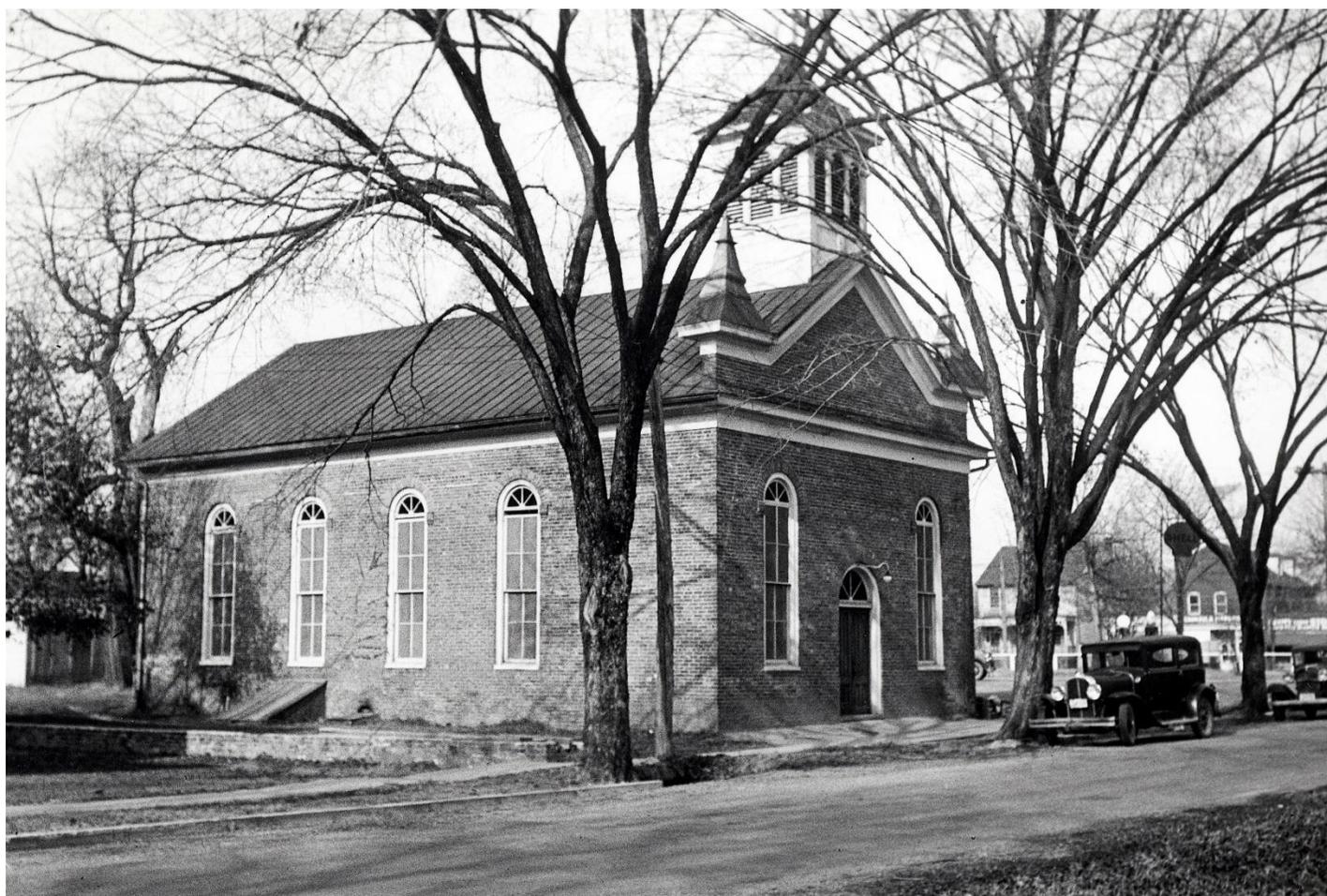


**FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH AND LOT M**

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH DESIGN**



The Colonial Williamsburg Department of Archaeology

August 2020

## Introduction

As part of Colonial Williamsburg's commitment to exploring and interpreting the Nassau Street site of the First Baptist Church the Department of Archaeology will perform a seven-week, archaeological survey of Lot M (Figure 1). The First Baptist Church of Williamsburg is one of the country's oldest African American churches founded by African Americans. The northern portion of Lot M was the location of the congregation's church from 1855 through 1956. Additionally, the property may have contained an earlier iteration of the Church's meeting house as early as 1804. The First Baptist Church has been an integral part of the Williamsburg community for centuries, and Lot M may contain archaeological resources which would provide valuable information about the church which has not survived in the documentary record. Moreover, there is a very real possibility that congregation members have been buried on this property, though any grave markers that they may have erected are long-since removed. Archaeological excavation provides the most precise and accurate method of identifying unmarked burial sites.

The goal of this initial archaeological survey is to determine if any undisturbed archaeological deposits remain on the property that have the potential to help interpret the property's use by the Church. This document contains a brief synopsis of the historic, archaeological, and geophysical data associated with Lot M, a list of research questions to be investigated during the project, and a description of the methods used in this investigation. Additionally, it lays out the various ways that we will seek public involvement in the project, before, during, and after the fieldwork is concluded. In addition to providing answers to our research question, we hope that the process of undertaking this archaeological project will provide an avenue for members of the First Baptist Church congregation, the Williamsburg community, and interested individuals from all over the world to engage with our common past.

