

Excavation of graves begins at site of Colonial-era Black church

BY BEN FINLEY
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Archaeologists have begun a months-long effort to learn who was buried at one of the oldest Black churches in the U.S. and how they lived. (Ben Finley / Associated Press)

Archaeologists in Virginia began excavating three suspected graves at the original site of one of the nation's oldest Black churches Monday, kicking off a months-long effort to learn who was buried there and how they lived.

The First Baptist Church was formed in 1776 by free and enslaved Black people in Williamsburg, the colonial capital of Virginia. Members initially met secretly in fields

and under trees in defiance of laws that prevented African Americans from congregating.

A total of 41 apparent burial plots have been identified. Most are four to six feet long and up to two feet wide. The soil is discolored in places where holes were likely dug and filled back in. Only one grave appears to be marked, with an upside-down empty wine bottle.

Before excavations began Monday, a private blessing was held.

“It was important for us to have that ceremony — to bless the ancestors,” said Connie Matthews Harshaw, a church member and board president of a foundation that preserves First Baptist’s history. “Because we don’t know their names. Their names are known only to God.”

[First Baptist’s original church](#) was destroyed by a tornado in 1834. The second structure, built in 1856, stood there for a century. That building was bought in 1956 and razed to build a parking lot for Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum that was expanding at the time and that now has more than 400 structures.

The suspected burial plots were a surprise to many, said Harshaw. But some older members of the church had long believed that ancestors were buried there based on stories passed through the generations.

“When your grandmother tells you something, normally you can count on it,” Harshaw said.