

In Graves of a Lost Black Cemetery, Hope for Links to Family History

At a site paved over to make way for Colonial Williamsburg, Black residents seek clues in unearthed graves



By Michael E. Ruane

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Jacquelyn and Dennis Gardner at First Baptist Church of Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Va., on Aug. 14, 2022. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)

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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — Archaeologist Jack Gary pulls back the plastic tarp covering the grave. A few surprised frogs jump out of the way. He shows the outline of the burial, marked by the disturbed soil thrown on top of the deceased.

At the foot of the grave, his team found a broken bottle turned upside down and probably placed intentionally. The reason is not clear. The old African American First Baptist Church that stood here and buried its dead here is long gone, replaced by a parking lot.

Eight blocks away, on this bright Sunday in August, Dennis Gardner, 87, whose great grandparents are said to be the first people married in the old church in the 1850s, has arrived for the 11 a.m. service at the new First Baptist Church, the congregation's home for several decades.

So have Robert A. "Bobby" Braxton, 84, who, as a youngster, rang the bell in the old church; and the Rev. Julie Grace, an associate minister, whose parents brought her there as an infant but who later left Williamsburg, she thought, for good.

They came to pray, sing and to express the wish that the departed in the old cemetery, where more than 40 graves have been found, might reveal their stories.

Those worshipers are part of an extraordinary project here in which experts at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary are working at the behest of potential living descendants of those resting in the graveyard.

Over the years, African American cemeteries have been violated, obliterated and forgotten. And debate has simmered over how, or even if, human remains in such cemeteries should be examined.

Here, the "descendant community," eager to fill gaps in vanished African American and family history, has been consulted and briefed at every step, and has urged the archaeologists on.

Who were the people laid to rest in the graves? Could one of them be an ancestor of someone living in the community?

"I'd be very proud," Gardner said, if such a link were found. "I'd probably stick my chest out a little further."

He said he is the oldest active member of the church and began attending services in the old building when he was 6.

"It's a very important part of our history," he said. "If they could find my great grandparents and test their DNA, they could link them further back to those who first came over on the slave ships, then where *they* came from."



Photographs of Jane and John Ashby, great-grandparents of Dennis Gardner's who are thought to be the first couple married at First Baptist Church in the late 1800s. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)



Visitors to Williamsburg walk by First Baptist Church on Aug. 14. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)

Black history erased

The First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, organized in 1776, is one of the oldest Black congregations in the country.

It dates to a time when enslaved and free African Americans around Williamsburg worshiped in a remote forest shelter made of tree limbs and underbrush.

Church tradition says that a local White businessman, Jesse Cole, while walking his lands one day, came upon the congregation meeting and singing in such a shelter. Moved by the scene, he offered them a carriage house he owned on Nassau Street.

In 1818, a “Baptist meeting house” was reported on the site. In 1834, a newspaper reported that the “colored people’s meeting house” there was blown down by a tornado. In 1856, it was replaced by the church that would stand for 100 years.

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.

In the mid-20th century, an effort was underway to re-create the Colonial world of the former state capital as a tourist attraction. African Americans who live there today say much of the history of Black life in Williamsburg was erased as a result.

The 1850s church did not fit with a 1750s motif. It was torn down in the 1950s, after Colonial Williamsburg bought out the congregation and paid for the new church outside the historic district.



Worshippers listen to a sermon at First Baptist Church. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)

Gardner said his family also was bought out, in 1955, and moved from its home on Nicholson Street, near the reconstructed colonial capitol, to a Black neighborhood outside town.

Colonial Williamsburg “displaced a lot of the Black families,” he said. “Matter of fact, we were one of the last ones to sell.”

The move got the congregation a stately new church with stained glass windows and a parking lot. The Gardners got a better house and, for the first time, a car, his sister, Christine Jordan, said.

They did not know all that was left behind, she said. And many said they were too young at the time to register anger.

The old site was paved over in 1965 and turned into a parking lot. A modest historical plaque was erected.

A new look at the past



Connie Matthews Harshaw and Donald Hill ring the historic bell at First Baptist Church of Williamsburg on Aug. 14, 2022. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)

In 2020, Connie Matthews Harshaw, the president of the church's Let Freedom Ring Foundation, noticed Williamsburg visitors reading the plaque and wondering where the church was.

She then met Cliff Fleet, who had just taken over as the president and chief executive of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

"I said to him that I was embarrassed for him, because they were in the business of history and I didn't see anything about the African American experience," she said.

She and Fleet agreed to begin an investigation of the site with ground penetrating radar to see what was beneath the parking lot, she said in a telephone interview. The project grew from there.

Once the excavation was underway, the brick outline of the old church was revealed. Gary, the foundation's director of archaeology, said he and his team also found the imprint of an even earlier building, referred to as "the Old Slab Church," because of its construction of rough-hewn slabs of wood. That church may date to before 1818.

The known public record about the site did not mention a graveyard, and the radar did not detect one, Gary said.



The Rev. Reginald F. Davis, left, the pastor of First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Connie Matthews Harshaw, a member of First Baptist, and Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology, in October 2021 examine the brick foundation of a church building that previously stood at the site. (Ben Finley/AP)



Archaeologist Jack Gary removes a tarp covering an old grave at the First Baptist Church-Nassau Street Archeological Project dig in Williamsburg on Aug. 14. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)

But Gary said archaeologists suspected a cemetery might be there, partly because they had heard of a congregant who, in the 1950s, told church leaders building an annex that her great-grandfather was buried on the grounds.

When the graves were found, the project was paused, and the foundation sought advice from members of the church.