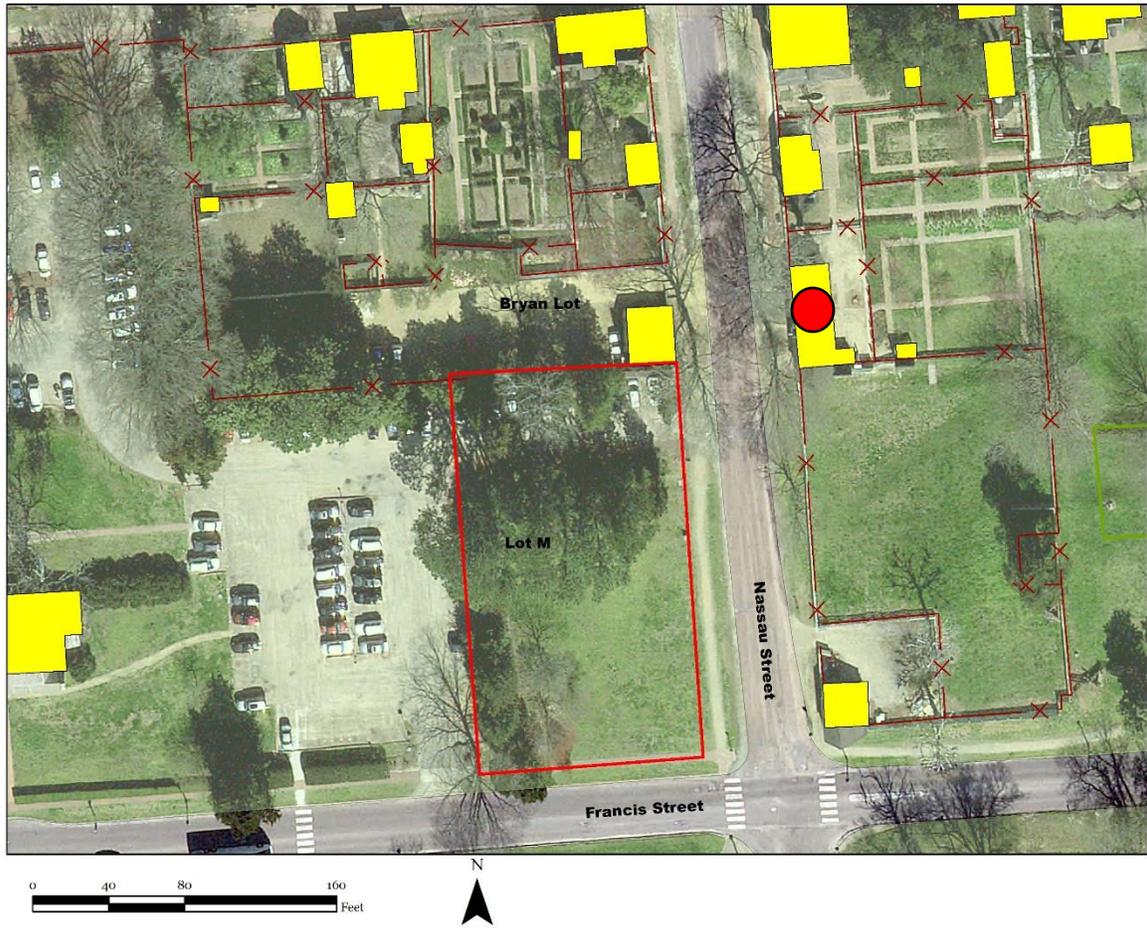


Figure 1: Location of Lot M (in red). The reconstructed Cole Stable is marked with a red dot.

## Historical Background

According to a 1717/18 bill of sale between William Blaikley and John Custis, Lot M contained a house as early as 1716, possibly built by John Tullitt, a local bricklayer. While not mentioned in the bill of sale it is possible that the house would have had associated outbuildings.

“[William Blaikley] [h]ath granted, bargained, sold, aliend... unto the said John Custis and his Heirs for ever, one certain lott of ground and house, in ye Citty of Williamsburgh near Custis Square, denoted in ye plan of ye said Citty by ye letter M, which lott of ground and house ye said Blaikly purchasd of John Tullitt (Blaikley purchased lot from Tullitt (bricklayer) in 1716)” (Stephenson 1959: 2-3)

John Custis owned the property and buildings until his death in 1749. It is unclear who owned the lot after Custis’ death or what happened to any buildings from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The 1781 Frenchman’s maps does not depict any buildings on the lot (Figure 2). By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the lot was owned by Charles Taliaferro as noted on the Unknown Draftsman’s map circa 1790.

In 1804 Jesse Cole purchased Lot M after Taliaferro’s death and in 1818 purchased the Bryan House and lot which stood just north of Lot M. Cole’s purchase of the Bryan lot provides the first documentary mention of a physical edifice for the First Baptist Church standing on Lot M. The tax book records the southern boundary of the Bryan Lot as “the Baptist Meeting house”, placing it on the north boundary of Lot M (Rowe 1983). It is unclear what this building looked like or how long it had been standing on the lot by 1818. In 1834 a tornado destroyed or badly damaged the church. The Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser from June 23, 1834 stated:

