



COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FIELD TECHNICIAN DESHONDRA DANDRIDGE CAREFULLY WORKS AT THE 19TH-CENTURY SITE OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG.

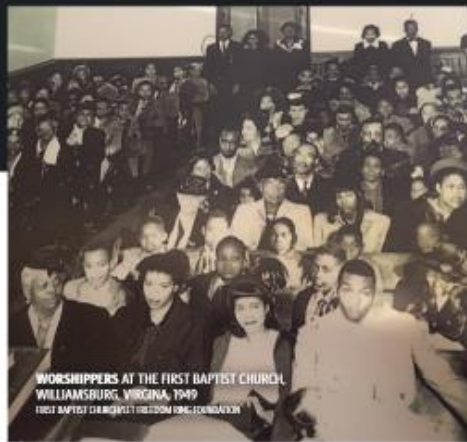


THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH on Nassau Street, in Williamsburg, Virginia, served as the home for one of the oldest continuous congregations in the United States. The original structure, built around 1818, was destroyed in the 1830s when the African Baptist Church (as it was called then) had as many as 600 members. A new brick building (photographed here in 1901, above) was dedicated in 1856.

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FIRST BAPTIST'S LONG HISTORY

TODAY'S MEMBERS of the First Baptist Church regard the ongoing excavation and hoped-for restoration of its early 19th-century meetinghouse as "a symbol of healing," said Connie Matthews Harshaw, who heads the foundation that works to preserve the church's history. The brick building built in the 1850s not only served as the congregation's home for a century but also played an important role in American history. In the Civil War, Confederate forces commandeered the church to serve as a hospital but were forced to abandon it as they retreated during the Battle of Williamsburg in May 1862. In 1863, after President Abraham Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation that freed enslaved people in rebel states, a school to teach newly free Black Americans opened in the church building. "This isn't just about a little church in Williamsburg," said Harshaw. "It's about a national treasure."



WORSHIPPERS AT THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA, 1949



THE FREEDOM BELL from the First Baptist Church was used in the 2016 opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., when President Barack Obama rang it. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

RESTORING AMERICAN HERITAGE

The Search to Recover a Storied Black Church

Colonial Williamsburg is excavating the 19th-century site of the First Baptist Church, where Black worshippers met more than 200 years ago.

In 1956 the century-old home of the First Baptist Church—one of the United States' oldest Black congregations—was demolished. The congregation would be relocating to a new home, while Colonial Williamsburg, a living-history museum in Virginia, would expand into the site on Nassau Street.

They did a quick excavation of the site, but then it eventually became a parking lot. A memorial plaque was placed there in the 1980s. In 2020 Colonial Williamsburg announced that it would return to thoroughly excavate the site of the First Baptist Church, whose use as a place of worship goes back as far as 1818.

Free and enslaved Blacks began to worship in secret around 1776, gathering just outside of Williamsburg. In 1781, under the leadership of Rev. Gowan Pamphlet, an enslaved man in Williamsburg, they organized as Baptists. In the 1800s a white landowner named Jesse Cole happened by and was so moved by what

he heard that he offered his carriage house in town. A tornado damaged the meetinghouse in 1834. The congregation met in temporary premises until 1856, when a sturdy brick building was built which would serve as the Baptist church's meeting place until the 1950s.

An American Story

Even though a new place of worship was built at a different location, "We want to put the story of the church back on the actual site," said Jack Gary, director of archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg.

Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the First Baptist

Church's Let Freedom Ring Foundation, which works to preserve and share its history, said the ideal outcome would be "to find enough of the 1818 structure to restore it, and create interpretive programs to tell the story of the church and how it formed a part of colonial America."

Telling that story is long overdue. Colonial Williamsburg, created in the early and mid-1900s, "basically erased everything that has to do with African Americans," said Harshaw, who noted that the Black population amounted to a little over half of the colonial town. In contrast with the 1950s excavation, when

"maybe the story of the church wasn't of interest," Gary said, the current work involves a close collaboration between the museum and Harshaw's foundation.

The first digging session has yielded valuable finds, including at least two burials, more than 12,000 artifacts, and signs of a foundation that

may be the original 1818 meetinghouse. The congregation's rich oral history has been vital, added Gary, and helped point the way to the burial locations. "This project is an example of the work that is still needed to tell the whole story—not Black or white, but the American story," said Harshaw. ■