

THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

‘Love is here’: Hundreds gathered for block party in Williamsburg to celebrate Juneteenth

By Kim O'Brien Root
Virginia Gazette

Jun 21, 2022 at 11:34 am















People enjoy an afternoon of music, food and friendship at Williamsburg's Juneteenth Freedom Celebration on the lawn of First Baptist Church. (Kim O'Brien Root)

WILLIAMSBURG — The Triangle block in downtown Williamsburg was once a bustling area of Black businesses and residences, until redevelopment in the 1970s changed the landscape.

But on Sunday, in the shadow of historic First Baptist Church — one of the oldest Black churches in the country, the Triangle came to life with the Juneteenth Freedom Celebration. Part block party, part educational outreach, the event brought out hundreds of community members to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States.

The celebration, called “Honoring the Ancestors,” was part of Juneteenth events around the country. Long celebrated in Black communities but only recognized as a national holiday in 2021, Juneteenth marks the day in 1865 when enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, found out they were freed — more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.



A Juneteenth flag hangs at the Juneteenth Freedom Celebration in Williamsburg. (Kim O'Brien Root)

Many attendees called events like the Freedom Celebration “a wonderful beginning. ... It’s a good event to start a tradition,” said Dylan Pritchett, a self-described storyteller who grew up in Williamsburg. “It’s important that we get together, but what do we do now as a community? Hopefully it will expand and there will be more community involvement now that people know what it is.”

The event, one of several throughout the Williamsburg area over the weekend, was organized by the [Village Initiative](#) and [Williamsburg Action](#), two groups that work for equity and justice through education and awareness. The afternoon was filled with music, drumming, food, dancing, art, camaraderie and, according to organizers, joy.

“Juneteenth is about joy,” said Antonia Darnella, head of Williamsburg Action. “It’s uplifting. It feels safe. It feels like love. It feels like love is here.”

As an organization, the Village Initiative, which started in 2016 as an effort to equalize education, strives to be “bridge builders” in the community, to bring together all ages, races and demographics, said founder Jacqueline Bridgeforth-Williams. On Sunday, the bridge building “really came through,” she said, evident by the diverse crowd that spilled over from the church lawn and parking lot into the junction of blocked-off Prince George and Scotland streets.

“We’re celebrating in a place that there were a lot of memories,” Bridgeforth-Williams said. “I know the ancestors were pleased. Going back generations ... and I’m talking about going back to those enslaved who arrived here back in 1619. I know they were smiling and rejoicing somewhere.”

