

Human bone fragment identified at First Baptist Church archaeological dig site in Colonial Williamsburg

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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, shows a tooth to First Baptist Church history ministry chairwoman Liz Montgomery, left, and Let Freedom Ring Foundation President Connie Matthews Harshaw, center. The tooth was found during excavations at the First Baptist Church archaeology site on South Nassau Street, and Blakey determined that the tooth came from a human being during his in-person examination at Colonial Williamsburg's archaeological collections building Friday morning. Alex Perry/staff (Virginia Gazette)

The first, definite human bone fragment uncovered at the First Baptist Church archaeology site in Colonial Williamsburg was identified last week 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.

Blakey examined more than 60 bone fragments inside Colonial Williamsburg's archaeological collections building Friday morning to determine whether they were human or animal. He was joined by members of the Colonial Williamsburg archaeology team, as well as representatives from the First Baptist Church community.

Blakey identified a maxillary central incisor tooth that is definitely human, along with a phalanx finger bone that is probably human, he said. The bone fragments were individually bagged and arranged on a table inside the building.

Blakey characterized the bone fragments as definite, probable, possible or unidentifiable, which is based on established standards for skeletal biology research, he said.

These bone fragments were collected during the current phase of excavation work for the First Baptist Church project on South Nassau Street. The site is the first physical location of one of America's oldest churches **founded by free and enslaved Blacks**, and the project aims to tell the story of the church and the people who worshiped at the historic site.



Archeologists work to excavate at the site of where the historic First Baptist Church structures were located on the grounds of Colonial Williamsburg Thursday morning October 1, 2020. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

The first phase of the project began **in September** and was completed **in November**, while the second phase began in January and is expected to take about 18 months.

One of the first priorities for the archaeologists during this second phase 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. **They discovered evidence of grave shafts during the first phase that indicated there was at least one burial at the site**, and then received consent and guidance from the First Baptist Church community to determine the total number of burials.

Most of the bone fragments that Blakey examined Friday were small — no bigger than the size of quarter — and they had no anatomical features to determine whether they were human or animal. Blakey said these fragments are not inconsistent with human bone and are possibly human, but they're also consistent with other mammal skeletons, which makes them unidentifiable.

“Unidentifiable usually refers to a bone that for our purposes is unobservable, which means there are no definite, anatomical features that would tell you what bone it is, much less what species it is,” Blakey said. “It’s an amorphous piece of bone.”

A bone that’s considered “probable” appears to be human, but is still too fragmentary to determine absolutely whether its human and not another large mammal.

“This is my concern about the hand bone, but it is probably human,” Blakey said.

But the tooth, according to Blakey, is definitely human.

“There’s no other species that has something that looks like that,” Blakey said about the tooth. “I can identify specifically what tooth that is, (and) I even know based on its wear that it was the tooth of an older person.”



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, carefully examines more than 60 bone fragments in Colonial Williamsburg's archaeological collections building Friday morning. The bone fragments were uncovered by Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists during the current phase of excavation work at the First Baptist Church archaeology site on South Nassau Street. Alex Perry/staff (Virginia Gazette)

According to Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology, these bone fragments were found in layers of soil that were disturbed during a previous excavation conducted in 1957. Those archaeologists were searching for evidence of any 18th-century structures that once stood on South Nassau Street site.

Excavators in 1957 dug trenches to look for brick foundations at the site. Gary said there was reason to believe that burials at the South Nassau Street site had been disturbed during these previous excavations, and that bone fragments were likely to be encountered in specific portions of the site during this current excavation.

“The 1957 excavations were designed really to look only for brick foundations, and the way they did that was digging trenches across the property,” Gary said. “Obviously in the course of them digging through trenches, they dug through graves, and that’s disturbed some of these graves and mixed these fragmentary remains into these trenches, which we’re excavating now.”



Katie Wagner, the Colonial Williamsburg project archaeologist for the First Baptist Church site on South Nassau Street, looks over bone fragments with 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 bone fragments were uncovered by archaeologists during the current phase of excavation work at the First Baptist Church site and were closely examined by Blakey inside Colonial Williamsburg’s archaeological collections building Friday morning. Alex Perry/staff (Virginia Gazette)

Gary and Blakey have established protocols for handling any possible human remains at the site. These include individually bagging each bone fragment that’s uncovered, then sending pictures of bone fragments that could possibly

be human to W&M's Institute for Historical Biology. The institute will then follow up with an in-person examination of the fragments on a regular basis. "We're trying to treat all these bones with respect, whether they're human or not," said Katie Wagner, the Colonial Williamsburg project archaeologist who oversees day-to-day operations at the First Baptist Church site.

The Institute of Historical Biology's expert advisement helps guide the archaeologists in the field, and the protocols also ensure that the church community is informed every step of the way.

"If there are definitive human remains, we want to make sure that they know first," Gary said.

Each step in this ongoing project is being done according to the wishes of the First Baptist Church community, which includes the First Baptist Church Nassau Street Descendants, who worshiped at the historic church or whose parents and grandparents once worshiped at the church.

Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation that is working to preserve and uncover the history of the church, was at the Friday morning examination with Liz Montgomery, chairwoman of the church's history ministry. Montgomery said that seeing Blakey examine the bone fragments gave her clarity on how the process works, as well as confidence that the bones are being handled with care.

"I think that the descendant community is going to want to know that the proper care has been given to examine this archaeological evidence," Montgomery said Friday. "I think that we're on the right track, and we should continue with the same kind of care."



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, uses a magnifying glass to examine a bone fragment inside Colonial Williamsburg's archaeological collections building Friday morning. Blakey closely examined more than 60 bone fragments that were uncovered by Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists during the current phase of excavation work at the First Baptist Church site on South Nassau Street. Alex Perry/staff (Virginia Gazette)

The First Baptist Church Nassau Street Steering Committee held a Zoom meeting Monday morning to share the latest findings with members of the descendant community. The church community gave their permission in the meeting for archaeologists to proceed with the next step of the project, which includes finding out how many burials are at the site, and looking for other possible human remains.

Gary said that his team will proceed to remove layers of soil in the west end of the lot — including the 1957 trenches — to get down to where they can see the tops of the grave shafts.

“When we see the first signs of disturbance in the soil, we’re going to stop at that level, and then we’re going to expand off of that,” Gary said Monday.

Their goal is to map out the locations of each burial in the site, and then bring that information to the church to allow them to determine the next step.

“Getting down into the grave shafts themselves, (and) into the remains themselves, that’s further down the line and will require even more conversations than what we’re having now,” Gary said.

The descendant community has agreed to submit samples of their DNA to help with the identification process. Blakey said further testing will be required to determine whether or not the tooth has enough proteins to be a suitable source of DNA. He also said that it will be very unlikely to narrow down the individual identity of anyone interred at the site, and that establishing familial relations would be more likely.

In the Monday meeting, Harshaw said that this archaeology project was initially meant to find artifacts that could help tell the complete story of the church. But she said the project “took on a different meaning” when the archaeologists confirmed that there were graves at the site.

“The descendant community now is wanting to hurry and get this done,” Harshaw said. “They want to know who those people are, because they want to pay tribute to them, they want to memorialize them, they want to excavate and study them, and re-inter them.”

Gary said that this development serves as another opportunity for transparency by sharing their findings with the church community and receiving their guidance to proceed. The work to locate the grave shafts is expected to resume this week, weather permitting.

“For us this is part of the process, and we need to make sure that everyone is on board as we move forward, and I think we heard that today,” Gary said.