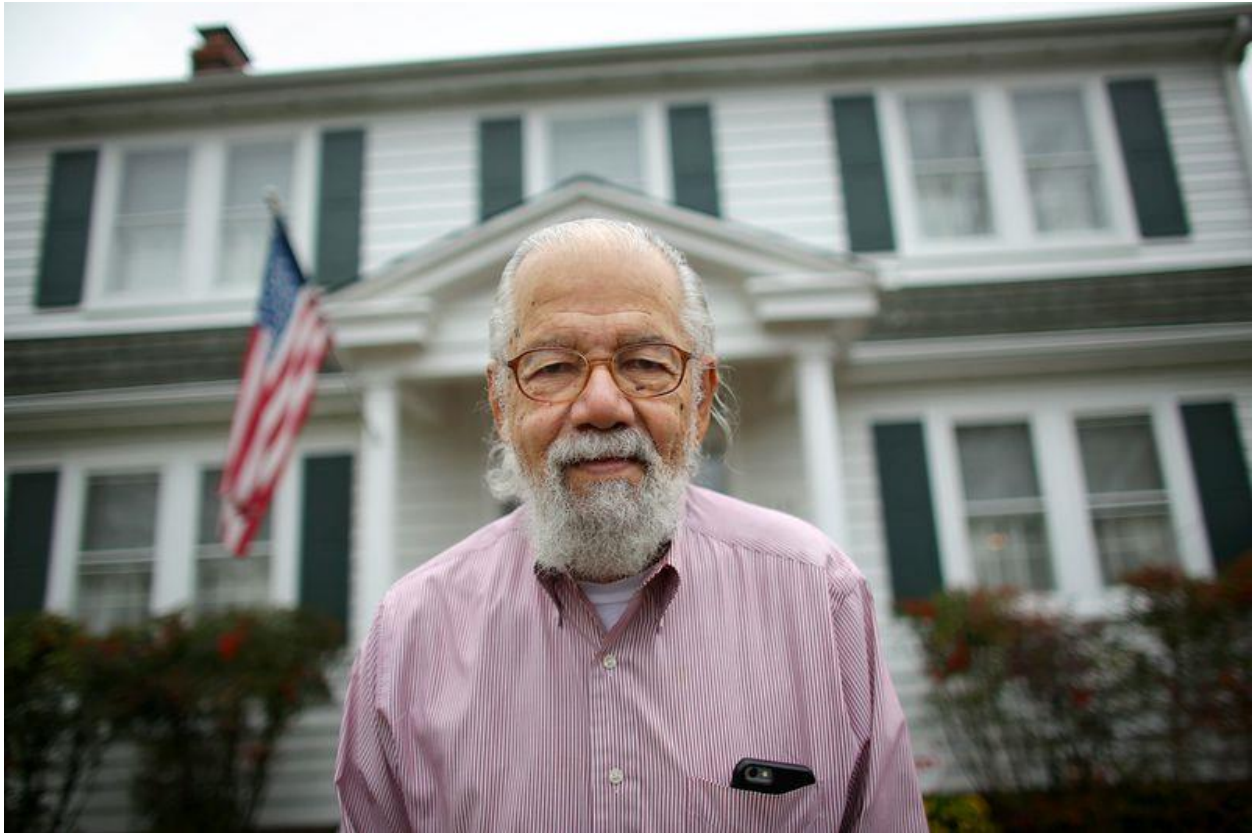


First Baptist has always been a beacon in the community:’ Descendants share memories of historic Williamsburg church to preserve, share its history

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Bobby Braxton, photographed Thursday outside of home, grew up attending Williamsburg's First Baptist Church. Braxton lives in the house his grandfather built on Braxton Court in 1920. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

Dennis Gardner fondly remembers his busy Sundays as a child at Williamsburg's First Baptist Church.

They would start with Sunday school in the morning inside the South Nassau Street church building, followed by the Sunday church service. He would then return evenings with his friends for the Baptist Youth Training Union.

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"Before college, that was the center of our social life for the youth," Gardner, 86, said about First Baptist Church in a phone interview, as it was where most of his friends gathered in his early years.

Gardner is one of the First Baptist Church Nassau Street Descendants, a group of people who had worshipped at the historic church site on South Nassau Street, as well as those with family members who worshipped at the church over generations.

The memories of these descendants help tell the complete history of First Baptist Church, one of America's oldest churches **founded by free and enslaved Blacks**, as the group continues to provide input on the ongoing Colonial Williamsburg archaeological project at the church's first physical location on South Nassau Street.

Alvene Patterson Conyers, 73, of James City County, recalled her years in the church's music ministry, where she experienced many different aspects of performance throughout her young adult life, including singing with the Williamsburg Symphony at the Williamsburg Lodge.

