

# Archaeologists in Colonial Williamsburg uncover foundations of historic First Baptist Church, one of America's oldest churches founded by free and enslaved Blacks

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Archeologists excavate area of the historic First Baptist Church structures

DéShondra Dandridge, an archaeological field technician, works to excavate at the site of where the historic First Baptist Church structures were located on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Thursday morning October 1, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

It was a hot and sunny fall afternoon Monday when Connie Matthews Harshaw visited the Colonial Williamsburg archaeology site. Harshaw had already been to the site, near the intersection of Nassau and Francis streets, about 10 or 15 times, she said. But this visit had notable significance for her as president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, whose goal is to preserve and uncover the history of Williamsburg's First Baptist Church.

The Nassau Street site is the first physical location of **First Baptist Church**, one of America's oldest churches **founded by free and enslaved Blacks**. The week of Sept. 21, Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists uncovered foundations of some of the original church structures that date back to the 19th century — and they're in good condition, too.

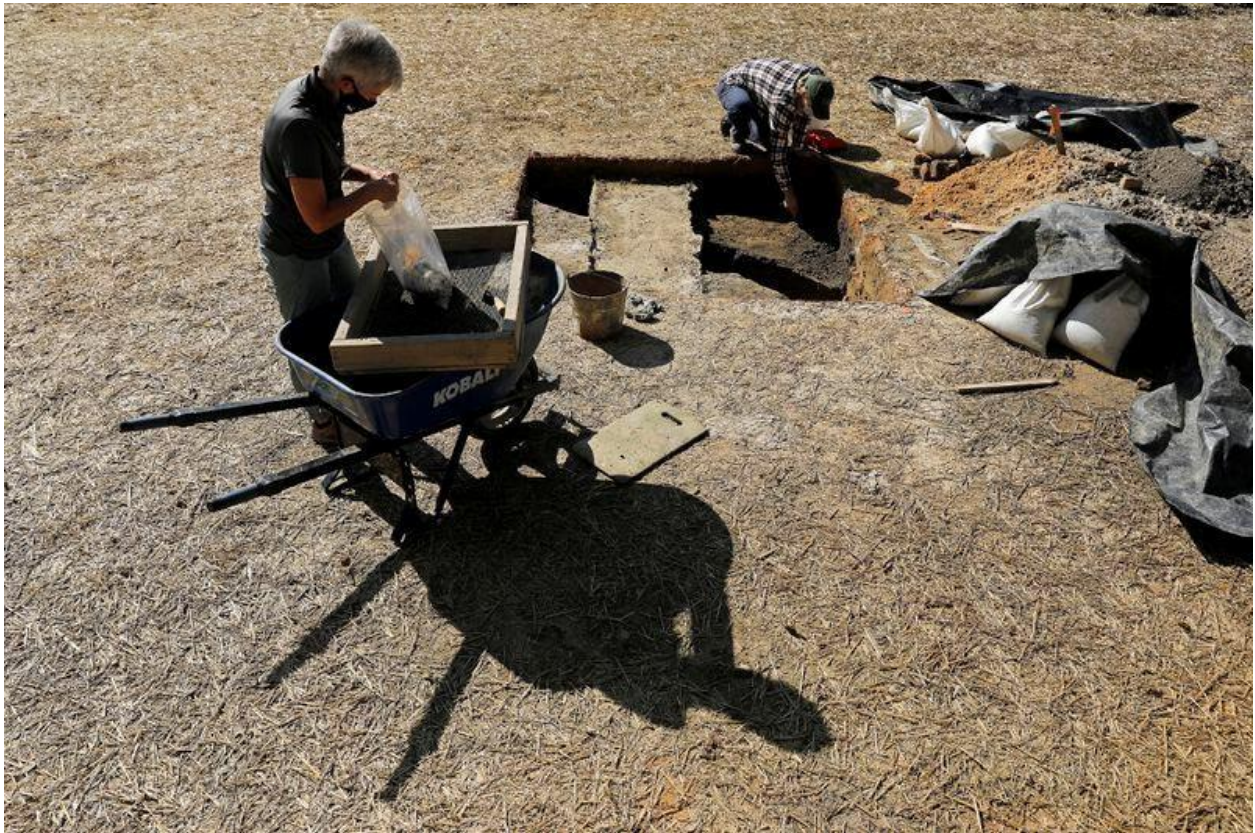
“It is emotional to know that for so many years it was covered up, and now that it's being uncovered, and it's intact, that's pretty amazing,” Harshaw said at the site Monday.



The foundation of the original First Baptist Church structure is seen as archeologists continue work to excavate at the site of where the historic First Baptist Church structures were located on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Thursday morning October 1, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)



Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg’s director of archaeology, said that they uncovered the foundations of the 1856 church building in one of the excavated holes in the South Nassau Street lot. They also found a smaller brick foundation for a building that actually predates [the 1856 church](#), as well as an intact posthole from what appears to be the late 1700s, Gary said Monday. “What’s exciting about that is that there’s intact stuff out here that hasn’t been completely disturbed by other activity,” Gary said of the well-preserved state of the findings. “That means we’ll be able to get new information with more excavation out of this lot.”



