

FRANK & BEN BORN AUGUST 17, 1786

September 2022

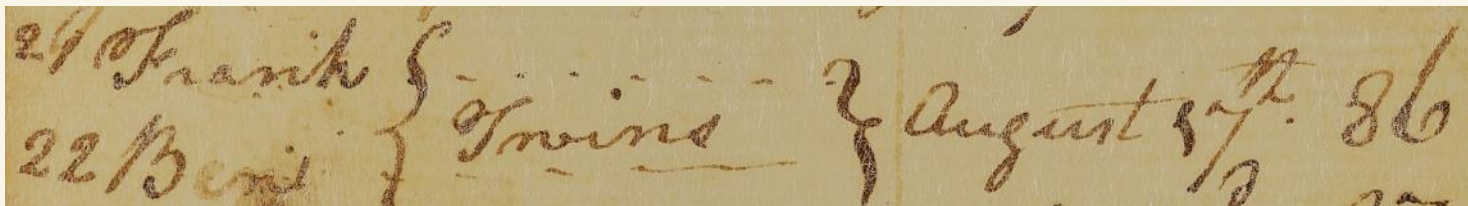


Image from Isaac Hite Jr.'s *Commonplace Book*, Virginia Museum of History and Culture (Mss5.5.H67375.1), pp. 19a

Ben and Frank were twin brothers who, even 50 years later, are in seeming good health and are recorded side-by-side in Isaac Hite Jr.'s estate inventory records of 1837. The first recording of the twins was at their birth in 1786. Hite had just begun his register, and they are

on the second page. In the column for mother's name, Hite recorded "twins," skipping the mother's name. Of course, the twins knew who they were, and the Hites knew their mother, but researchers had not. Just recently, while interpreting the last pages of the register, "Lizza"

was noticed. This connects them to Eliza, one of the earliest of enslaved women to be sent to Belle Grove from Montpelier in 1783, and who researchers thought bore no more children after her arrival (see February 2021 Feature).



CLUES IN NAMES

The naming of the twins provides some clues about Eliza's connection to the enslaved community at Montpelier, where enslavement began circa 1720. Researchers wondered if Eliza had no more children because her partner was unable to move to Belle Grove with her. But that she had a child named Frank, and that a man named Frank was also sent to Belle Grove, suggests he could have been a new partner for her, or her longtime one.

There are five "Bens" at Montpelier who proceed the one discussed here. Two use the last name of Taylor through to 1844. What significance does this have? Frances Taylor was wife to Ambrose Madison, founder of Montpelier, and likely brought enslaved people there as part of her marriage dowry in 1721. Their families may have self-identified under the last name of Taylor. At

Belle Grove, there exists not only a sixth Ben, but the name Taylor being used by Sarah, another enslaved woman from Montpelier, for her son born in 1807. This implies she and Eliza may be kin, out of the Taylor group enslaved at Montpelier.

If Frank is Eliza's spouse, we can be alert for the reuse of the name of his mother, Peg, and we find it. The reuse of family names, well documented in other features, opens new doors, and may allow us to connect two more descendants to Eliza's family tree: a daughter Mary, born 1790, and her daughter Peggy, named for her Montpelier grandmother. Peggy, in turn, has a boy named Frank, and this name reuse, links four generations together. Remember that enslaved families, denied the formal use of family names, repeated first names in their family trees.

THE SURPRISING BEN

We cannot trace progeny from either twin at this point, nor do we know much about Frank. But a quote from Ann Hite's letter to her daughter puts Ben at center stage:

On December 30, 1826, she writes:

"My Dear Ann,

Ben has just handed me your note and has afforded our fireside a good deal of amusement by his account of his consequence and smartness."

Ben has just completed a roundtrip holiday season errand to Woodstock, home of Ann Hite's eldest daughter's family. An earlier mention implies she is hurrying to finish her letter for him to take down. This anecdote is unusual—enslaved people were not normally invited in for fireside chats. And his conversations with the Hite family sound as if they had happened

Continued next page

before. Was “Ben” a white family friend? Read more about this theory in the side bar.

Other letters indicate that the family owned a private coach, and the coachman was Frank Thornton (see June 2021). So, what conveyance might Ben be driving to get to Woodstock? Isaac Hite owned at least four farm wagons, and in all probability, the most presentable one was sent into Winchester to pick up goods, or make deliveries of Belle Grove farm products, like lumber, hams, and maybe whiskey or cider to merchants. Its driver would need to be smart and trustworthy, able to interact with the white businessmen of the town, and also have the skills to manage a team of horses. Who better to send to Woodstock with the furniture sent down after the marriage, or holiday goodies and presents for the

Hite family there? Ben seems to have been that person.

The anecdotes describe an extroverted man who was a good raconteur. What types of things might Ben have told the family to amuse them so? What comes to mind for you before we suggest some? Perhaps he unpacked the presents and special foods from the wagon with a flourish, making the newlyweds feel merry and special? Perhaps he had stories to tell of family members white and Black, and how Christmas was celebrated? Maybe he brought gossip from Winchester from a recent trip there? Could he have made much of his bravery in navigating the thirty miles of bad roads to get to them in the winter? In a world where news traveled by word of mouth or letter—like the one Ann sent—visitors bringing news were welcome.

ANOTHER MONTPELIER FAMILY CONNECTION?

In Isaac Hite Jr.’s estate inventory, Frank is listed with the family name/last name of Jennings. An obvious connection might be again found at Montpelier, where Paul Jennings (served President James Madison as manservant and barber, at the White House and Montpelier. Paul Jennings wrote the first White House memoir about his time there. Paul was about 15 years younger than Frank;



perhaps they were cousins? How tempting might it have been to note one’s relationship to such a famous person? Does this image of Paul Jennings provide an idea of what Frank may have looked like?

In the 1850 Federal Slave Census for Ann Hite (by then Isaac’s widow), there is a 64-year-old “Mulatto” man, but only one. Six enslaved boys were born in 1786. Two have annotations in Isaac’s list that would eliminate them as being present at Belle Grove in 1850, leaving a 25% chance that this man could have either been Frank or Ben.

“MR. DARCY REGRETS”

Those acquainted with Jane Austen understand the formality of address in the early 1800s.

Ann Tunstall Maury was well educated, despite being brought up in relative poverty and, at a young age, losing her father after his ministry to yellow fever victims caused him to contract the disease. Both her grandparents and parents were ministers and school owners and educators. Ann grew to womanhood in the Tidewater, with its grand plantations and notable families like the Madisons and Taylors, attending social events where all the courtesies were routinely practiced.

Her series of letters that survive from the 1820s exchange news of family members and their movements and activities, using all the social formulas for the dozens of people mentioned. Adult males are called “Mr.” A man with a special skill was called “Doctor” or “Bishop.” To her daughter, Ann calls her own husband, “your father,” not “Isaac.” Her daughter’s husband is always, “Mr. Williams,” emphasizing his dominance of that household.

The only persons called by their first name are daughters under age 15, and sometimes her first-born son when he’d done something amiss. Clearly, as defined by their work assignments, enslaved people are known only by their first names. Based on this analysis, we are confident “Ben” is an enslaved person, and neither kin nor social acquaintance.

NEXT MONTH WE WILL HONOR

Young Truelove born 1783

This issue produced by Robin Young and Kristen Laise with proofreading by Craig Morris.

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

336 Belle Grove Road • P.O. Box 537 • Middletown • VA 22645

info@bellegrove.org • virtual.bellegrove.org • www.bellegrove.org • 540-869-2028