

Retropolis

Graves found at site of historic Virginia Black church

Archaeologists find evidence of burial grounds beneath a parking lot in Colonial Williamsburg.



Archaeologist Kyle Brubaker digs in Colonial Williamsburg at the historic site of First Baptist Church, one of the oldest African American churches in the United States. (Timothy C. Wright for The Washington Post)

By

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Archaeologists have found evidence of at least two graves, along with artifacts such as a fragment of an ink bottle, a porcelain piece of doll's foot, and building foundations, during a dig at the site of a historic African American church in Colonial Williamsburg, officials said Monday.

The discoveries were [made in late summer](#) and early fall beneath a parking lot on Nassau Street at the former location of the old First Baptist Church. One of the oldest Black churches in the country, it had buildings on the spot in 1856, and perhaps as early as 1818. It was organized in 1776.

Evidence of two grave shafts have been found, Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology, told an online community meeting Monday morning.

Community members were asked if they wanted archaeologists to probe the graves and remove any possible remains to try to identify who is buried there.

Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the church's Let Freedom Ring Foundation, said she had so far heard no community objection to that.

"They are wanting to know who those people are," she said. "So that they can correctly memorialize them and mark their graves."

[*An archaeological dig unearths one of the earliest slave remains in Delaware*](#)

In 1953, when the church planned to build an adjacent annex, a member of the congregation, "Sister Epps (Most likely Mrs. Fannie Epps)," said her great-grandfather was buried where the annex was supposed to go, researchers have said.

Gary said Monday the likely graves are right where Epps said her relative was buried.

"We are pretty sure that these are grave shafts," he told the community meeting during a presentation. "These are burials. There are no human remains that have been exposed. The human remains are further down ... These are the tops of the grave shafts."

"I assume that if there is one or two, that there's going to be more than that here," he said in an online meeting with reporters later.

Gary said that if the graves are excavated, and if remains are found, experts could try to identify whose they are. "I think it would be a challenge to get down to the individual," he said.

But Matthews Harshaw said: "There are a lot of descendants that are still here, that can actually piece the story together for us, to give us some clues that we may be able to rely on."

“We ... have members of the community and of the church that have stories in their Bibles about where people are,” she said.

Gary said if skeletons were recovered they would likely be examined at the Institute for Historical Biology at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg.

Gary said the dig began on Sept. 8 and ended on Nov. 6. He said the evidence of the graves turned up on the last day. He called Matthews Harshaw and said, “Are you sitting down?”

“This story is familiar to everybody who’s African American that has not been able to wrap their arms around their history,” she said. “It’s pretty emotional.”

The 1856 church — whose [bell was used to dedicate the National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) in Washington four years ago — was torn down in the 1950s. But its foundation and those of two earlier structures, one possibly a privy, have been detected underground.



An archaeological dig was undertaken at the site shortly after it was purchased by Colonial Williamsburg in the 1950s. (Timothy C. Wright for The Washington Post)

It is the earliest African American church in Williamsburg, experts said.

When Colonial Williamsburg was being organized as a tourist attraction in the early and mid-1900s, during a time of entrenched racial segregation, the story of a post-Colonial Black church did not fit the Colonial narrative, church descendants have said. A plaque was placed at the site in 1983.

According to the congregation's tradition, enslaved and free Black people began meeting secretly in the woods to pray and listen to a minister named Moses, and later to an enslaved tavern worker and preacher named Gowan Pamphlet.

When Pamphlet, a Baptist, was ordained in 1772, he was the "only ordained black preacher of any denomination in the country," according to Colonial Williamsburg.

And it was perhaps around that time that he began to lead meetings of the rural Black congregation outside town.

Williamsburg was the capital of Virginia from 1699 to 1780, and by 1775, more than half of its 1,880 residents were Black, most of them enslaved, according to historian Linda Rowe.

The church congregants had to meet in remote locales outdoors. It was dangerous for Black people to gather in numbers anywhere, for fear of arousing White suspicions of revolt.

Moses, the original preacher, was regularly whipped for holding religious meetings, Rowe wrote.

Pamphlet's enslaver, Jane Vobe, ran the King's Arms Tavern on Duke of Gloucester Street, across from the Raleigh Tavern, a popular venue for auctions of enslaved people, Rowe wrote in the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography.

Pamphlet's congregation continued to grow anyway, to as many as 500 by 1791, Rowe wrote.

And church tradition has it that a local White businessman, Jesse Cole, while walking his lands one day, came upon the congregation meeting and singing in an outdoor shelter made of tree limbs and underbrush.

Moved by the scene, he offered them a carriage house he owned on Nassau Street, according to Rowe.

At that point, the record is cloudy.

In 1818, there is a reference to a “Baptist meeting house” on the spot, according to the project’s research. “It is unclear what this building looked like or how long it had been standing on the lot by 1818,” researchers have written.

Further mention came in 1834, when a tornado tore through Williamsburg and a Norfolk newspaper reported that the “colored people’s meeting house” was blown down.

In 1855, a stately new brick church was built with a steeple and Palladian windows.



The current location of the First Baptist Church was built about eight blocks away from the original location in 1956. (Timothy C. Wright for The Washington Post)

The church housed a school for Black students in the 1860s. It survived a Civil War battle in 1862 that killed and wounded thousands of men, and filled the town with injured soldiers.

It served its members through the end of slavery, the eras of Reconstruction, Jim Crow racial oppression, segregation and the dawn of the civil rights movement.

The church shows up on a 1921 insurance map labeled “Baptist Church (Colored.)” The map notes that it was heated with “stoves” and illuminated with “lamps.”

Colonial Williamsburg subsequently bought the church and tore down the old building in 1955. The site was paved over in 1965. A new church funded by the sale — the First Baptist Church — was built about eight blocks away in 1956.

After the old church was torn down, a limited archaeological dig was conducted in 1957, Gary, of Colonial Williamsburg, said. Results were modest.

The current project is set to resume Jan. 4.