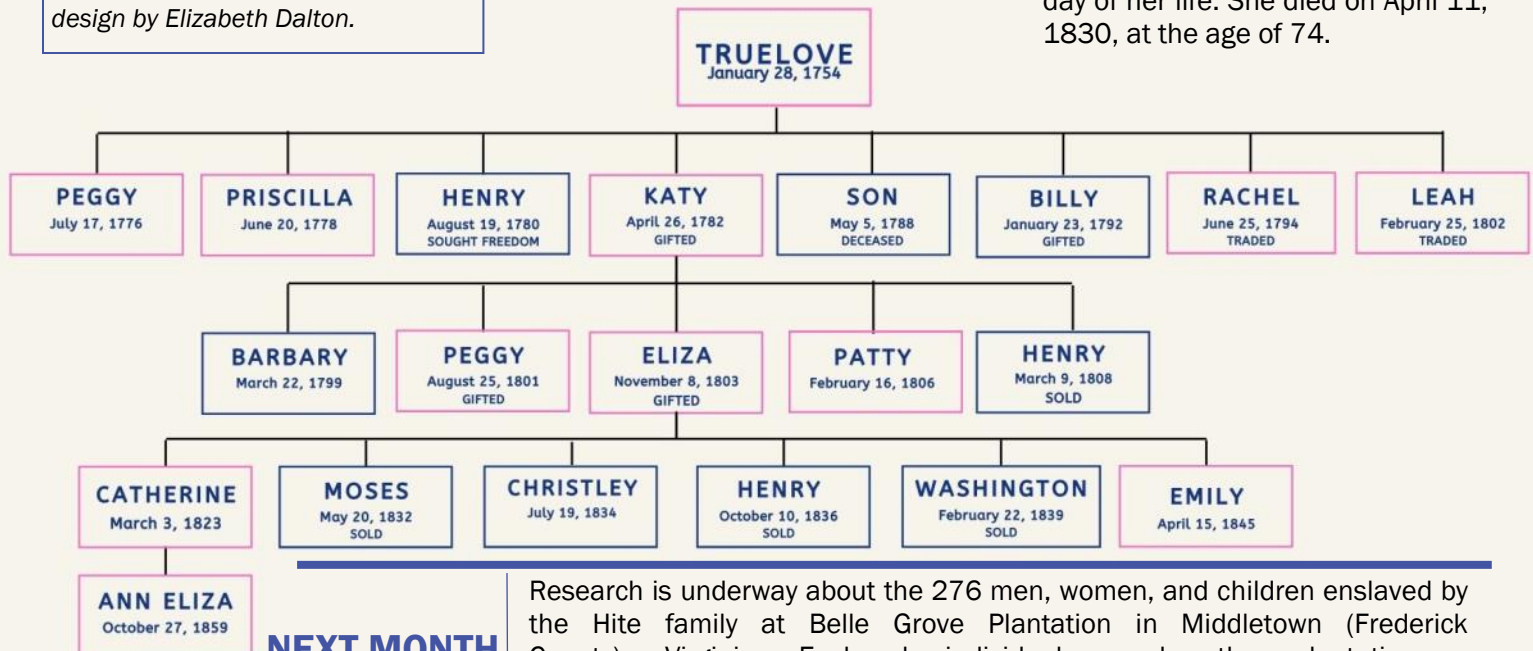
Slavery fragmented Truelove's family on all sides at Belle Grove.

Though she bore eight children, she did not end her life as a family matriarch surrounded by younger generations. Her firstborn daughter, Peggy, was traded away at age 14 to George Hite, for Abba and Hannah in 1790. For the purposes of selling or trading enslaved youth, 14 was considered adulthood. Truelove's second girl, Priscilla, is not recorded as a mother and may have had health issues, but did live into her mother's old age. Her third daughter, Katy, had five children, the main line of descendants. Her fourth daughter, Rachel, and fifth daughter, Leah, were traded in 1809, at ages 15 and 12, respectively, to obtain Philis, the wetnurse for Ann Hite's children.

Of Truelove's three sons, Henry sought freedom and seems not to have been captured. The middle son died a week after birth, unnamed but acknowledged. Only Billy remained, last documented in 1824, after which he is noted as given to a Hite son. It is not known if he had children.

Returning to Katy, who bore the grandchildren whom Truelove got to love, we cannot document what happened to her two sons, Barbary and Henry. Barbary was born when Katy was 18 years old; it is one of the youngest recorded births at Belle Grove. Katy and two daughters, Peggy and Eliza, were gifted to the Hite's eldest daughter, Nelly Baldwin, around 1809. They lived on property or next door, so contact may have been possible. The death of Nelly Baldwin and her husband by 1830 created a family crisis of six orphans, with whom Katy and/or Eliza may have assisted.¹ Eliza and her children, possibly after interim stops, wind up with a Hite son, close to Belle Grove, where it's possible her daughter Patty remained—though little is known of her.

Out of all the possibilities and hopes, only Truelove (age 70), Priscilla (48), and Billy (32) appear in records to have been living at Belle Grove in 1824-25. If this seems tumultuous to read, imagine what it was like to live. Out of the 14 descendants born in her lifetime, eight were taken from her. It seems that a lovely name did not ensure a lovely life. As a field hand, Truelove worked very hard every day of her life. She died on April 11, 1830, at the age of 74.



**NEXT MONTH
WE WILL HONOR
Hannah born
February 20, 1790**

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