

Archaeologists proceed with second phase of Colonial Williamsburg's excavation of historic First Baptist Church site

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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 Thursday morning January 21, 2021. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

DéShondra Dandridge carefully worked to remove clay with her shovel and trowel from the South Nassau Street lot in the Thursday morning cold.

The Colonial Williamsburg field technician wore a hoodie, gloves and face mask to the scene where the second phase of archaeology continues at the historic site in Colonial Williamsburg.

“We’re kind of removing the different layers so we can expose more of the brick pathway that’s here,” Dandridge said, pointing to uncovered bricks inside a trench archaeologists dug into the ground.

Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists began Phase 2 of the First Baptist Church archaeology project on South Nassau Street Jan. 4, according to Colonial Williamsburg Director of Archaeology Jack Gary. The site is the first physical location of one of America’s oldest churches **founded by free and enslaved Blacks.**

The project aims to help tell the story of the church and the people who worshiped at the South Nassau Street site. The first phase of the project began **in September** and was completed **in November**, while the second phase is expected to take about 18 months.

The team arranged bricks on the site this month to create an outline of where the 1856 First Baptist Church building once stood. The bricks outline sections of the structure, from the east end of the building where the front door faced South Nassau Street, to the half-octagon-shaped 1890s addition on the west end.

“It starts to give folks a sense of where exactly the building was,” Gary said. Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation that is working to preserve and uncover the history of Williamsburg’s First Baptist Church, said seeing the brick outline is different than looking at maps and old photographs of the church.

Harshaw described photos from the South Nassau Street church that date back to the 1940s, showing ushers in the back of the church and a baby on the first pew. Now, she and others can see where these spots were in the open space of the lot.

“It gives people a sense of space, especially those members of the descendant community who were children at that time,” Harshaw said. “They can actually feel what it’s like, and it’s pretty emotional for them.”



Victoria Gum, 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 January 21, 2021. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Gathering input

The team is working on a few immediate priorities early on in this second phase and according to the wishes of the First Baptist Church Nassau Street descendants. This group consists of people who had worshiped at the historic church site, as well as those whose parents and grandparents once worshiped at the church.

The first priority archaeologists have for this second phase is determining how many individuals may be buried at the west end of the South Nassau Street lot, as well as identifying any human remains they may uncover.

“During the first phase of excavation we discovered there was at least one, most likely two burials, and we needed to understand — right away, from the beginning — how many people are buried there,” Gary said. “So we’ve expanded our excavation in order to see how many individuals are there, and that’s really at the guidance of the congregation and our steering committee.”

Gary has established protocols for any possible remains at the site with Michael Blakey, National Endowment for the Humanities professor at the College of William & Mary, and the director of university’s Institute for Historical Biology.

Gary said they will dig deeper into the west end of the dig site, but will not go so deep as to find human remains. He emphasized that would only be done after further guidance from the First Baptist community.

“We can see the outlines of the graves long before we get down to actual human remains, so that’s the first step, is just getting to that level, where we can see how many people are there,” Gary said. “And then once we get guidance from the church, and from the descendants and our steering committee, then we may proceed to go down to those remains. But we will only do that if we’ve got their consent, and we have research questions that we’re going to be asking of those remains once we get down there.

“We don’t want to expose them just to expose them — there’s no reason to do that,” he continued. “We have to have really solid research questions, and a way to answer those research questions, before we expose those remains.”

Harshaw said it’s important to the descendant community that the people who are buried at the South Nassau Street site are memorialized properly, and they also wish to find any possible connections between the group and those who are interred at the site. She said the descendant community has agreed to submit samples of their DNA to help with the identification process, if that’s possible.



Kyle Brubaker, an archaeological field technician, excavates at the site of where the historic First Baptist Church structures were located on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Thursday morning January 21, 2021. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Searching for a meeting house

The second priority for the archaeologists is to keep searching for evidence of the church's original, permanent, pre-1818 structure.

Tax records indicate the congregation was worshipping on the South Nassau Street site in a building referred to as the Baptist Meeting House by 1818, according to a Colonial Williamsburg news release on Jan. 14. This meeting house was destroyed by a tornado in 1834, and then in 1856 the African Baptist Church, as the church was known before the Civil War, dedicated a new brick church on the site of the earlier building. The congregation was later renamed First Baptist Church in 1863.

Archaeologists uncovered the foundations of the 1856 church building in one of the excavated holes in the South Nassau Street lot during the first phase of

excavation, in which they also also found a smaller brick foundation for a building that predates the 1856 church.

Gary said they don't yet know whether the smaller brick foundation is part of the 1818 Meeting House, or if it's part of a building that dates back even further than the meeting house. He hopes continuing excavation work will help answer this question.

"We know we have an early building here, (and) we're looking for an early building, so we're targeting that so we can determine if it is the first church building. If we determine that it isn't, then we've got other areas on the lot that we need to start looking (into) to be able to find that first church building," Gary said.

Archaeologists will continue to excavate where this earlier building was located and narrow down the years in which this building was used by dating artifacts that they uncover there.

"There are certain types of artifacts that, based on their style and their form — usually this is ceramics that we're talking about — they're great for giving a date," Gary said. "By looking at decoration styles and forms on certain ceramics, we can get down to date ranges that are within 10-15 years. So that's what we're looking for."



Kyle Brubaker, an archaeological field technician, looks through clay and gravel while a team works to excavate the site of where the historic First Baptist Church structures were located on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Thursday morning January 21, 2021. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Telling the whole story

The First Baptist Church project continues to receive support as archaeologists continue their work.

According to the Jan. 14 news release, Colonial Williamsburg has received nearly \$3 million in philanthropic support, including a \$2.5 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to aid in the “research and interpretation” of the South Nassau Street site. Lilly Endowment Inc. is an Indianapolis-based, private philanthropic foundation, and Colonial Williamsburg is one of 18 organizations nationwide receiving grants through the Lilly Endowment Inc. Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative, according to the release.

[In the Dec. 10, 2020, State of the City address](#), Williamsburg Mayor

Douglas Pons said that staff will “pursue the development of an [African American heritage trail](#) that features prominent locations and monuments to Williamsburg’s past.”

“We are always seeking opportunities to more inclusively display Williamsburg’s rich history,” Pons said in the Colonial Williamsburg news release. “Now that the City Council have set forth the goal to create an African American Heritage Trail downtown, city staff will begin planning for this project, which aims to better reflect the story of our city. The First Baptist Church is certainly a significant part of that story.”

Joe Straw, senior public relations manager at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, said in an email Thursday, “Colonial Williamsburg enthusiastically supports the City of Williamsburg’s proposal to establish an African American Heritage Trail and looks forward to working in ongoing partnership with the city, First Baptist Church, its descendant community and other community partners in this important effort.”

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