“In Williamsburg many chimnies and frame houses were blown down, among which the colored people’s meeting house near the Lunatic Hospital; the gable end of Mr. Jesse Cole’s brick stable and carriage house was also blown in...”

According to Tommy Bogger’s history of the church, after the tornado the congregation met in the powder magazine concurrently with the white Baptist church until a brick church was built in 1855 on Lot M (2006:16). The oral history of Eliza Baker, which was taken in 1933, related that Jesse Cole provided the church with a structure in which to worship. Ms. Baker recalls that the church was an “old carriage house” or an “old barn” that was replaced by the brick church in 1855. She described it as “shacklety” and that people feared it would fall down on the congregation due to their rejoicing, thus leading to the need for the new brick church. Ms. Baker was born in 1845, so her recollection of the church would have been as a young child and would have been of a building that post-dated the tornado. This would also suggest that the congregation was not worshipping in the powder magazine prior to the construction of the brick church. Because the newspaper article references both the meeting house and Jesse Cole’s stable as two separate buildings in 1834, this leads us to speculate that Cole may have offered the use of his damaged carriage house, which was across Nassau Street, after the original meeting house structure was destroyed by the storm (see Figure 1 for the location of the Cole Stable). This may account for Ms. Baker’s recollection of it both being a carriage house and in disrepair. More study

of the documentary record as part of the current project may be able to help sort out some of these details.

