

# Archaeology project explores site of First Baptist Church's buildings dating back to the 19th century

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VIRGINIA GAZETTE | AUG 25, 2020 AT 5:42 PM



Pictured, from left, Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation Director of Archeology David Givens, Field Supervisor Bob Chartrand and Senior Staff Archeologist Sean Romo are shown near the first permanent location of Williamsburg's historic First Baptist Church on South Nassau Street. This year a partnership led by First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg has resumed archeological investigation of the site, which last took place in 1957.

Courtesy of Let Freedom Ring Foundation (HANDOUT)

The site of one of America's oldest churches founded by free and enslaved Blacks may soon be uncovered in Colonial Williamsburg's latest archaeology project.

The excavation will take place near the intersection of Nassau and Francis streets with hopes to unearth the early structure used by members of the Historic First Baptist Church dating back as late as the 19th century. The excavation will start in early September and the first phase is expected to last seven weeks. The first phase has been fully funded through donor support.

Later phases will be developed based on the initial findings.

First Baptist Church was organized in 1776, the year America gained its independence, by enslaved and free Blacks in secret. Prior to the 1800s, members of the church met in secret at Green Spring Plantation and then Raccoon Chase, a rural area outside of Williamsburg.

Jesse Cole, a white man, moved by the congregation's hymns and prayer, offered them a building on what is now Nassau Street in the Historic Area.

Dating back to 1818, a structure on the property was referred to as the Baptist Meeting House and could have existed as early as the late 18th century.



The second permanent First Baptist Church structure on South Nassau Street in Williamsburg was dedicated in 1856. Colonial Williamsburg purchased the site in 1954. Two years later, First Baptist Church relocated to its current location at 727 Scotland Street. In 1957 Colonial Williamsburg demolished the 19th-century structure and conducted an archaeological investigation of the site, uncovering evidence of structures dating to the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This year a partnership led by First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg has resumed archaeological investigation of the site, which last took place in 1957. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg (HANDOUT)

A tornado in 1834 destroyed the Meeting House. A new brick church was built on the site in 1856 for the African Baptist Church, as it was known before the Civil War. In 1863, it was renamed First Baptist Church and has remained since. In 1956, Colonial Williamsburg acquired the land on South Nassau Street and tore down the 19th-century brick building.

The current archaeology project will be conducted by Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists, under the guidance of First Baptist Church, in hopes of uncovering the previous church structures, including the original Meeting House from 1818 and the brick church from 1856.

There will be community involvement and collaboration with the Let Freedom Ring Foundation as well as William & Mary, local museums, local churches and others.

Students and scholars from Colonial Williamsburg will be assisting Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists during the dig and through searching church and foundation records to explore the full history of the church.

The university will have two foundation-funded fellowships for graduate students enrolled in their anthropology program. There will also be opportunities for undergraduates. University faculty will also be part of the project, lending their expertise.

“The early African American’s pick and control of their own story and lives is important. And I think the story of First Baptist Church founded in 1776 needs to be told and to help solidify and dignify that even at the founding of this nation, we as a people we have been here, we have been apart of it,” said Pastor Reginald Davis.





Pictured is the 1957 archaeological excavation at the site of First Baptist Church's original permanent structure on South Nassau Street. This year a partnership led by First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg has resumed archaeological investigation of the site. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg (Beamish / HANDOUT)

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. Many of the men on the original archaeology project were lack men and Colonial Williamsburg plans to identify their contributions and work. Notes and maps from the 1957 excavation have been digitized into Colonial Williamsburg's archaeological mapping database and helped determine some of the initial steps.

Efforts for the current project really accelerated when Connie Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, spoke with Cliff Fleet, CEO of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, in the spring.

In May, archaeologists from the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation with First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg conducted a groundpenetrating radar analysis on the site. The data from that analysis showed evidence of “historically significant archaeological findings.”





A Colonial Williamsburg Archaeology Department map is shown depicting features at the site of Williamsburg's historic First Baptist Church South Nassau Street. This year a partnership led by First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg has resumed archeological investigation of the site, which last took place in 1957. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg (HANDOUT)

“There is evidence of a late 18th-century or early 19th-century structure below later buildings used by the church, leading us to wonder if it could be the remains of the first church building. The results of this initial phase will help to inform how we move forward with additional research that will allow us to fully interpret and commemorate this nationally important site,” said Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg’s director of archaeology in the joint news release by First Baptist Church and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Harshaw emphasized the need to tell the lives of the freed Black members of the church, in addition to the enslaved, as an important aspect of this project. She expressed her hopes that this project will advance that effort and lead to further educational and interpretive programs.

Harshaw and First Baptist Church will oversee the archaeology project and have detailed to Colonial Williamsburg how they want artifacts found to be preserved and displayed, as well as if any burial sites are found, how they can be protected and memorialized.

Ronald Hurst, vice president of collections and museums and chief curator for Colonial Williamsburg, said that this project will help further interpretive programs and tell the stories of the 51% of people of color who lived in Colonial Williamsburg in the 1770s.

He added that they have the intention to re-build or identify where the old church buildings stood, as much as they can identify, and create interpretive programs on the site.

“The dig is to go back and release and unearth those voices that have been silenced a long time. And as we’ve always said, till the lion tells his side of the story the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter,” said Pastor Davis.

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