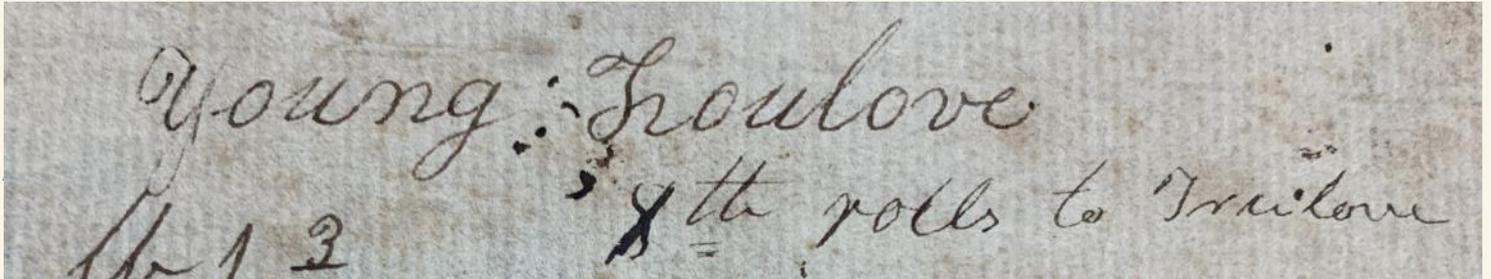


YOUNG TRUELOVE BORN November 16, 1783

October 2022



This month we honor “Young” Truelove, another person who had a single clue left in Hite business records, opening some insight into her personhood. Two Trueloves, born thirty years apart (1754) and (1783), lived at Belle Grove, after forced relocation from James Madison Sr.-owned lands when his daughter Nelly Madison Hite received her inheritance. Was the younger named in honor of the older by her mother Sarah because there was kinship? Or after a loved one separated on a different plantation? With duplicate names, often a nickname is applied to distinguish them, hence “Young Truelove.” As yet unconnected to descendants, she is known to have lived to at least age 54.

Belle Grove has an incomplete set of fiber processing records, which span 1819-1837. Some undated notes indicated Young Truelove received up to 12 pounds of wool on three occasions, most likely to spin into thread.¹ This glimpse opens a vast panorama of history. Inventory records tell us Hite kept the most prized sheep of the century, merinos, known for exceptionally fine fleece from which clothing for the elite was made.

Although its length was an asset in joining fibers for thread, its fineness gave the spinner less of a mass to grip. Women’s smaller hands did most of the spinning work, the wool passing through their fingers on the spindle. Dexterity was an asset. If a woman’s hand was disfigured by years of hard work in the fields, pulling nettles, hoeing out corn stalks, callused, scarred and rough, it could not spin merino wool, perhaps explaining why average farmers refused it. From this, we ask if perhaps Young Truelove had “soft

hands” because she labored at domestic rather than field tasks? Lanolin in wool softens hands, but cannot heal years of abuse.

In the early 1800s, production of textiles used for household and clothing relied on women’s skills; America lacked a textile manufacturing industry, and supplies from Europe were expensive and erratic. Cloth and garments were made at home from fibers grown or raised there. The rule of thumb was one sheep provided one person with their woolen clothing needs. Merino clothed the elite Hites; country sheep provided the rough wool for blankets and clothing for the enslaved workers each Christmas.

Wool underwent at least nine stages of processing from sheep to cloth, with the “wool year” running from shearing commencing June 1 to thread making October to February. Once off the animal, long days were required to immediately clean the fleece of oils, mud, manure, and brambles to prevent spoilage. It was stable when twice washed and dried. The 12 plus steps required to process wool into thread for Belle Grove’s use could begin in the off season, December to February.

Spinning, step eight, involved using spindles to transform a large pile or roll of carded wool into thread. This was pulled off the spindles into hanks or skeins, ready to weave into cloth on a loom by another worker. Spinning was skilled work, requiring patience, attentiveness, and a steady, experienced hand, so the thread would remain even and not break. It was a rare task able to be done sitting down, and while minding children. Estate records for a Mrs. Pugh imply a production of a pound a

day. So the note where Truelove received eight pounds would have been a week and a day’s work for her, likely done in her cabin, as shared textile work spaces were uncommon in this area at that time. Was the equipment her own or loaned from Belle Grove? Were the four spinning wheels in the Belle Grove 1837 inventory just centrally stored for general use? Did the Hite women and girls spin? It seems unlikely Ann Hite could have piled any more tasks onto her workload, but it’s an unknown.

While not definitely noted, the Hites almost certainly paid Young Truelove for this “extra” work. We know this because doing so was common practice throughout the South, and Truelove’s work is listed alongside records of free white women who would have been paid for their labor. Truelove, along with Betty and Nancy who processed eight pounds between them,² may have chosen to make money processing wool in January, because the long winter nights gave them extra time between “sundown to sunup” that they could use to make money for themselves and their families. Summer had the longest work days for everyone, inside and out, 14-16 hours.

Archaeological investigations at Belle Grove’s quartering site show that enslaved people bought necessities and small luxuries like medicine, tools, buttons, ceramic plates, and jewelry to make their lives slightly easier and more bearable.