While the details of the two decades after 1834 are unclear, in 1855 the congregation built and moved into a new brick edifice that would stand on Nassau Street for the next 100 years. This building was a brick structure measuring approximately 66 ft by 33 feet.

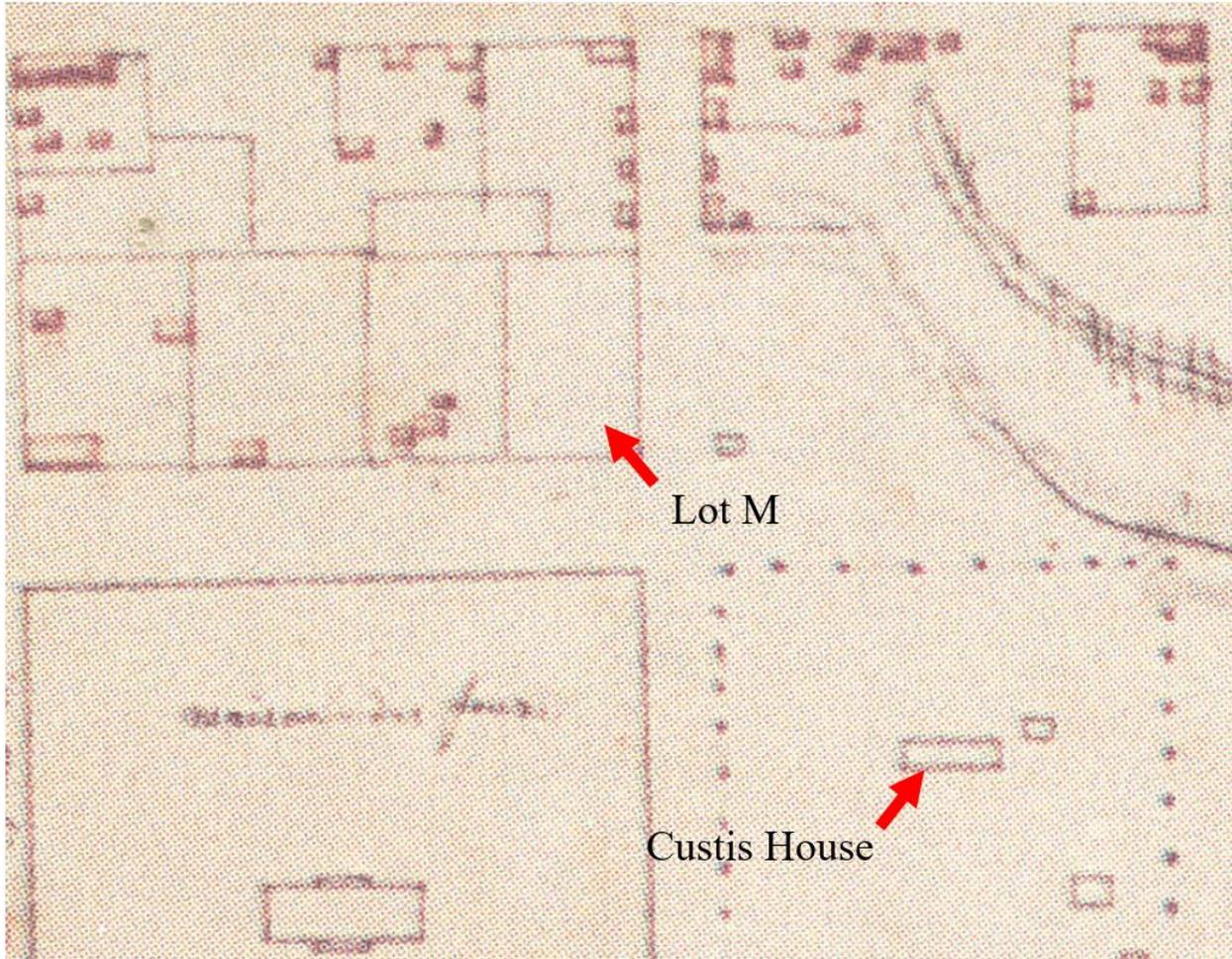


Figure 2: Detail of Frenchman's Map (1782) with Lot M and Custis House marked.

