

First Baptist Church descendants host vigil ahead of excavation project

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The Descendants of the Historic First Baptist Church host a blessing for their ancestors that are believed to be buried on the original site of the church on Nassau Street in Colonial Williamsburg.

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (WAVY) — Descendants of the historic First Baptist-Nassau Street Church held a vigil Monday morning. The ceremony was titled “Ancestral Blessing: In honor of those whose names are known only to God.”

The First Baptist Church is one of the nation’s oldest African American churches dating back to 1776. The church was founded by enslaved and free worshippers.

In total, 41 grave shafts have been identified at the original First Baptist church grounds. Earlier this year, descendants of the church voted to allow Colonial Williamsburg archeologists to excavate and catalogue three of the oldest graves. The human remains will be returned at the end of the project.

The osteological analysis will likely determine the age of death, stature, injuries, illnesses, physical stresses, and quality of life. The DNA analysis will reveal eye color, skin tone, diseases, or conditions, as well as ancestry. The process is expected to take 6 months to identify race, age, and sex.

“This is an emotional experience. I’m waiting to try to learn exactly who is buried here,” explained Dennis Gardner, First Baptist Church descendant of the Avery family.

He tells 10 On Your Side the project comes after years of requesting Colonial Williamsburg to conduct research.

“The new administration developed a keen interest in the history of the First Baptist Church siting right in the Colonial Williamsburg area.”

His sister, Christine Gardner-Jordan, said she is excited to learn more about the remains.

“Just imagine just a couple of decades ago, nobody was interested, nothing was going on. We were just in the background and now it is coming out and it’s overwhelming that my grandchildren and great-grands will know that we had an important part in the history of Williamsburg.”

“If we uncover or unearth something that gets us that much closer to knowing them and knowing more about who they were, then this is a great thing,” said Jacqueline Bridgeforth-Williams, First Baptist Church member and descendant.