

# ISAAC

## BORN OCTOBER 6, 1795

October 2021



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

To learn about Isaac, we need to come forward from our focus in prior features, to the Belle Grove Plantation of 1826, when the Hite children had begun marrying and leaving. In 1826 Isaac, then age 30, is the subject of a family discussion on job assignments.

He was the fifth-born child, and the fourth of six sons born to Abba and Frank Thornton at Belle Grove Plantation in Frederick County, Virginia (both of whom were featured earlier this year).

Readers may recall that Isaac's mother Abba was brought out of captivity from the Cherokee Nation in Carolina by George Hite. As surviving legatee of his father's estate, he had legal authority to continue to hold her in slavery. He traded her and Frank to his cousin Isaac Hite Jr. of Belle Grove in 1790. For motivations unclear to us now, she named a son born in 1792, George, and the one born in 1795, Isaac. It was not commonplace for enslaved people to name their children for their enslavers, and it is unfair of us to step back into her complicated life and suggest reasons that make sense to us.

In the feature on Abba (August 2021), it was established that the close relationship she forged with the Hite family, as nursemaid to their children, seemed to have resulted in privileges not universally enjoyed. For example, none of the Thorntons' 12 children were sold

away from Belle Grove to other owners, either individually over time or in a large 1824 sale when 60 Hite slaves went on the auction block. Three were, however, given to nearby adult Hite children.

In an era when letters were the main method of communication, Isaac Hite Jr.'s second wife, Ann Hite, wrote prodigiously. Belle Grove is lucky to have access to a series written to her newly married eldest daughter, young Ann Hite Williams, but not young Ann's replies. The letters were filled with tidbits of family news: health, coming and goings, and expressions of affection. The bride appeared to be struggling to set up housekeeping and a household routine after occupying her new home in Woodstock in May 1826, following her February 9, 1826 marriage to attorney Phillip Williams Jr.

It is unclear if bride or groom brought enslaved servants into the new household. The Williams family was, at that time, launching their legal dynasty in Frederick and Shenandoah Counties. As town folk, they likely owned many fewer enslaved people than their rural counterparts, the Hites. We have no specific records, but it was likely both sets of elite parents contributed land, money, or enslaved help to the marriage. We don't know who gave what in this case. Young Ann does not appear to have had sufficient servants, free or enslaved, to keep up.

Young Ann receives a lot of advice from her mother, as evinced in letters written May 6-10, 1826. Mrs. Hite seems to be constantly supporting the newlyweds by loaning enslaved men and women from Belle Grove for a few days, a week, or longer, who are to perform specific tasks, such as laundry. Frank, by then the coachman, was constantly ferrying people to and fro. Mrs. Hite also passes along messages from her husband, who almost never writes his daughter directly.

In the May 6 letter, the Hites fear that Ann has not been provided with a manservant. Isaac Hite, though noting the inconvenience of losing a field hand before harvest, asks his wife to confirm their daughter needs one. In her May 10 letter, mother Ann Hite repeats her husband has realized the Williams may need a gardener and is willing to send them one of his enslaved men. As anyone who has gardened in Virginia knows, May is a demanding month with much to clear, plant, and tend.

The loan doesn't sound like a short term of days or weeks, but it is unclear if this is meant to be a long-term loan until they get established, or if it is a permanent transfer. There are no written records concerning the ownership of Isaac being legally transferred to the Williams.

In the May 10 letter, two specific candidates are described. Ann Hite

gives a very rare, and therefore valuable, look into the personalities of the two enslaved men the Hites are making available from whom the Williams may choose. One hint that the “position” is long term is that they offer the only two men “who have not wives.” With others loaned to the Williams, the Hites appeared to have no compunction about separating married couples for a few weeks.

One candidate, Daniel, is only 17, the son of Isaac’s sister Hannah. We know his fate (he will be the topic of a monthly feature in 2022) and a short stint in a Woodstock garden would not have altered that.

Regarding the other man, Mrs. Hite writes:

*Isaac too has worked in garden but has never been in the house, at any period in his life, except*

*for the last mentioned business.<sup>1</sup> Isaac would [,] I presume [,] be the most valuable at present he has however a proud spirit and might not at all times be very manageable . . . you and your husband must make your choice.<sup>2</sup>*

By a May 17 letter, the topic is dropped. The issue was resolved, but we do not how. Possibly Isaac was loaned for a while. In 1833, Ann Williams died. In 1834, Phillip Williams Jr. remarried and moved to Winchester. Perhaps, if Isaac was loaned, that terminated? Though the Hites and Williams remained close, with Mr. Williams serving as their legal counsel, property not vested in Ann Hite Williams would not transfer to her surviving husband or their two children.

<sup>1</sup> We do not have the letter that discusses this “business.”

<sup>2</sup> Hite Family Papers Volume II “The Private Papers of Nelly Conway Madison Hite & Ann Tunstall Maury Hite” Compiled and Edited by Jacob M. Blosser.

## DO WE KNOW ABOUT ISAAC’S FAMILY?



Why Isaac is unmarried at 30 is a mystery. Was he married and widowed? There seem to be no children binding him to Belle Grove at this point. It is a mistake to assume the ratios of males and females of like ages were always balanced in large enslaved communities. A look at Belle Grove over the decades, shows sometimes the choice for a marriage partner was a single person and they might not suit. Roughly half a dozen girls, born close to Isaac, were deeded away to the two eldest Hite children, and left Belle Grove about the age of 15. This drop in potential spouses for Isaac may have been the reason he was unmarried.

On September 15, 1834, a boy named Thornton was born at Belle Grove to one of two enslaved women named Lucy. The odds seem greatest that a male from the Thornton family is his father, and Isaac is the only possible person for that year. Both Lucys have Montpelier origins, where Thornton was a family name but we don’t know who named this baby.

In the 1837 death inventory of all enslaved people owned by Isaac Hite Jr., his namesake is not listed. There are no notations of the death of Isaac “Thornton” in Belle Grove records. In the 1850 Federal Slave census Phillip Williams Jr. is living in Frederick County/Winchester with ten enslaved men, women, and children, none the correct age to be Isaac. He just appears to slip out of sight.



## GETTING TO KNOW ISAAC

As noted earlier, it is unique to have any insights into enslaved persons’ personalities, what they thought, or how they made their way through life under the harsh realities of enslavement. Isaac had the rare fortune to grow up and live for decades among his complete nuclear family. Additionally, a dozen other enslaved babies were born within four years, so he had plenty of playmates. If he was deployed to Woodstock for any period of time, he was not cut off from visits and news of loved ones at Belle Grove. As noted, the traffic was constant.

Isaac, at 30 years of age, had managed to cultivate and maintain a sense of personal pride throughout decades of enslavement. It is an impressive achievement, and implies that he had refined the skill of not crossing the line to hostility or insubordination. While there were orchards, vegetable gardens, and fields of various grains, agrarian work was repetitive. So was animal care, tending flocks of sheep, herds of cows, or horses. A smart man knew the ins-and-outs of all these tasks after many years of work, and might have bridled if told the obvious by an overseer.

*This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise*

**NEXT MONTH WILL  
FEATURE UPDATES  
ON INDIVIDUALS  
HONORED THIS YEAR**

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](http://www.bellegrove.org/support/donate).

## Belle Grove Plantation

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