

21 grave shafts discovered at First Baptist Church archaeology site in Colonial Williamsburg

By ABIGAIL ADCOX

VIRGINIA GAZETTE |

JUL 16, 2021 AT 11:07 AM



Outlined in red are the 21 rectangular grave shafts that Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists have identified at the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg archeology site. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Colonial Williamsburg had a community meeting Thursday to announce they have found 21 grave shafts at the site of the [Historic First Baptist Church](#)

of Williamsburg, one of America's oldest churches founded by free and enslaved Blacks.

Jack Gary, director of archaeology for Colonial Williamsburg, reported that his team has now identified 21 grave shafts and two other possible ones in the west end of the Nassau Street site. The Nassau Street site is the first physical location of First Baptist Church.

This could indicate that there are as many as 23 grave shafts on the property, but Gary cautioned that they are still expanding the area to look for more grave shafts.

Based on the layers of soil around the grave shafts, Gary said they can determine they predate the 20th century.

Archaeologists first discovered evidence of the burials when they excavated the foundation of the First Baptist Church building's 1953 annex, an addition to the church building that was never completed.

In February, archaeologists uncovered some of those burial remains on the site, but historical records show that a woman identified as Sister Epps, voiced that her grandfather was buried in the area as they were preparing to break ground on the 1953 annex.

The grave shafts that they found are rectangular burial structures that could indicate where a hole for a person's remains were dug and then filled in after the remains were placed. This leaves a type of stain on the soil that Gary and his team have identified.



Overview of the site that Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists are working on to locate grave shafts, which could indicate where human remains have been buried at the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg archeology site. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

The human remains, if searched for and found, would be deeper below the surface. Gary said that the human remains, if there are any, could be as close as a few centimeters or further below the surface where they are now.

“We want to make sure we’re not exposing the remains for a whole host of reasons. ... We stopped as soon as we see the top, so I can’t tell you how deep they are,” said Gary.

The question now is how does the First Baptist Church community want to proceed.



Katie Wagner, left, and DéShondra Dandridge work to excavate at the site of where the historic First Baptist Church structures were located on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Jan. 21, 2021. Jonathon Gruenke/Staff file (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation that is working to preserve and uncover the history of First Baptist Church, said during the meeting that the descendent community is in agreement they want archaeologists to continue expanding the site, while the descendants decide what to do further about the burial sites.

One audience member spoke of creating a space where the greater Williamsburg descendant community could be part of the conversation, since several churches grew out of First Baptist Church, with the scientists and archaeologists part of the project.

Other findings from Thursday's presentation indicated they are now looking at the soil around the [old foundation they found intact on the site](#) to

determine how old the structure is and if it is in fact part of the first church building from 1818. Gary said they are optimistic that they may know in the next couple of months.

In the process of searching for the burial sites, they have **previously uncovered a number of bone fragments**, only four of which have been identified as human.

The four bone fragments that have been identified are teeth and include one third molar and one upper molar. A full analysis of the teeth has not been done.

Gary's team has been working with Michael Blakey, National Endowment for the Humanities professor at William & Mary, and the director of W&M's Institute for Historical Biology on the **protocols for possible remains found at the site**. The bone fragments found, for example, have been sent to the Institute for Historical Biology.



Dr. Michael Blakey, National Endowment for the Humanities professor at the College of William & Mary and director of the university's Institute for Historical Biology, shows a tooth fragment to Liz Montgomery, chairwoman of the history ministry at the First Baptist Church, and Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation in February. Staff file (Virginia Gazette)

“We have not conducted any research on, for example, pathology in any of the skeletal elements. Our job is to identify with Colonial Williamsburg whether they are human remains or not,” said Blakey at the meeting.

“We are now in the point in the process of publicly engaged archaeology, in assessing with the descendant community what research questions might be of sufficient value to them to allow Jack Gary and his team to continue to excavate.”

The [project has been conducted by Colonial Williamsburg](#) archaeologists under the guidance of First Baptist Church. Their goal is to uncover the historic church structures, including the original Meeting House from 1818 and the brick church from 1856. Currently, Colonial Williamsburg is six months into the expected 18 month project as part of [phase 2](#). The project first broke ground in September 2020.

It still is not known, though, if or how many burial remains are on the site.

Gary said that they will search horizontally as they continue to find evidence of grave shafts. He expects that most of the burial sites will be within the boundary of the church, but it's possible some could be found past.

Based on how the grave shafts are laid out, Gary said that previous suspicions that some of the burial sites could be of Civil War soldiers is now less likely.

“You can see that these are in rows, but they’re not in pretty regular rows, and normally for a battle or a mass casualty event things are very orderly, because you can see where everybody is going,” said Gary.

What they found are grave shafts placed in multiple directions and varying sizes. Gary said that this indicates they were buried over a period of time and several of the shafts’ sizes suggest they were for a child.

What’s next

The decision on whether or not to dig farther down in the grave shafts in search of human remains is in the hands of the church.

Blakey indicated that moving forward there will be “informed consent” between Colonial Williamsburg and the church community, so that the church can be educated on the findings and their options on how they can proceed.

Colonial Williamsburg has made an agreement with First Baptist Church and the descendant community that the project will be guided by them, so any burial sites found can be protected and memorialized properly.

“The task that I have right now is getting the descendant community on board, in line, to have their own voice. ... We really do need to put our arms around the community to get them engaged and get them to the table,” said Harshaw. According to Colonial Williamsburg’s website, this archaeology project will guide how the site is interpreted, commemorated and recreated for the broader community to educate them on the church and its history.

Abigail Adcox, abigail.adcox@virginiamedia.com, 757-264-8149