

# Archaeologists find more graves at lost Williamsburg African American cemetery

Hidden under a parking lot for half a century, an old church cemetery has yielded 21 graves



Colonial Williamsburg began an archaeological dig at the original site of the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg on Tuesday. The church was founded by enslaved people from Africa in the late 1700s. (Timothy C. Wright for The Washington Post)

By

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Nineteen more graves have been found in an old African American cemetery that was once buried under a parking lot in Colonial Williamsburg, the site's chief archaeologist said Thursday.

The total of likely burials discovered at the location of the old First Baptist Church on Nassau Street in the former Virginia capital now stands at 21, with the possibility of more to be found.

In addition, experts said four human teeth have been unearthed at the site of one of the oldest such churches in the country and the earliest African American church in Williamsburg.

Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology, said rectangular patterns of soil discoloration show the location of the burials in what is almost certainly the church's old burying ground. Some smaller ones may be graves of children. "We have not found the full extent ... of the burials yet," he said. "We need to continue expanding our excavation to get the full number of people there. ... We will keep going until we stop seeing burials."

The presumed graves, which all predate the 20th century, have not yet been fully excavated, and the archaeologists are awaiting approval from the church's descendant community to proceed with that, Gary said. Indications are that the community is eager to find and honor its ancestors, many of whom were enslaved. And there is hope that some may even find the lost resting places of relatives.

### *Faces of the dead emerge from lost African American graveyard*

"I have the unfortunate task of listening to the descendants who say to me, 'I'm dying every day. And this study ... the history, this is great,'" said Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the church's Let Freedom Ring Foundation. But they add: "I want to know if my family's in the back of that church. How soon can you tell me?" she said. "It is emotional to think about uncovering graves and exposing skeletons," she said. "Yes, we want to know. We want to see. All [21]? We don't know. Can we just maybe do two?" But "we want to be clear: Don't stop," she said.



An image with the outlines of some of the 21 graves that have been discovered at the original site of the First Baptist Church. (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

The announcement came during a meeting in Williamsburg with Gary; Michael Blakey, director of the Institute for Historical Biology at William & Mary; Joseph Jones, anthropology lecturer and research associate at the institute; Matthews Harshaw; and the descendants of church members. Some participants also attended online.

The dig at the site began last September, after Matthews Harshaw and Cliff Fleet, president of Colonial Williamsburg, agreed that Williamsburg had little or no information on the historic church, she said in an email.

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. In 1818, there is a reference to a “Baptist meeting house” on the spot, according to the project’s research. “It is unclear what this building looked like or how long it had been standing on the lot by 1818,” researchers wrote.

In 1856, a stately new brick church was built with a steeple and Palladian windows. The church housed a school for Black students in the 1860s. It survived a Civil War battle in 1862 that killed and wounded thousands of men and filled the town with injured soldiers.

It served its members through the end of slavery, the eras of Reconstruction, Jim Crow racial oppression, segregation and the dawn of the civil rights movement.

[\*The search for the missing dead in a historic African American cemetery\*](#)

But as Colonial Williamsburg was being transformed into an 18th-century historic site, the presence of a 19th-century Black church didn’t fit that narrative. The colonial landmark bought the church and tore it down in 1955. The site was paved over in 1965. A new church funded by the sale — the current First Baptist Church — was built about eight blocks away in 1956.

Last 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 February, they found one of the four teeth and a small bone that could be from a human finger. Gary said Thursday that work is continuing to determine the boundaries of the cemetery. He said the graves have been dated by the layers of soil on top of them. He said he was not sure how far down any remains might be. “This phase of the project is designed to determine the number of burials ... the extent of those burials and to be able to put them back on the landscape so we know exactly where they are,” he said. He said archaeologists had also found remnants of a brick wall that may have delineated the church property. And they reexamined the previously discovered foundation of what may or may not be the church from before 1856.

“Within the next two to three months, we’ll be able to answer the question as to what this building” was, he said. “Stay tuned.”



Archaeologist Eric Schweickart searches for artifacts Tuesday morning during the first day of a dig. (Timothy C. Wright for The Washington Post)