



The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
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Colonial Williamsburg Project to Restore and Interpret One of Nation's Earliest Black Baptist Churches Awarded \$3 Million Grant

Lilly Endowment Inc. directs second grant to The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, initiates a \$1 million matching gift challenge

WILLIAMSBURG, VA (Feb. 23, 2023) — A [nationally recognized project](#) to examine, reconstruct and interpret the Historic First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Va., will benefit from a \$3 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. The church, founded in 1776 by enslaved and free Black worshippers, is one of the nation's earliest Black Baptist churches.

The grant was awarded to The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation to establish a financial endowment for long-term support of religious interpretive staff at the site and direct funding toward the reconstruction of the church's original structure. The grant also initiates a matching gift challenge, requiring Colonial Williamsburg to raise an additional \$1 million for the project by Oct. 31, 2023.

"First Baptist Church's history is one of many powerful stories that unfolded in Williamsburg during our nation's founding. Lilly Endowment recognizes the significance of ensuring the church's history and the lessons of its early years are researched and shared with the nation and the world," said Cliff Fleet, president and CEO of Colonial Williamsburg. "We are thrilled to receive the Lilly Endowment's grant, which is their second very generous commitment to this project. We also are actively engaging other donors through the grant's matching gift challenge. This grant and the ongoing support we are seeking from additional donors comes at a critical time as we seek to reconstruct the original building by 2026, the 250th anniversary of the church's founding."

The First Baptist Church project is a partnership that includes First Baptist Church's descendant community, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and the Let Freedom Ring Foundation. The Lilly Endowment Inc. made a \$2.5 million grant to The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation for the project in 2020, its first year.

Since then, significant progress has been made at the site and several discoveries have garnered national and international attention. In October 2021, archaeologists located the original foundation of the church's original structure, located near the intersection of Nassau and Francis streets in Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area, which dates to the early 1800s. In addition, more than 60 burials have been discovered at the site. Remains from three of the

gravesites are currently undergoing osteological and DNA analysis, which may provide clues about who is buried at the site.

Once archaeology has been completed, the congregation's first meeting house will be reconstructed and interpreted, featuring Colonial Williamsburg Nation Builder the Rev. Gowan Pamphlet, who was a founder of First Baptist Church and is portrayed by the Rev. James Ingram.

"Lilly Endowment's wonderful commitment to supporting interpretive staff will ensure that the history and many of the remarkable stories of First Baptist Church's early years are shared with Colonial Williamsburg visitors for generations to come," Ingram said. "The stories of Rev. Pamphlet and the First Baptist Church congregation provide critical lessons about the nation's religious history. Their ingenuity and determination speak to their commitment to their faith and to pursuing religious freedom."

Pamphlet, who was an enslaved worker in a Williamsburg tavern, founded First Baptist Church in 1776 and secured admission of the church into the Dover Baptist Association in 1793, the same year he gained his freedom.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation received both Lilly Endowment grants through its Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative, a national effort to that is supporting 34 organizations as they develop new or strengthen existing exhibitions and education programs that fairly and accurately portray the role of religion in the U.S. and around the world.

"Museums and cultural institutions are trusted organizations and play an important role in teaching the American public about the world around them," said Christopher L. Coble, Lilly Endowment's vice president for religion. "These organizations, including Colonial Williamsburg, are using the grants to help visitors understand and appreciate the significant impact religion has had and continues to have on society in the United States and around the globe. Our hope is that these efforts will promote greater knowledge about and respect for people of diverse religious traditions."

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has already received several gifts that qualify for the matching gift challenge and is currently seeking additional support to complete this effort. To learn more visit, <https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/give/funding-opportunities/first-baptist-church-archaeology-project/>.

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The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation preserves, restores and operates Virginia's 18th-century capital of Williamsburg. Innovative and interactive experiences highlight the relevance of the American Revolution to contemporary life and the importance of an informed, active citizenry. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed original buildings, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers, lodging, culinary options from historic taverns to casual or elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 36 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones and his son Rees Jones, a full-service spa and fitness center, pools, retail stores and gardens. Philanthropic

support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives.

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