

# First Baptist Church descendants opt to open 3 graves; work soon to begin on uncovering

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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) The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation will begin the excavation and examination of three bodies buried at the historic First Baptist Church site following a unanimous vote by the church's descendants. The decision came following a community meeting in which the foundation's archaeology team, First Baptist's Let Freedom Ring Foundation, key

historians, anthropologists and the descendants sat down to discuss their options.

To continue with the excavation, the foundation needed permission from the descendant community, according to Connie Harshaw, the foundation's president.

"This is quickly becoming an example to the nation that this is how things should be done," Harshaw said at the meeting, held Saturday at the Williamsburg Regional Library. "You can't tell someone else's story. We have to let them speak. It has to come from their voice."

With the descendants' approval, the foundation hopes to further understand the race, age and gender of those buried. The foundation's archaeology team has found 33 human burials on the grounds, said Jack Gary, the foundation's director of archaeology.

The archaeology team, under the guidance of First Baptist Church, **[first began digging at the Nassau Street site in September 2020.](#)**

Since then, the team has made several discoveries including the original foundation of the 1818 church structure as well as the later 1856 structure. Additionally, the team has uncovered several artifacts revealing the lives these people might have lived. In February 2021, the team uncovered bone fragments, which led them to the burial site.

During the meeting, Gary unveiled the foundation's most recent discovery: an up-turned wine bottle.

According to Gary, the bottle makes it the only grave so far that has led to questions regarding its cultural significance.

As a result of the discovery, Gary said the grave will likely be a contender for one of the three to be exhumed.

The decision to exhume and examine three of the 33 discovered bodies will help the foundation answer some of the more baseline questions before they decide to continue further, Gary said. These questions include the state of the

bodies, how well they were preserved, whether they were of African descent or members of the congregation and when they were buried.

“We wanted to approach this in a way to get some baseline answers,” Gary said. “We feel like we can get some of those answers with a smaller sample.” Examining three of the bodies will help with DNA and genetic testing, since not all DNA is preserved equally, said University of Connecticut anthropologist Raquel Fleskes.

“Different parts of the cemetery can preserve differently,” Fleskes said. “It’s really important just to assess what these individuals look like and what their preservation is so we can make sure that the DNA is done as sensitively as possible.”

The 1818 structure is now thought to have been a 32x16-foot building instead of the previously 16x20-foot hypothesis, Gary said. The recent discovery will further the team’s understanding of the structure in order to recreate it.

Recent archival evidence also suggests that Jesse Cole, the white landowner previously thought to have given the congregation the building, gave the congregation the land and they subsequently built the original church.

Additionally, historians discovered a list of names of congregation members found at the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library titled, “Baptismal, Memberships and Death: 1865.” The list includes nearly 1,650 names. The discovery has helped further the church’s understanding of its descendants and plays a crucial role in its history.

Following Saturday’s decision, Gary said next steps moving forward are to gain the proper permits and begin the research design. From there, excavations will begin. The process of determining the age, race and gender of the bodies will take “less than a year,” according to Michael Blakey, director of William & Mary’s Institute for Historical Biology.

“This is our shared history and that’s an important fact that people need to always understand,” Harshaw said. “It’s not their history or our history. It is

our shared history. We were all in this space at the same time doing different things and we have different perspectives. But we all own it.”