Over the years the Church made improvements to the building and added additions such as an extension of the altar to the west, however no major expansions took place. It is unclear when the Church took ownership of the property outright but they must have owned it by 1887 when they purchased from the Cole family an additional slip of land along the southern boundary. This division of the larger Lot M parcel remained until Colonial Williamsburg reconsolidated the entire lot after purchasing the Church's portion in 1955 and the rest of the lot from Eastern State Hospital in the 1960s.

Photographs of the church building from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century show a bulkhead entrance to a cellar on the south wall of the building (Figure 3). Just to the east of the bulkhead entrance appears another low box of some sort, however it is unclear if it is structural. A low

brick wall appears to have separated the church's property from the rest of Lot M and a wooden fence is also seen in some pictures along the Nassau Street frontage. A stone or concrete sidewalk ran in front of the church and connected to the front door with a stone or concrete stoop or apron (Figure 3). Very little can be seen in photographs of the western side of the church lot, however there appears to be a small outbuilding with two side by side doors at the back of the lot that is most likely the outhouse. What little can be seen of it shows a sign with "Men" on one of



*Figure 3: C. 1930 photograph of the 1855 church building.*

the doors (Figure 4). In 1953 the church began construction on an annex. During planning for construction, Sister Epps (Most likely Mrs. Fannie Epps) related that her great grandfather was buried where the annex was supposed to be built. The church agreed to commemorate the burial with a plaque in the floor of the annex. While ground was broken and construction begun, the building was never completed as Colonial Williamsburg offered to purchase the church a mere two weeks later (Bogger 2006:69). Due to Colonial Williamsburg already owning the lot directly adjacent to the church to the north and the altar being in the west end of the church, the most likely location of the annex is along the south side of the church. The church was demolished by Colonial Williamsburg in 1955 and archeological excavation commenced in 1957. The site of the church was paved over in 1965 for use as a parking lot for Merchants Square businesses. A buffer of vegetation was planted between the parking lot and the southern end of the lot.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the southern end of the lot still needs to be fully researched, however by 1904 several structures had been built along Francis Street, including the Executive building

of Eastern State Hospital and two smaller structures on Lot M. Insurance maps and aerial photographs from the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century suggest that several structures were constructed and modified on Lot M and by 1921 three residences were located here (Figure 5). Two of the structures fronted on Francis Street while the third fronted on Nassau Street. It is possible the buildings were constructed as housing for hospital workers. Colonial Williamsburg purchased these lots from Eastern State Hospital in the early 1960s and demolished any remaining structures.



Figure 4: Detail of c. 1940 photograph showing the privy building.

