

# Human remains found at Williamsburg archaeology dig

Researchers find evidence at site of historic Black church.



Archaeologist Merideth Poole searches for artifacts Sept. 8 during the first day of a dig at Colonial Williamsburg. Colonial Williamsburg is studying the original site of the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, which was founded by enslaved African people in the late 1700s and still survives. (Timothy C. Wright for The Washington Post)

By

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Human remains have been discovered in an archaeological dig at the site of a historic African American church in Colonial Williamsburg, experts announced Monday. A worn upper front tooth and what is probably a finger bone were unearthed during excavation at the site of the old First Baptist Church, one of the oldest such churches in the country and the earliest African American church in Williamsburg, experts said. The remains were found in what was left from an excavation at the site in the 1950s and probably came from a grave that was inadvertently disturbed in that process, experts said.

The current dig has located what [appear to be two graves](#). Archaeologists believe there may be more.

The grave shafts have not yet been explored, but descendants of the church's earliest members said they want the archaeology to continue to try to learn who the deceased were, and honor them.

The church was organized in 1776, and had buildings on the site in 1855, and perhaps as early as 1818.

Colonial Williamsburg bought the old church and tore it down in 1955. A new church funded by the sale was built about eight blocks away in 1956. The original site was paved over in 1965.

The bell from the old church was used to dedicate the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington in 2016.

[\*Descended from the enslaved, this family helped open the African American museum\*](#)

The remains were discovered this month, Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology, said Monday.

The spot is an area where oral tradition holds that [past church members](#) were probably buried behind the old structure on Nassau Street.

The announcement came during an online meeting with Gary; Michael Blakey, director of the Institute for Historical Biology at William & Mary; Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the church's Let Freedom Ring Foundation; and descendants of church members.

“We would like to know as soon as possible how many grave shafts there are,” Harshaw said. “At the end of the day we want to find out who they are and if possible connect any surviving descendants to those burials.”

Gary and Blakey said that could be difficult but they were honored to have the community’s go-ahead to continue the dig.

Community member Donald Hill asked whether the experts knew when the graves were dug.

One way to tell would be “to excavate down to the remains themselves and see what materials are inside the grave shafts,” Gary said. “Looking at things like coffin hardware, the handles that are on coffins, they can give us dates.”

“Looking at, also, any clothing remains on the individual could give us a potential date for when they were buried,” he said.

Dennis Gardner, who was born two blocks from the dig site and attended the old church, said, “I think we should explore for additional graves and see what we ... find and then after that I think we should determine what we want to do with the remains.”



Colonial Williamsburg began an archaeological dig at the original site of the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg. The church was founded by enslaved African people in the late 1700s. Colonial Williamsburg purchased the original church property in the 1950s and tore down the existing structure. The church still survives at its location just outside the historic district. (Timothy C. Wright for The Washington Post)

Blakey said about 70 small bone fragments had been recovered from the site. In most cases it was not clear whether they were human or animal. “These are ... unidentifiable, tiny fragments,” he said.

But they also found what is probably a finger bone, “very likely a human bone,” and the lone upper front tooth, he said. Wear on the tooth was “extreme,” he said.

The dig at the site began last September. In November, archaeologists announced that they had found evidence of at least two graves, along with artifacts such as a fragment of an ink bottle, a porcelain piece of a doll’s foot and a building foundation.

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 written. The graves were found right where the annex was started, but never finished.

The dig paused for several weeks in late fall 2020 and resumed in January. Gary said Monday that it would continue “as soon the rain stops.”

According to the congregation’s tradition, the church goes back to the time when enslaved and free Black people began meeting secretly in the woods nearby to pray and listen to a minister named Moses. 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 the late historian Linda Rowe.

The church congregants had to meet in remote locales outdoors because it was dangerous for Black people to gather in numbers anywhere, for fear of arousing White suspicions of revolt. 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. On that spot in 1855, a stately new brick church was built with a steeple and Palladian windows. On that site, the archaeologists are now trying to resurrect a vanished past.