Archeologist Meredith Poole, left, and Erin Schwartz, fellow and Ph.D. candidate at William & Mary, work to excavate at the site of where the historic First Baptist Church structures were located on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Thursday morning October 1, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

This archaeology project is being conducted by Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists and under the guidance of First Baptist Church, [with the goal of uncovering historic church structures at the site](#), including the original Meeting House from 1818 and the brick church from 1856.

Gary said in an email Thursday that they are not able to confirm as of yet what the relationship is between the smaller brick foundation that was uncovered, and the 1818 Meeting House.

“It is possible they are connected, but more extensive excavation will be needed to make that determination,” he said in the email.

The project is being assisted by the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, the College of William & Mary, local museums and churches, and other community partners. Students and scholars from William & Mary are assisting Colonial Williamsburg at the dig site, and through church and foundation records to explore First Baptist’s history.

Archaeologists from the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation with First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg **conducted a groundpenetrating radar analysis on the site in May**, which showed evidence of “historically significant archaeological findings.”

The site on Nassau Street was first explored by Colonial Williamsburg in 1957 to determine the existence of any 18<sup>th</sup>-century structures by digging trenches to look for brick foundations. Notes and maps from that 1957 excavation have helped Gary and his team relocate the foundations in this current excavation.

“By geo-referencing these maps onto the current landscape we were able to place our excavation units in the spots that were of most interest to us, particularly the areas where the earliest foundations were located,” Gary said in the email. “Our current units have now come down exactly where we wanted them to and are uncovering the things we were targeting.”

The **first phase of excavation began Sept. 8** and has been fully funded through donor support. Gary said they’re a little more than halfway done with the first phase of the project as of Monday, which is expected to be completed around the end of October or early November, depending on weather. Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists are working five days a week at the Nassau Street site, as Gary and his **staff have been able to work continuously during the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing safety and cleaning protocols**. Gary explained that people are able to separate into different



units and stay 6-feet apart at the outdoor site. They also have masks for when they work closer in closer proximity, and equipment is regularly cleaned with ethanol spray.

There are four larger excavation units that have been dug out of the lot, along with smaller ones that help determine a baseline of activity, Gary said. They will review all of the information they've collected once the work is finished, refer to maps and notes in Colonial Williamsburg's database, and get artifacts into the lab to be washed, identified and cataloged.

These artifacts range from ceramics and bottle glass to architectural materials including bricks and nails, and the archaeologists are able to use these different artifacts to establish a date range for different features at the site, Gary said.



Colonial Williamsburg archaeological field technician Victoria Gum holds pieces of ceramic found at the dig site of the first permanent location of Williamsburg's historic First Baptist Church on South Nassau Street. (Virginia Gazette)

Colonial Williamsburg archaeological field technician Victoria Gum described some of the different types of ceramic pieces found around the intact posthole they uncovered, one of which is creamware that started being produced in England in the early 1760s, and another being pearlware, which became more prominent around 1780.

“One of the ways we’ll figure out how old the posthole is is by looking at the ceramics and the other artifacts,” Gum said.

Gary said the artifacts also help to tell the story of what else happened at the church site centuries ago.

“They’re worshipping in the church, but are there other things that are happening here? Do we see certain types of concentrations of certain types of artifacts that may suggest that events are happening on the site,” Gary asked. “I don’t have answers to those questions yet, but the artifacts can help tell us that. By looking at where do we find them (and) what kind of quantities we find them in, we can start to get some information about that.”

Gary and his team will make their initial interpretations of these findings and recommendations for work in latter phases, as they continue to collaborate with Harshaw and First Baptist Church.

The church has explained to Colonial Williamsburg how they want artifacts to be preserved and displayed, and how any burial sites should be protected and memorialized, if discovered. They also want to re-build or identify where the old church buildings stood and create interpretive programs on the site.





Colonial Williamsburg Director of Archaeology Jack Gary, far right, shows Let Freedom Ring Foundation President Connie Matthews Harshaw, right, one of the excavation units on Monday at the site of the first, permanent location for Williamsburg's historic First Baptist Church on South Nassau Street. (Virginia Gazette)

“Our institutions' histories are intertwined along with the community's,” Colonial Williamsburg president and CEO Cliff Fleet said in an email Thursday about the partnership between Colonial Williamsburg and the church. “First Baptist Church's story, however, **is significant not only to our community but to the history of the nation**. Colonial Williamsburg was established to uncover and share that history, and we are committed to sharing the full story. So this partnership and project are important, not just locally but to the entire country, especially now.” Harshaw said that the church's partnership has “strengthened” since she first discussed the archaeology project with Fleet in the spring.

“We want to make sure that not only do we find the artifacts, but that we also interpret and tell the story the right way, so that partnership is key,” Harshaw said.