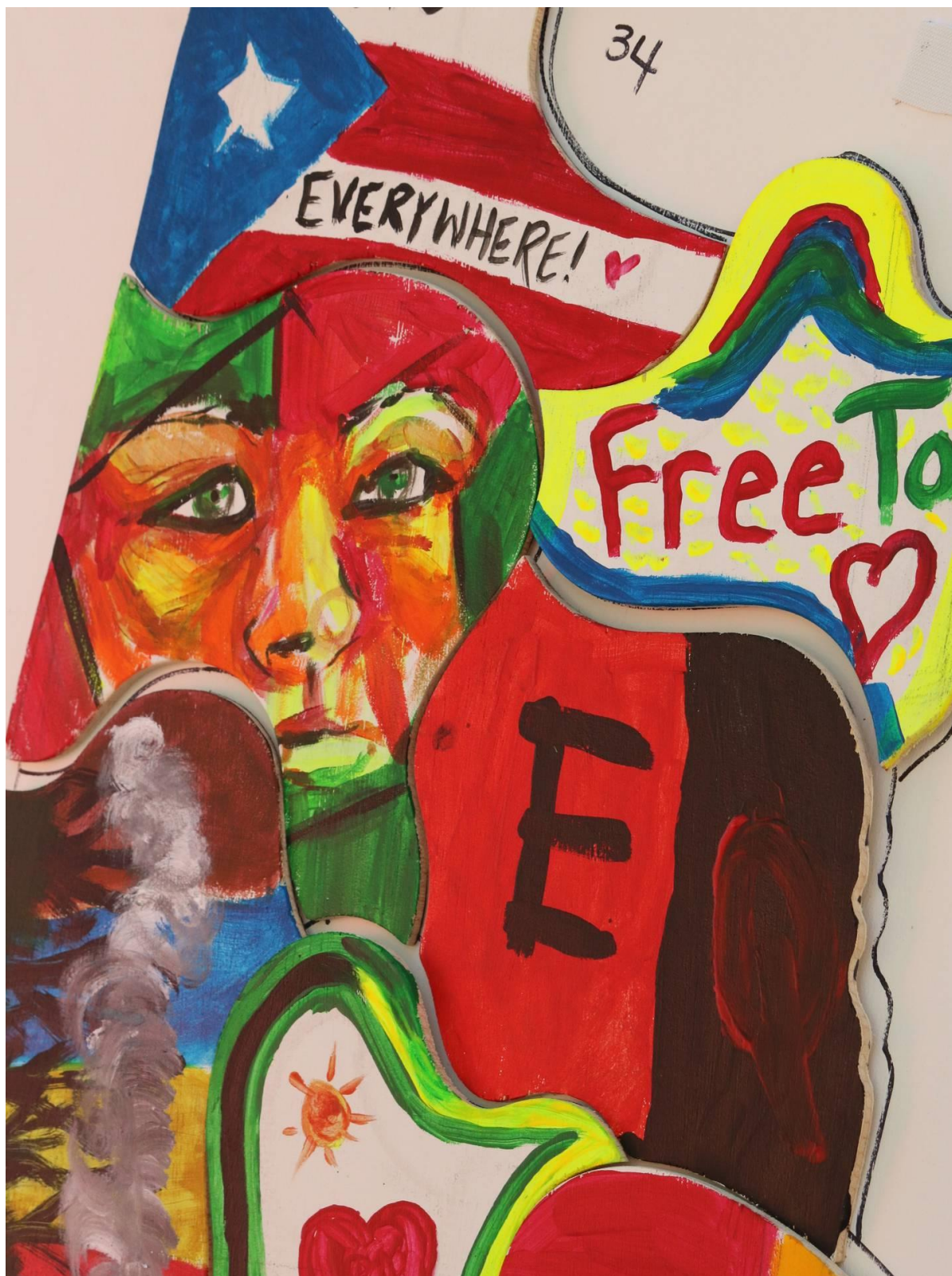
For the past few years, the Village Initiative, in partnership with the College of William & Mary and Williamsburg-James City County Schools, been spearheading the [Local Black Histories Project](#). The educational project is documenting the history of the Black community in Williamsburg, collecting more than 100 histories so far.

[[Project documents oral histories of the Black community in Williamsburg](#)]

The project was on display at the celebration as Steve Prince, the director of engagement and artist in residence at William & Mary’s [Muscarelle Museum of Art](#), led a community art project. Attendees could paint puzzle pieces that would fit together to create the outlines of two figures — Mrs. Bessie Skinner Gerst and Dr. J. Blaine Blayton, two notable members of Williamsburg’s

Black community. Gerst opened a kindergarten for Black students during the years of segregation, while Blayton was the first Black physician in Williamsburg and the first Black member of the James City County School Board.

“It’s community engagement, but it’s also teaching people about the power of art,” Prince said, who planned to paint the head and hands himself to finish off the large wooden pieces that will be part of a traveling art exhibit.



For a public art display, Juneteenth attendees painted puzzle pieces that would fit together to create outlines of two of Williamsburg's pioneering Black residents, including Bessie Skinner Gerst, who ran a kindergarten out of her home during segregation to address racial disparities. (Kim O'Brien Root)

From the line dancing to the red velvet cupcakes, from voter registration to free children's books, there was a lot to learn and smile and laugh about at Sunday's event. But, said organizers and community members alike, the fight for equality and justice continues.

"I love this country. It's a great country," said Herb Jones, who is running for Congress and spoke briefly at the event. "We've made great progress. ... or have we? We have a lot to celebrate, but there's a lot of irony and there's a lot of work that still needs to be done."

Kim O'Brien Root, 757-603-3671,