

Burial remains uncovered at First Baptist Church site in Colonial Williamsburg

By ALEX PERRY

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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)

Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists have uncovered burial-site remains at the Historic First Baptist Church of Williamsburg-Nassau Street, the first physical location of one of America's oldest churches **founded by free and enslaved Blacks**.

These remains were uncovered during the first phase of the Colonial Williamsburg archaeology project [that finished in November](#). The project will help tell the story of Williamsburg's First Baptist Church and the people who worshiped at the South Nassau Street site. The next phase of archaeology will be a year-and-a-half long and is scheduled to begin in January.

Archaeologists discovered evidence of the burials when they excavated the foundation of the First Baptist Church building's 1953 annex, an addition to the First Baptist Church building that was never completed. Beside this foundation are the remains of a tree stump, and around the foundation and the stump's remains in the ground are evidence of grave shafts, where a hole was dug for a grave and then filled back in, according to Colonial Williamsburg Director of Archaeology Jack Gary.

Historical records show that in 1953, when First Baptist Church was preparing to break ground on the annex, a woman identified as Sister Epps spoke up and said that this area for the annex is where her great-grandfather was buried, Gary said. The church then agreed that they would install a plaque in honor of her great-grandfather, and then proceeded to break ground.

"We just found a grave exactly where (Sister Epps) told us there was going to be one," Gary said in a virtual meeting about the archaeology project held Nov. 23, "and so we think about the history of the church and the oral histories, and the histories of families that are out there — imagine what else is true about this site that could help us understand it."

Archaeologists have thus far uncovered evidence of two possible graves at the site, and Gary said determining how many burials are on the property and mapping their exact locations is crucial in their next archaeology phase.

"When we know where they are, we can protect them," Gary said.

First Baptist Church is working with the archaeologists and the College of William & Mary's Institute for Historical Biology to establish protocols for human remains uncovered at the South Nassau Street site. This is being done according to the wishes of the First Baptist Church Nassau Street

Descendants, which consists of people who had worshiped at the historic church site, as well as others whose parents and grandparents once worshiped at the church.

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 that the descendant community wishes for archaeologists to carefully uncover and study any potential remains at the South Nassau Street site. These remains would remain in the Williamsburg area for study, and would then later be re-interred at 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 Sept. 28 at the site of the first, permanent location for Williamsburg's historic First Baptist Church on South Nassau Street. (Virginia Gazette)

“We have decided that if we do disturb the intact burials, (then) we want to reinter them,” Harshaw said in a phone interview Monday. “We want to mark them, identify them and properly memorialize them.”

Harshaw said that they are also asking for help from the descendants themselves to try to identify any people buried there.

“We are trying to also get information from those descendants that are still here,” Harshaw said. “We have asked them to check in their Bibles and in their records, to see if there is any mention of their family members buried around that tree in the back of the building.”

Gary has been working on the protocols for possible remains at the site with Michael Blakey, National Endowment for the Humanities professor at William & Mary, and the director of W&M’s Institute for Historical Biology. Gary said that the protocols they’ve developed so far are to help identify any remains that have been disturbed at the site.

Blakey said there’s reason to believe that in the previous excavations over the decades, burials were disturbed, and fragments of bones were scattered in specific portions of the site, which are likely be encountered during the current excavation.

“We’re going to be very deliberate and try and identify any human remains among these other materials,” Gary said in a phone interview Monday. “It’s entirely possible that there won’t be, but because it’s possible that there could be, we’re going to be very deliberate in making sure we can identify them.”

This involves identifying whether any uncovered bone fragments are human or not. Archaeologists will start by sending photographs to the Institute for Historical Biology, who will follow up by visiting their lab in Colonial Williamsburg. Any human fragments that are discovered will require further advisement from the descendant community, Blakey said.

Further protocols will be focused on any intact burials that may be uncovered during the next phase of archaeology. There are different degrees of research, from uncovering burial stains that are marked by discolorations in the soil, to studying the human remains themselves.

Blakey said the conversation with the descendant community about testing any uncovered remains at the site has just begun.

“There is some interest in research on the part of the community, and we will be following up with them,” he said.

All of this work has ethical implications, and input from the descendant community is required every step of the way, Blakey said.

“We will verify whether these are human remains or not, and if there are human remains, (then) all work stops,” Blakey said. “The descendant community will then be notified, and they will have the determining power.”

Gary also said that any of these decisions during the next phase of archaeology are in the control of First Baptist Church and the descendant community. “If we do find remains, we immediately stop and turn to them for guidance about how they want to proceed,” Gary said.

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