

Historic highway marker dedication honors local preacher and icon

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Rev. James Ingram, portraying Rev. Gowan Pamphlet, speaks at the historic highway marker dedication ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring the Nation Builder (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)

WILLIAMSBURG — History was made at the intersection of Scotland and Nassau streets this weekend.

On Sunday, April 25, members of Williamsburg's Historic First Baptist Church, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR) and the community joined together to dedicate a historic highway marker in honor of Nation Builder Gowan Pamphlet.

Rev. Pamphlet was an enslaved worker at the King's Arms Tavern, who became an ordained minister in 1772 at the permission of his owner Jane Vobe. At that time, he was the first and only ordained black preacher in the country, according to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Rev. Pamphlet preached equality throughout the American Revolution, risking his life as he led religious gatherings of enslaved and freed African Americans in the late 1770s.

RELATED STORY: Historic First Baptist Church to dedicate marker honoring local icon



Rev. James Ingram and Rev. Dr. Reginald F. Davis unveil the historic highway marker honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet on April 25, 2021. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)

Under constant threat by laws that prohibited religious gatherings of African Americans, as well as lack of recognition by the state Anglican church and later white Baptist leaders in Virginia, Rev. Pamphlet was forced to preach in undisclosed locations to continue to spread the word of God. A well spoken man with a magnetic personality, Rev. Pamphlet attracted the attention and garnered the respect of not only the local African American community, but of whit

He founded what is today known as Historic First Baptist Church, which grew to a congregation of 500 members. By 1793, he was granted his personal freedom and continued to lead the members of his church until his death in 1809 (the actual date of his death is unknown).

The location of the highway marker is important to the members of the 245-year-old church, as it is the intersection of the original church on Nassau and the current church on Scotland streets.

With tears in her eyes, Ms. Harshaw said, “This means a lot to us.”

The Rev. James Ingram is a Colonial Williamsburg actor, interpreter and member of the church. He has researched and portrayed Pamphlet for 23 years.

When Rev. Ingram was asked by WYDaily what this sign means to him, knowing that Pamphlet’s story will now reach more people?

“Lifelong dream that I never thought I’d see in my life,” he answered.

Rev. Ingram described Pamphlet as “a man who sacrificed all he had to make sure that we were able to have a place, and eventually a building, to hear the word of God.”

Before a crowd of community members sitting socially distanced from one another, the sign was unveiled at the intersection of Scotland and N. Nassau streets in Williamsburg, opposite from Matthew Whaley Elementary School, 301 Scotland St.



Rev. Dr. Reginald F. Davis,
minister of Historic First
Baptist Church in Williamsburg,
speaks at the sign dedication
ceremony on April 25, 2021,
honoring Rev. Gowan
Pamphlet. (WYDaily/Nancy
Sheppard)



Descendants of the early congregants of Historic First Baptist Church in
Williamsburg gather around the newly dedicated historic highway
marker. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)

Also in attendance for the ceremony were Rev. Dr. Reginald F. Davis, pastor of First Baptist Church, Liz Montgomery, chairwoman of First Baptist Church's History Ministry, and Dr. Colita Nichols Fairfax, chairwoman of the Virginia Board of Historic Resources and leading authority in Virginia's African American history, as well as several family members descended from early church congregants.



Liz Montgomery, chairwoman of Historic First Baptist Church's History Ministry, speaks at the historic highway marker sign dedication ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)

“As Colonial Williamsburg, William & Mary and First Baptist continue to research archaeological evidence and other primary source information, we will be able to tell a more accurate, complete and inclusive history of this city, state and nation,” said Ms. Montgomery.

For the members of Historic First Baptist Church, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Virginia Department of Historic Resources and all of those who helped bring this sign to Williamsburg, this has been a labor of passion to honor a hero whose story has hardly been told.

Dr. Fairfax noted that only 4% of historic highway markers in Virginia are dedicated to African American history, despite the Commonwealth having one of the oldest historic highway marker programs in the United States.

“One of the things that’s going on right now in the country, but especially here in Williamsburg, is trying to restore historical justice,” said Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of Historic First Baptist Church’s Let Freedom Ring Foundation. “Colonial Williamsburg has agreed to help us reroute visitors so children who come here on their field trips can actually get the whole American story.”

Bringing Rev. Pamphlet’s name to the public is just the first step in a long chronology of historic inequities that the community hopes to shine light upon in the months and years to come.

When Rev. Ingram thinks about the meaning behind honoring Rev. Pamphlet, he refers to a traditional African belief.

“As long as we speak the name of the one that’s passed, they will never die,” he said. “We had around 75 or 80 people here today, but millions of ancestors were all around just watching.”

To see more images of the ceremony dedicating the historic highway marker honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet, click through the photo gallery below.



Prior to the unveiling of the historic highway marker honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet on April 25, 2021. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Vice Mayor W. Pat Dent speaks at the historic highway marker ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Rev. James Ingram and Rev. Dr. Reginald F. Davis unveil the historic highway marker honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet on April 25, 2021. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Rev. James Ingram, portraying Rev. Gowan Pamphlet, speaks at the historic highway marker dedication ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring the Nation Builder (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Rev. James Ingram, who has been portraying Gowan Pamphlet for 23 years, speaks at the sign dedication ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring the Nation Builder. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Rev. Dr. Reginald F. Davis, minister of Historic First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, speaks at the sign dedication ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Dr. Colita Nichols Fairfax, chairperson for the Virginia Department of Historic resources, speaking at the sign dedication ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Liz Montgomery, chairwoman of Historic First Baptist Church's History Ministry, speaks at the historic highway marker sign dedication ceremony on April 25, 2021, honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Connie M. Harshaw, President, 'Let Freedom Ring Foundation, speaks at the historic highway marker dedication on April 25, 2021, honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Members of the committee that help bring this sign to fruition gather around it following the ceremony on April 25, 2021, which honored Rev. Gowan Pamphlet. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



Descendants of the early congregants of Historic First Baptist Church in Williamsburg gather around the newly dedicated historic highway marker. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)



The historic highway marker honoring Rev. Gowan Pamphlet was dedicated on April 25, 2021. The sign sits in front of Matthew Whaley Elementary School, located at 301 Scotland St. in Williamsburg. (WYDaily/Nancy Sheppard)

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