Conyers said the church's early historical records show that her family's church ties date back to her great-grandfather, who was the church's clerk during the mid-19th century, Conyers said in a phone interview. Conyers herself served as church clerk for 25 to 30 years, and she was also church secretary for 14 years.

Conyers said being part of the church's descendants community gives her a sense of pride.

“First Baptist has always been a beacon in the community, and has always stood out for leadership and being progressive,” she said. “I feel a sense of pride as a result of that, and I feel a sense of family.”

Robert A. “Bobby” Braxton’s family goes back six generations with First Baptist Church and also as residents of Williamsburg. Braxton, 83, lives on Braxton Court with his wife Hazel, [on the cul-de-sac that his grandfather, Robert Henry Braxton, established in the 1920s off Scotland Street.](#)

Braxton recalls [ringing the church’s Freedom Bell](#) in his youth, and the times when dozens of children would play together on Braxton Court after Sunday school. The children would walk down Duke of Gloucester Street and stop by the old Rexall Drug Store for lemonade and “funny books,” he said, or at the College Pharmacy across the street.

“Even being segregated, it didn’t bother us mostly because we always found something to do (as kids),” Braxton said.

Mary Leah Scott is 91 years old and lives in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, but grew up on Braxton Court and in Williamsburg’s First Baptist Church. She even got married inside the South Nassau Street church building in 1954.

“I have pictures on my wall of First Baptist Church, because I got married in that church,” she said. “I often look at the pictures on the wall and I can remember things from those pictures that I see.”

Her memories are filled with images of beautiful holiday programs the church held for Christmas and Easter, as well as the picnics at beaches around Jamestown, which brought together the whole church community.

“We could go to any table and ask for anything we wanted,” she said. “It wasn’t just ‘my table, your table.’ It was a community thing, and it was beautiful.”



Williamsburg's First Baptist Church is located at 727 Scotland St. Colonial Williamsburg purchased the original First Baptist Church site on South Nassau Street in 1954, and two years later the church relocated to its current Scotland Street address. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)

The First Baptist Church Nassau Street Descendants group met for the first time with about seven living members this past November, [**near the end of the first phase of the ongoing Colonial Williamsburg archaeology project**](#) at the South Nassau Street site. [**The project's second phase began in January**](#) and is expected to take about 18 months.

Gardner frequently visits the archaeological site on South Nassau Street, and said it is “emotional” to see the archaeologists at work and to think about future progress of the project.

“I think we’ve made tremendous progress with the new administration at Colonial Williamsburg, and their commitment to tell the true story of First Baptist Church (and) Black people within the Williamsburg community,” he said.



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)

The project aims to tell the story of the church and the people who worshipped at the historic site, and the input of these living descendants is crucial to telling that story, according to Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, which is working to preserve and uncover the history of Williamsburg's First Baptist Church.

Harshaw said there's now about 24 living members who are part of the descendants group. Word of the First Baptist Church project has spread through social media and national news coverage, helping the church connect with people outside of the Williamsburg area, and also with younger people

who may not attend the church, but who have parents and other relatives who once did.

“The net keeps getting wider as people understand that there has been some importance attached to this project, and that it’s important to get this story told,” Harshaw said. “The (descendant group) has tripled, and it’s still growing.”

The descendants community is aiding the work of the church’s history ministry, which is utilizing a variety of historical sources to help tell the story of this historic Black church.

Liz Montgomery, chairwoman of the church’s history ministry, said they have handwritten church records that date back to the 1850s. People have also shared photo albums of church members dating back to the early 1900s, and they’ve been able to utilize Colonial Williamsburg’s Albert Durant Photography Collection. “That was able to help us with our storytelling for the history ministry,” Montgomery said.

Church members have looked through old Bibles from relatives, including three or four members who have family Bibles dating back to the 1800s, Montgomery said. They’re also collecting artifacts such as wooden collection plates and communion sets of glassware.

Harshaw said the church plans to organize a “scanning event” when continued COVID-19 vaccinations and declining case numbers make it safer to gather later this year. The event will be open to the public for people to bring in any Bibles, photos and other historical records concerning the church. Living descendants will review them, and any significant artifacts will be collected with the owner’s permission, then preserved and later presented for display purposes, in collaboration with Colonial Williamsburg.



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)

One of the priorities for the archaeologists during this second phase of excavation has been to determine how many individuals may be buried in the west end of the South Nassau Street lot, and to identify any possible human remains. **The first, definite human bone fragment uncovered at the site was identified in February** by Michael Blakey, a National Endowment for the Humanities professor at the College of William & Mary and director of the university's Institute for Historical Biology.

The archaeologists then received consent and guidance from the church's community to determine the total number of burials at the site. The descendant community has agreed to help with the identification process of human remains at the site so that they may identify these individuals, and to

properly memorialize them once they've been excavated, studied and reinterred at the site.

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