

The Northern Virginia Daily

Belle Grove's online exhibit tells of former slave who freed his family

By Josette Keelor The Northern Virginia Daily Feb 2, 2023 Updated Feb 3, 2023



Kristen Laise, executive director of Belle Grove Plantation, shows a pair of six exhibit panels inside the lower level of the manor house that highlight the research of the Jackson Family enslaved at Belle Grove. Emanuel "Manual" Jackson, whose name has been spelled various ways through historical documents, was a free African American who successfully freed three of his children, his daughter-in-law and his grandchild who had all been enslaved by the Hite Family at Belle Grove.

Rich Cooley/Daily

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In 1837, Emanuel Jackson, a free black man from Frederick County, purchased the freedom of his son from the Hite Family, the owners of Belle Grove Plantation in Middletown.

"He essentially worked until his dying day to free his family," said Kristen Laise, executive director of Belle Grove, now a nonprofit historic house museum.

The story of Jackson and his family was known to the staff at Belle Grove, but they began uncovering more detail in 2016 after learning of a digitized document in the "Free at Last: Slavery in Pittsburgh in the 18th and 19th Centuries" online exhibit created by the University of Pittsburgh Library.

The document was an 1837 bill of sale between the executors of Major Isaac Hite Jr. and Emanuel "Manual" Jackson for the \$800 purchase of Jackson's second youngest son, Emanuel, which amounts to \$27,400 in today's currency.

The discovery shows how powerful one document can be, said digital public historian Jess Pritchard-Ritter, who built Belle Grove's online platform through her company For the Love of History Consulting LLC.

Finding that document made them realize this was a much bigger story, she said.

Now Belle Grove is telling that story through its latest online exhibit, "The Jackson Family: A Story of Resilience & The Enduring Love of Family." The exhibit — which can be found at virtual.bellegrove.org — includes historical documents, maps and municipal records showing how the family grew and prospered. It details how Jackson, who lived in Pittsburgh at the time, purchased the freedom of several of his children and his grandchild from the Hites.

"We're hoping it may lead us to some possible descendants," Laise said.

Jackson had five sons and a daughter with Hannah Thornton.

Records kept by the Hites show that they also purchased Jackson's two youngest children, Frank and Betsy Ann. Two letters previously donated to the Stewart Bell Jr. Archives at Handley Regional Library outline arrangements for the purchase of Jackson's enslaved eldest son, Daniel, enslaved daughter-in-law, Matilda Gordon, and enslaved grandson, also named Emanuel.

Jackson's second eldest son, Adams, was sold, and his third eldest, Nace, died before he could be freed, the online exhibit says. Their mother was also noted as being sold.

Over the years, the Hites enslaved more than 270 people at Belle Grove, and very few obtained freedom.

Calling the effort "historical detective work," Pritchard-Ritter said the online exhibit has been an emotional journey.

"This story in particular was challenging because there was so much information," she said. "You can look at the same document over and over again and you find little things that stand out to you each time."

It would have been easy to overwhelm readers of the online exhibit with the abundance of details, so it took a lot of work to pare it down into a readable format, she said. And yet, despite all the information, there are also a lot of holes and dead ends.

For example, they still don't know where Adams Jackson and Hannah Thornton were sold.

"That's a big, big mystery," Laise said. "It's a real heartbreak on many levels, but one of the heartbreaks is that's where our paper trail ends. ... To meet a descendant who may want to know all that deep history would be exciting."

They also don't know when or how Manuel Jackson obtained his freedom, she said.

"There is one document that intrigues us because it does make sense that it could be him, but without a last name in the document, we don't know for sure," she said.

The document is posted at <https://virtual.bellegrove.org/deed-of-emancipation>.

Researchers working with Belle Grove plan to search for additional local records to see if they can confirm this was Jackson, she said.

To help with the exhibit, Belle Grove hired genealogist Amy Arner of Arner Research in Pittsburgh to learn more about the Hite family's life in Pennsylvania. Arner confirmed many of the Belle Grove researchers' findings and located a variety of records about the family's businesses, real estate holdings, military service and subsequent generations.

The exhibit also includes suggested activities for students of all ages and encourages teachers and parents to use the exhibit to teach about that era in history and how to do genealogy and historical research.

Virtual Belle Grove launched in 2021 to expand Belle Grove's educational reach.

Its other three online exhibits offer a look into the lives of Ann Hite, the second wife of Belle Grove's owner Isaac Hite Jr.; Mary Briscoe Baldwin, the Hites' granddaughter who had a pioneering career as a missionary and teacher; and Lucy Walker and Rebecca Cooley Gordon, two women who witnessed the Battle of Cedar Creek from Belle Grove.

Additionally, the website hosts links to "Honoring the Enslaved Community at Belle Grove," a monthly newsletter that features individuals and families enslaved by the Hites.

The latest exhibit has been an extraordinarily difficult project, said Pritchard-Ritter.

One of her goals has been "to share [details] as best we can with the caveat that it's the best we can," she said. "It's emotional and educational and I think that's what makes this story so cool and powerful."

It's been especially exciting to learn how successful Manual Jackson had been in freeing his family.

"There was a lot of heaviness in the beginning of their story," she said. "[But] they all landed in Pittsburgh and they were wildly successful..."

"Hopefully folks will want to know about it and will continue to share their research," she said. "From here on out, we're hoping to add other generations and share their stories as much as we can."

Belle Grove Plantation, a National Trust for Historic Preservation site that partners with Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park, is closed for the winter but will reopen for daily tours on March 18.

For more information, go to bellegrove.org.

Contact Josette Keelor at jkeelor@nvdaily.com

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