¹ 1837 spinning records, *Isaac Hite Jr. commonplace Book*, 1785 and 1819-1899.. BG 84.1.94, (image above)

² *Ibid.*

MERINO: THE WORLD'S MOST VALUED SHEEP

Originating in the Atlas mountains of North Africa, flocks accompanied the Moorish invasion of Spain by the Berber people as early as the 7th century. The merino breed was further improved, tailored to the Mediterranean climate. The Royal Kingdoms of Spain and England earned vast wealth selling fine woolen luxury cloth to the elites of Europe—9/10^{ths} of Britain's total exports—and jealously guarded the sheep producing it with the death

penalty for taking one abroad.¹

Merino under hair is a fine, pure white fiber two to four inches long, and crimped. It processes into a thin, warm cloth that drapes well; it is not thick and chunky. A gift that keeps on giving, it never stops growing. Rams average 140 pounds, and have a ten-year active breeding lifespan.

¹ Rasmussen, Margaret Byrd Adams, "Waging War with Wool: Thomas Jefferson's Campaign for American Commercial Independence from England." *Material Culture*, Spring 2009, pp. 17 – 37.



Enslaved men and women assigned to sheep husbandry at Belle Grove likely noted Hite was mighty particular about his sheep, but unaware, and likely uncaring, of the merino flock's fancy pedigree, and the swashbuckling saga of how they got to Belle Grove. Certainly, this luxury wool never found its way to their clothing, nor its luscious meat to their table. Their rough and coarse wool probably came from a parallel flock of colonial country sheep.

THE PURLOINED SHEEP

Thomas Jefferson among them, forward-thinking Americans saw the advantage of improving upon the "very coarse, unsightly and unpleasant"¹ wool from colonial flocks, and developing a domestic-textile industry to remove dependence on Europe. Merino sheep were urgently sought, with a few dozen entering New England states before 1800, possibly on consular ships.

Willing to "wink" at accusations of smuggling "for an enterprise...solely on the behalf of agricultural gentlemen of distinguished character in Washington and its neighborhood," Jefferson and Madison formed a partnership to put these sheep in every county in Virginia.² In successive presidencies, both worked furtively with U.S. Consular agents in Tangiers, the Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, and Napoleonic France, the latter eager to poke England in the pocketbook. Many letters went back and forth, and some in the National Archives outline the 3,700-mile journey to Belle Grove:

The *Diana*, under Captain Lewis, left her home port of Alexandria in February, 1810, and returned May 4 with nine rams and four ewes, with bills of lading from the U.S. Consul in Lisbon, William Jarvis, to fill a "purchase order" from Jefferson and President Madison.³ Two pair went to Jefferson and Madison, with the rest auctioned at \$500 apiece (\$12,000 today⁴), Madison's overseer, George Gooch, went up to Alexandria for his and Jefferson's as well, returning on

June 6 with them and new lambs to Black Meadow near Gordonsville, the preferred Madison sheep hold. Jefferson's Joseph Daugherty fetched his. Later that year, the good ship *Citizen* brought Madison four more ewes from Jarvis on August 26; again, Gooch went to Alexandria to fetch them. Of Jarvis's October cargo of 58 merinos, two went to Madison and the rest to Boston, with the President buying four more ewes that year. If his brother William obtained the eight more he was tasked with, Madison had a decent-sized merino flock—and sheep must be in a flock to thrive.

Despite being tended by a human shepherd and French Briard shepherds who also herded cattle, turkeys, ducks, and chickens, Jefferson's sheep prospered less well than his imported Briards. Alas, many lambs were male. Jefferson's dream of seeding purebred sheep in every county faltered.

The extra ewes were a smart move by Madison, for by 1813 he had enough to sell, and is the obvious source of merino sheep to Isaac Hite Jr. If Hite bought or was gifted a purebred pair, he could build a stable flock within six years. Merino rams were documented to be able to "tup the ewes" for ten years if healthy; likely no one was eating the excellent, flavorful mutton from these sheep for the first decade. Hite may have had another advantage—the 1810 imports came with Portuguese export permits from the limestone-rich Tagus river area of Lisbon, which even today is quality

horse-raising country. Hite's flock, also pastured on limestone land, seems to have prospered for decades: 143 by 1837, outperforming Jefferson's flock. Apparently, he had sufficient to endow his eldest son's plantation in White Post. In 1825, the son wrote his uncle Madison about exchanging rams.⁵ We have no idea about Hite's dogs used to manage the sheep, though most colonial farmers used a short-tailed, rough-coated, medium-sized dog known as a "drover's dog."

The only other known merino in the Shenandoah Valley was the mixed-breed one Jefferson sent in 1812 to Judge Archibald Stuart in Staunton.⁶ By 1837, there were a million merinos in Vermont alone, but Isaac Hite and Young Truelove did their best with them in Virginia.

¹ Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX, 1783.

² Rasmussen, p. 19-20.

³ http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mjm.26_0089_0102

⁴ Inflation calculator <http://officialdata.org/us/>

⁵ <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0617>

⁶ Malone, Dumas. *The Sage of Monticello from Jefferson and His Time*, Volume 6, 1981, p. 79.

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise with proofreading by Craig Morris and assistance from Matt Greer.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR
Nancy born c. 1777 and her sons
Jordan born May 10, 1814 and
Nathan born June 24, 1815

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 P.O. Box 537, Middletown, VA 22645 or online at www.bellegrove.org/support/donate.

Belle Grove Plantation

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