

Vigil service held for bodies exhumed at historic First Baptist Church site in Colonial Williamsburg

Free and enslaved African Americans formed the First Baptist Church in 1776. They are now being remembered in a prayer and vigil service in Colonial Williamsburg.

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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — Descendants of one of the oldest known Black churches in America witnessed the uncovering of important history on July 18.

At 10 a.m., a prayer and vigil service was held at the First Baptist Church in Williamsburg to remember the lives of those who were temporarily lost in history, but have since been discovered.

Free and enslaved African Americans formed the church in 1776. For the last 18 months, archaeologists have been digging near the intersection of Nassau and Francis streets, to uncover what history they can find.

Last year, they found approximately 20 gravesites under the church's parking lot, which was the original site of the building.

Monday morning, the count was up to 41 grave shafts. The First Baptist Church descendant community voted to have archaeologists excavate three of them, to learn more about the race, age and sex of the people buried there. One of those graves had a wine bottle placed at one end, making it the only burial site that appears to be marked.

The archaeologists might be able to tell things about the remains like the person's age at death, stature, major injuries, illnesses, physical stresses, general quality of life and place of origin.

Once excavated, the bodies will be taken for DNA testing, in the hopes of connecting the deceased to their living ancestors today. The excavation process is expected to take two months, and running tests could take from six months to a year.

Most of the descendants who were children when the church was located on Nassau Street are now in their late 80s, [according to previous 13News Now coverage.](#)