

First Baptist Church descendants meet with experts, discuss future of historic burials found at dig site

By EM HOLTER VIRGINIA GAZETTE | NOV 08, 2021 AT 4:13 PM



Outlined in red are the 21 rectangular grave shafts that Colonial Williamsburg archeologists have identified at the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg archeology site. Courtesy of Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (HANDOUT)

WILLIAMSBURG — The First Baptist Church descendant community met with a group of panelists recently to discuss their options and next steps following the discovery of graves at the historic church site.

The panel featured Colonial Williamsburg Head Archeologist Jack Gary, William & Mary's Lemon Project historian Jajuan Johnson, anthropologists Michael Blakey and Joseph Jones, and geneticist Raquel Fleskes, who are equipped to assist the descendants and the foundation's research if authorized.

Each shared their own expertise and knowledge of how they would conduct their research on the remains through historical research, chemistry and genetic analysis.

Currently, the descendent community is faced with the decision of either leaving the graves alone or exhuming the remains and studying the bones in an attempt to better understand the lives of the people before them following the late 2020 discovery.

The purpose of the Oct. 30 panel was to allow the community to better understand the processes involved in exhumations, what could be learned from their remains and the extent in which it is invasive.

If the descendent community opted to study the remains, they could learn the age, sex and ethnicity as well as the level of strenuous labor they endured and potentially, through genetic genealogy, find direct links to their ancestors. According to Blakey and Jones, who conducted research at the New York African Burial Grounds, there is a lot to be learned from bone analysis, primarily through dental chemistry.



Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists work in the area of the First Baptist Church's location Thursday morning October 7, 2021. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

Teeth can offer insight into age as humans undergo teeth ruptures at different stages in life. Additionally, they can help determine, in regards to Black burial grounds, whether the person was born in Africa or in the Americas through their level of lead exposure.

According to Jones, as lead is absorbed into the body, human teeth, through a chemical process, utilize it instead of calcium.

As lead was more prevalent in the Americas than in Africa, anthropologists can determine the origin of birth as well as migration patterns.

If someone shows low levels of lead at a young age and then a spike later in life, they infer the person was born outside of the Americas. But, if they show signs of constant lead exposure from a young age into adulthood, then more likely, they were born in the Americas.

“These things that we absorb from the environment then absorb into the skeletal,” Jones said. “So, we can exploit those processes and reconstruct those elements of the past.”

Additionally, Fleskes, who conducted similar research at a South Carolina African burial site, said through genetic analysis, they could potentially determine the country and/or region of origin as well as make direct links to descendants.

The process of obtaining genetic material includes either soaking teeth or crushing up a small fragment of skull bone located below the ear. From there, they can extract the DNA and begin to draw conclusions.

With the help of Johnson, who will conduct genealogical research, the descendants could potentially learn the names and more information about the lives of those buried at the site.

But these types of analysis have drawbacks. It is an invasive procedure as it requires some level of destruction to the remains and depending on how old the remains are, it can be difficult to find viable DNA, Fleskes said.

“Ancient DNA is a powerful method to think about ancestry and kinship but like every tool, it does have its limitations,” Fleskes said.

Additionally, Gary said, while he does not believe that is the case, there is always the possibility that the burials themselves aren't related to the First Baptist Church.

"In a town that had been established in 1699 and the church coming in the 19th century, there's a hundred years of time period where these could be other people," Gary said. "Now, we have great pieces of evidence to suggest otherwise, but I just want to throw out the possibility."

Following the panel discussions, the descendants did not reach a decision and will need to consider whether or not they plan to disturb the graves or not. Connie Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, an organization aimed at the preservation and conservation of Williamsburg's historic Black churches, said they will consider their options and give an answer early next year.

In the meantime, Gary and his archaeological team are still uncovering artifacts, **including their recent discovery of the church's original 1818 structure**, at the historic site on Nassau Street. To date, the team has uncovered 27 graves and Gary anticipates they will discover more.