

Archaeologists in Colonial Williamsburg uncover more findings at First Baptist Church site as Phase 1 of the dig ends

By ALEX PERRY

VIRGINIA GAZETTE | NOV 16, 2020 AT 5:54 PM



Archaeological field technician Victoria Gum shovels dirt into a wheel barrow while working to excavate near the intersection of Francis Street and South Nassau Street on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Tuesday morning November 10, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

The first phase of excavation has ended for a Colonial Williamsburg archaeology project aiming to help tell the story of Williamsburg's First Baptist Church, one of America's oldest churches **founded by free and enslaved Blacks**.

Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology, said his team recently uncovered the brick foundations of more historic structures within

the South Nassau Street lot that held the first physical location of **First Baptist Church**, including what Gary referred to as the building's 1953 annex, an addition to the church building that was never completed.

Last week, archaeologists also found what Gary called “the 1893 addition” to the 1856 First Baptist Church building. Gary explained that the space was where the altar and pulpit were placed.

The site on Nassau Street was first explored by Colonial Williamsburg in 1957 to determine the existence of any 18th-century structures by digging trenches to look for brick foundations, and notes and maps from that excavation have assisted Gary and his team in this current investigation.

The team had seen the 1893 addition in their records, but this week they were able to see the old brick, proof of the space.

“It’s pretty powerful to be able to stand where the pulpit was, (and) where the altar was,” Gary said at the South Nassau Street dig site last week.



DéShondra Dandridge, an archaeological field technician, works to excavate near the intersection of Francis Street and South Nassau Street on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Tuesday morning November 10, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

The team has also found an interesting feature in the ground on the other side of the lot that’s closer to Francis Street. This feature is evidence of a pit that,

according to Gary, is not associated with the church, and dates back to the early 1700s.

Gary said that looking at this portion of the South Nassau Street lot was part of their work on the First Baptist Church project because they wanted to see if there were any traces of church parishioner activity outside the portion of the lot that was owned by the church.

“We knew very little about the area just south of where the church stood and wanted to see if there was any evidence of church activities happening on this part of the property,” Gary said in an email Thursday. “The answer to that question is still unclear, however we did find evidence of the earlier prechurch occupation of the property.”

The early 1700s feature that archaeologists uncovered actually may be connected to John Custis IV, one of the wealthiest men in Virginia in the early 18th century. [Colonial Williamsburg is conducting a multiyear excavation on Custis Square](#), the 4-acre property located at the corner of Francis and Nassau streets, right across the street from the First Baptist Church dig site.

The South Nassau Street property was purchased by Custis in 1718, Gary said, and historical records refer to a house already being on the property when Custis made his purchase.

“It is possible the feature is connected with the property’s first documented owner, who was John Tullitt, a bricklayer who was contracted to rebuild the Wren building after it burned in 1705,” Gary said. “He conveyed the land to William Blaikley in 1716 and John Custis IV bought it in 1718 and held on to it until his death in 1749. The house that was on it when Custis bought it could have been Tullitt’s.”

Findings like this help paint a clearer picture of the different ways this South Nassau Street lot has been occupied and used across the centuries.

“It’s kind of amazing how much can happen in a half acre over 300 years, but we’re starting to see all the different things that are happening here,” Gary said.

Active excavation work on the First Baptist Church portion of the South Nassau Street lot has been halted, as Gary and his team prepare for the project's second phase, which will be a year-and-a-half long and is expected to begin in January.

They're now washing, identifying and cataloging thousands of artifacts that were collected in the first phase of the excavation, **which began Sept. 8.** Many of these are pieces of ceramic, glass and other materials, as well as singular artifacts that help tell the story of the site.

Gary said a **good example of a singular artifact from the First Baptist Church site is a 19th-century ink bottle.** This is a typical find around the Williamsburg area, but in the context of the historic church site it has specific implications. Perhaps it was used to write the minutes of church meetings, or record the deaths, births and baptisms in the church community, he said. "We have to take a look at the rest of the artifacts in more detail, and kind of look at them as assemblages, because we've got so many fragments, so what do the fragments tell us about it," Gary said. "So we're not there yet, but there are couple of singular artifacts that do start to tell the story, and the ink bottle is a good one."



Archaeological field technicians DéShondra Dandridge, left, and Victoria Gum, right, work to excavate near the intersection of Francis Street and South Nassau Street on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Tuesday morning November 10, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists are reviewing data from the first phase of the project, including the different layers of soil they've studied on the site. All this information will be put into a preliminary report on the first phase, which will then become the research design document for the project's second phase.

"We'll say here's what we learned in phase one, here's the questions we want to answer with phase two. That's what we're working on right now. It's kind of the behind the scenes part of the project," Gary said.

The team is also in "constant communication" with the First Baptist Church community about their progress, Gary said, and the congregation has visited the site during two different open houses that have been held for the public since the project began.

The church also formed the First Baptist Church Nassau Street Descendants earlier this year, and these individuals have also been active participants in the process.

"They're starting to form questions about how they want to see the project proceed, and what other questions they would like to answer with the next phase of excavation, so we're working with that group as well," Gary said. The First Baptist Church Nassau Street Descendants consists of people who had worshipped at the historic church site on South Nassau Street, as well as others whose parents and grandparents once worshipped at the church, according to 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.

There are 14 members who are actively part of this group as of Nov. 12, the oldest being 104-year-old Ethel Bowman, and it's growing, Harshaw said. She said they are "aggressive working" to identify the voices of the First Baptist Church descendant community that need to be heard.

"We realized quickly, once the project started, that one of the most powerful voices we needed to hear from was the descendant community," Harshaw said in an interview Thursday.

Harshaw said the First Baptist Church community is very excited about the progress that's been made in the archaeology project thus far. It's also both "compelling" and "emotionally overwhelming" for the First Baptist Church Nassau Street Descendants group members whose stories will finally be told. "They're interested in finding their past and telling their story," Harshaw said. "They're interested in the artifacts that are being found, (and are) looking to the archaeologists to tell the story with them, (and) to help them interpret whatever it is they find."

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