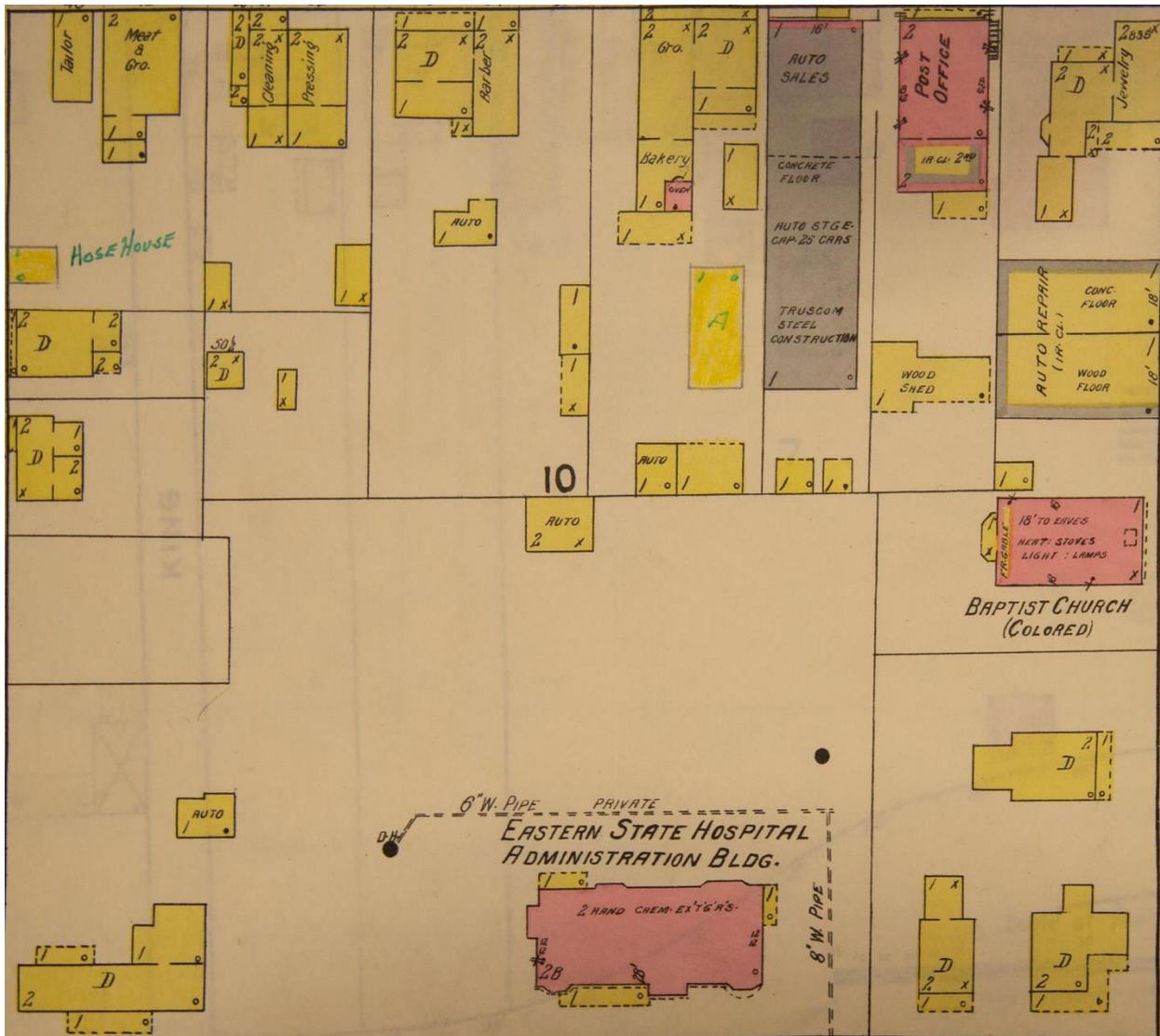


Figure 5: 1921 Sanborn Insurance map of Williamsburg.

## Previous Archaeology

The only previous excavation conducted on Lot M occurred in 1957 and concentrated on the northernmost 61.75' of the lot where the 1855 First Baptist Church had been located before its demolition in 1955. The excavations were conducted by James Knight under the direction of Ivor Noel Hume. Excavation techniques included systematically cross-trenching the entire area, first with trenches oriented east west and then at a 45 degree angle to the town plan. Larger trenches were excavated in areas where 18<sup>th</sup> century brick foundations were discovered, revealing the entire foundation (Figure 6). A trench excavated along the southern boundary of the property was deemed to contain nothing of importance at the time, however it was noted as having a modern concrete footing for a building that appeared to be incomplete. This may be the remains of the annex started in 1953 and could provide a valuable clue as to where any burials are located.

