

HARRY

BORN DECEMBER 4, 1787

December 2021



From Isaac Hite Jr.'s Commonplace Book, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1_19b).

Harry is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. He arrived as a nearly three-year-old child at Belle Grove in autumn of 1790, part of the trade between cousins Isaac Hite Jr. and George Hite. The key persons in the trade were Abba and Frank, both discussed in the June and August features this year. In Belle Grove records, Harry is documented as the first-born child, and eldest son of Abba; other records infer his father was a Cherokee man in South Carolina.

Reports of the day suggest Harry was born during his mother's period of captivity with the Cherokee nation in South Carolina, which began in 1776. Her birth year is 1769, putting her at age 6-7 when captured, and 16-17 when she became pregnant with Harry. It is not possible to know if any of her earlier children were born, lost, or left behind.

The features on Abba and Frank include details about the murder of the Jacob Hite family and the kidnapping and captivity of their entire enslaved community by British-allied Cherokee, and the latter's practice of retaining, or trading, captured Black enslaved groups.¹ Contemporary evidence is contradictory concerning the dates that George Hite actually reclaimed these enslaved people, his inheritance from his late father. Nothing informs us how soon, after he got them back, he traded these

“painful reminders of the terrible past”² to his cousin. For the boy to have a Cherokee father, Abba's rescue had to be somewhere between 1786 and 1789. The only solid known dates are their ages when they came to Belle Grove. From these, we can predicate that Harry was conceived in February of 1787. His sister, Hannah, was conceived by June of 1789, and her father may have been Frank Thornton. The different races of the fathers of the two children seem to be our only clue to when Abba left South Carolina.

The little Thornton family were the 28th-31st persons to enter the enslaved community at Belle Grove. There were a few teenagers in this community, but a trough of births meant few likely playmates for Harry other than twins Frank and Benjamin, who were about nine months older.

Grown up Harry was considered unusual by the local community. Three local historians all describe his looking part-Cherokee, which, if true, seems to eliminate Frank's being his biological father.³ No other member of the Thornton family was considered unusual.

T.K. Cartmell says Harry sired a daughter well regarded by the Hites, but there is no matching name.⁵ Belle Grove records give his death date as October 22, 1828, and this is curious as there are few

Historian Louise Perquet du Bellet in *Some Prominent Virginia Families* (1907) wrote:

The boy grew up an eccentric character and figure on the plantation as “Indian Harry.” He could never be civilized, but kept to himself: was always taciturn and refused to do anything except help in the kitchen, where his mother was assistant cook. From the time the boy was twelve or thirteen years old he would disappear the first warm weather of the spring and be seen no more till snow came. Then he would suddenly and silently appear in the kitchen and take up his position in the corner of the large fireplace, on a seat the other servants dared not take while he was about. He condescended sometimes, to bring wood and water, peel potatoes, or pick fowls. When about forty years old, he disappeared in the spring and returned no more. He was very passionate and some of the servants were not a little afraid of him. Some said, “He was conjured himself and might conjure others.” His master thought him irresponsible, but harmless, so permitted him to come and go and do as he pleased.

exact death dates for any of Isaac Hite's enslaved people.

From du Bellet's information, it is possible to summarize that he was "Indian," a loner, did not talk much, did not like to be around other people, introverted. White folks of this era attributed this to perceived stereotypes of Native Americans: "the silent brave out hunting." But Harry had not lived long enough in that culture to be thus trained. Just how much hunting, tracking, and warrior behavior did a three-year-old boy absorb? The Cherokee were

matriarchal; little Harry lived with his mother, and the enslaved had separate dwellings. Adoption into Cherokee families was the cultural exception. Black slaves remained Black slaves.⁶ Harry could have just as easily had a loving Cherokee father, as one who ignored, or did not acknowledge him. The Black people du Bellet interviewed attributed it to "conjuring," an Africanized concept in which someone had put him under an evil spell for aberrant behavior that might be "contagious." How might we look at Harry if he lived today?

1 Samuel Kercheval, *A History of the Valley of Virginia*, 3rd edition, W. N. Grabill, 1902 of the original 1833 edition, pp 182-4.

2 Louise Perquet du Bellet, *Some Prominent Virginia Families*, Vol IV, J.P. Bell Company 1907. p. 347.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 T. K. Cartmell, *Shenandoah Valley Pioneers and Their Descendants*, 1909 Heritage Press; pp. 255-6.

6 Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*. Harvard University Press, 2010, Chapter 7.

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HOW MIGHT MODERN MEDICAL SCIENCE BE HELPFUL?



It is neither possible to go backward in time with medical diagnoses nor good historical practice. It is also important to realize the entire enslaved experience was stressful, fearful, threatening, controlling, and inescapable. A local trauma-recovery practitioner, Mary Beth Williams, PhD. engaged with Belle Grove to tell Harry's story and wrote:

There is little information about the early years of Harry's life. His mother Abba was a young girl when he was conceived. Nothing is known about her pregnancy or his birth. Were there problems that led to his being withdrawn and distant? What were his early experiences among the Cherokee? What did he see? How was he treated by them? It is quite possible that Harry was an outcast or treated badly. In similar circumstances, children who have been born into and

experienced many negative experiences can develop numerous mental health problems. One of these is called Complex Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. This disorder is recognized in the professional community as impacting the actual core self of the victim and has life-long consequences. Among those consequences are dissociative abilities to "space out" and separate the self from circumstances around him or her.

The area in which Harry first lived is described as "hostile frontier land." Did he see warring tribes, torture of captives, or other atrocities? One can only guess that his early years were harsh. Abba either escaped from the Cherokee or was rescued by the Hite family, who were reclaiming their property. At that time, Harry was somewhere between two and three years of age. Harry was tolerated by those around him after his "reclaiming." Perhaps he also was autistic, or

had brain trauma from the circumstances of his birth. These are all possibilities. However, his behavior leads one to view him as less socialized, wanting to go off into nature and be alone. His mother's role as wet nurse, a valued role, seems to have given him an extra level of protection. The Hite family had mental illness in its history and, perhaps, was more understanding of this child's differences. Harry died at age 40 but, again, little is known of his teen or adult years. It does appear that he never fit in to any culture, either the Native or enslaved world.

Dr. Williams operates the Trauma Recovery and Education Counseling Center in Warrenton, Virginia and is author of *The PTSD Workbook: Simple, Effective Techniques for Overcoming Traumatic Stress Symptoms*. New Harbinger Press, 2016. More information at tinyurl.com/yckjamre.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

**Truelove, born
January 28, 1754**

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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