"We are very much guided by the descendant community," Fleet said in a telephone interview. "We're telling the history of America, but we're also telling the history of their ancestors."

Joseph Jones, a research associate at William & Mary's Institute for Historical Biology, said the excavation coincides with increasing "introspection about how to ethically treat skeleton remains."

This is "an excellent example of how we as researchers can go to a community, [and] say, 'Here is our expertise, our tool kit, and we want to put these in your employ,'" he said.

"What questions are important to you?"

Of the graves found so far, three have been excavated. Three skeletons have been found, along with several metal buttons and the outlines of three hexagonal coffins. The broken bottle remains a mystery. It is not rubbish, and may denote a person of importance in the community, Gary said.

Bone samples have been taken from the skulls of each individual, in the hope that DNA might be extracted and eventually compared to the DNA of members of the community. No community DNA has been donated for comparison yet, and some people would like all the graves excavated.

But Raquel Fleskes, a University of Connecticut specialist in colonial-era DNA and descendant communities, said the team must see whether DNA can be extracted from the first three sets of bones.

Sometimes DNA does not survive in an old burial, especially in the heavy, wet and acidic clay soil around Williamsburg, she said in a recent telephone interview. "Right now, we're kind of calling this the pilot phase," she said.

The bone samples have been taken to the University of Connecticut, where they will be ground into powder and undergo the complex attempt at DNA extraction, she said.

"Before undertaking a very large-scale project and disturbing all these burials, we wanted to make sure that it was not going to be for naught," she said. Results are not expected for several months, she said.

'The story is still here'



Robert Braxton is shown at First Baptist Church on Aug. 14, 2022. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)



The 500pound First Baptist Church Freedom Bell. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)

Back at the church, Bobby Braxton, wearing a blue blazer and brown-rimmed glasses, sat in a pew by himself as the Rev. Juanita Graham, an associate minister, read from the Bible's Psalm 34: "I sought the Lord, and he heard me ..."

Above Braxton in the steeple was the 150-year-old bell, which was made in 1871 and was salvaged from the old church. [\(In 2016, the bell was rung in Washington, officially opening the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture.\)](#) In the museum downstairs lay threadbare copies of the Baptist Hymnal, probably from the old church.

Around the corner on Braxton Court was the house where he grew up, and, beside that, his grandfather's house, which he renovated and now lives in.

Braxton, a dapper man, said that after being raised in Williamsburg, he moved to Columbia, Md., and worked as an engineer for Westinghouse for several decades.

He then came back, bought his grandfather's house and won a seat on the Williamsburg City Council.

"This is my home," he said.

"Some people have said, 'Oh yeah, [Colonial Williamsburg] took advantage of us,' " he said.

"No they didn't. You go look at that church. You look at all the land that we have. ... And you make a decision yourself."

Still, Braxton visits the dig site almost daily to see what it has revealed. He is proud of his family's place in the Williamsburg story and says has tried to preserve his links to the past. When he had his grandfather's house renovated, he told the workmen not to alter the wood banister on the stairs going up to the second floor.

"My mother and father, my grandmother and grandfather, and my great grandmother all went up and down those stairs, holding on to that banister," he said in a recent interview on his front porch.

As the church service ended, the pastor, the Rev. Reginald F. Davis, gave thanks. The congregation sang, "Amen." And people began to file out through the white front doors.



Associate Minister Julie Grace paused to talk about the old Black Williamsburg she knew growing up. Scotland Street, where the church stands, had numerous Black businesses, she said.

There was Mr. Webb's corner store, where, as a child, she would buy candy for a few pennies. There was a shoe store and a barber shop.

"To be able to walk this street and see nothing but African American progress when I was coming up, that's what gave me, helped me build, character," she said. "I was proud that I was a Black person." She said she seldom left the Black community and was sheltered from racism. But when as a 14-year-old she started working at a Williamsburg hotel as a bus girl, she ran into it head-on.

The Rev. Julie Grace is photographed at First Baptist Church on Aug. 14. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)

"I noticed how White people treated me," she said. "They were disrespectful, wouldn't leave tips. The first week I was in tears. Because I had never experienced anything like that." She put up with it.

"But I always told my Momma, I said, 'When I get of age, I am going to leave Williamsburg and I am never coming back,' " she said. "I didn't realize, when [you leave] you run into the same thing."

She said she left town in 1983, moved to Atlanta and lived there for 38 years. She was a procurement analyst and retired from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On a visit home a few years ago, she said she heard about two old tombstones that had recently been unearthed elsewhere in Williamsburg and were being presented to the church. She discovered that they bore the names of some of her ancestors.

She realized that her roots here were deeper than she knew.

"I made up my mind right then," she said. "I said, 'I'm coming back. ... This is my family. I'm coming back, and I'm going to stand up for my family.'" Five years ago, she returned to Williamsburg.

The tombstones are now in the church's museum, along with pictures and artifacts from the 1856 First Baptist Church. One black-and-white photo shows the inside of the old church, crowded with people. An infant is held by a man in the front pew.

"That baby right there," she said. "That's me."

Now graves are being unearthed where that picture was taken.

"We're coming back," she said. "You're uncovering us. You have to pay attention. You can't ignore us anymore."



The Rev. Julie Grace points to a picture taken in 1949 at First Baptist Church on Nassau Street. The photo hangs on a wall in the new First Baptist Church. (Kristen Zeis for The Washington Post)



By Michael Ruane

Michael E. Ruane is a general assignment reporter who also covers Washington institutions and historical topics. He has been a general assignment reporter at the Philadelphia Bulletin, an urban affairs and state feature writer at the Philadelphia Inquirer, and a Pentagon correspondent at Knight Ridder newspapers. Twitter