The 1957 excavations uncovered the remains of two 18<sup>th</sup>-century brick foundations (one 16' by 20', the other 6.5' by 12.5') beneath the foundations of the 1855 First Baptist Church structure. These foundations are located in the northeast corner of the lot (Figure 7). The smaller of the two buildings was tentatively interpreted as a privy, however no pit was noted as being found within the structure. The foundation of the larger building had been heavily damaged by the 1855 church, however an arrangement of bricks along the southern wall were interpreted as being steps. A scatter of brickbats was also interpreted as a possible paving leading to Nassau Street. A line of postholes was found running along Nassau Street, ending at the southeast corner of the larger of the two 18<sup>th</sup> century brick buildings. No information was recorded about the stratigraphy to the west of the church and little is known archaeologically about this section of the lot. Similarly no further archaeological excavations have occurred on Lot M since 1957 and the southern portion of the lot has never been tested archaeologically.



Figure 6: Photograph of 1957 excavation showing cross-trenches, the brick foundation of the 1855 church and earlier brick foundations.

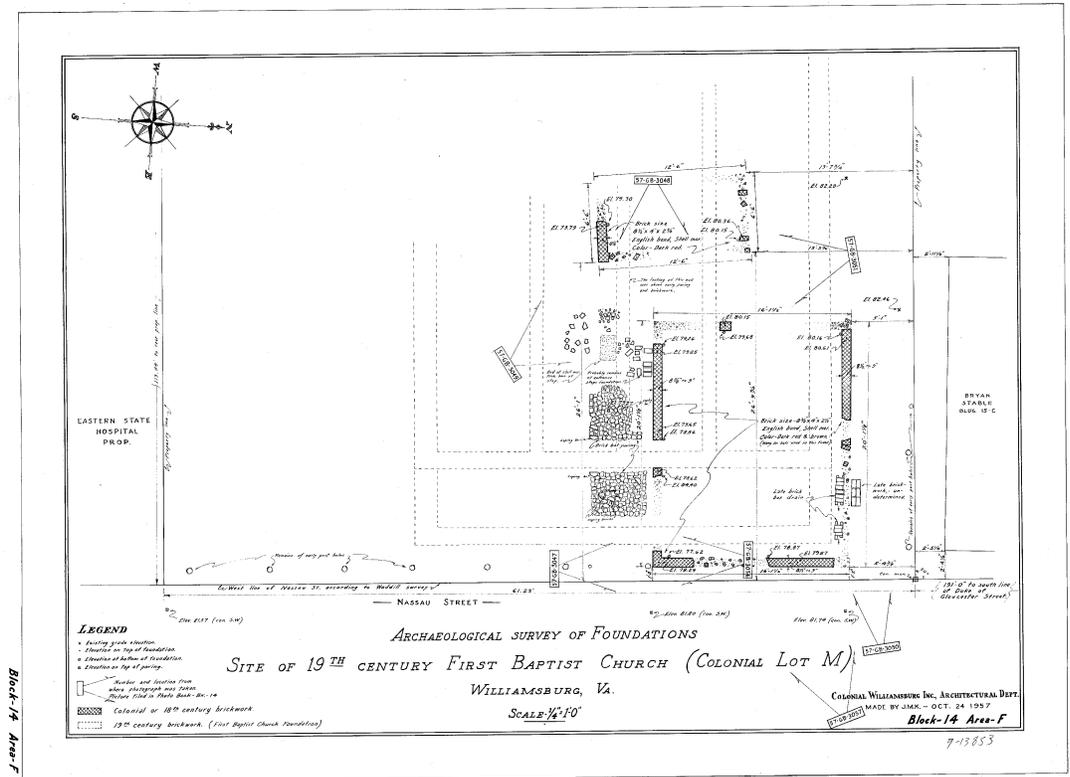
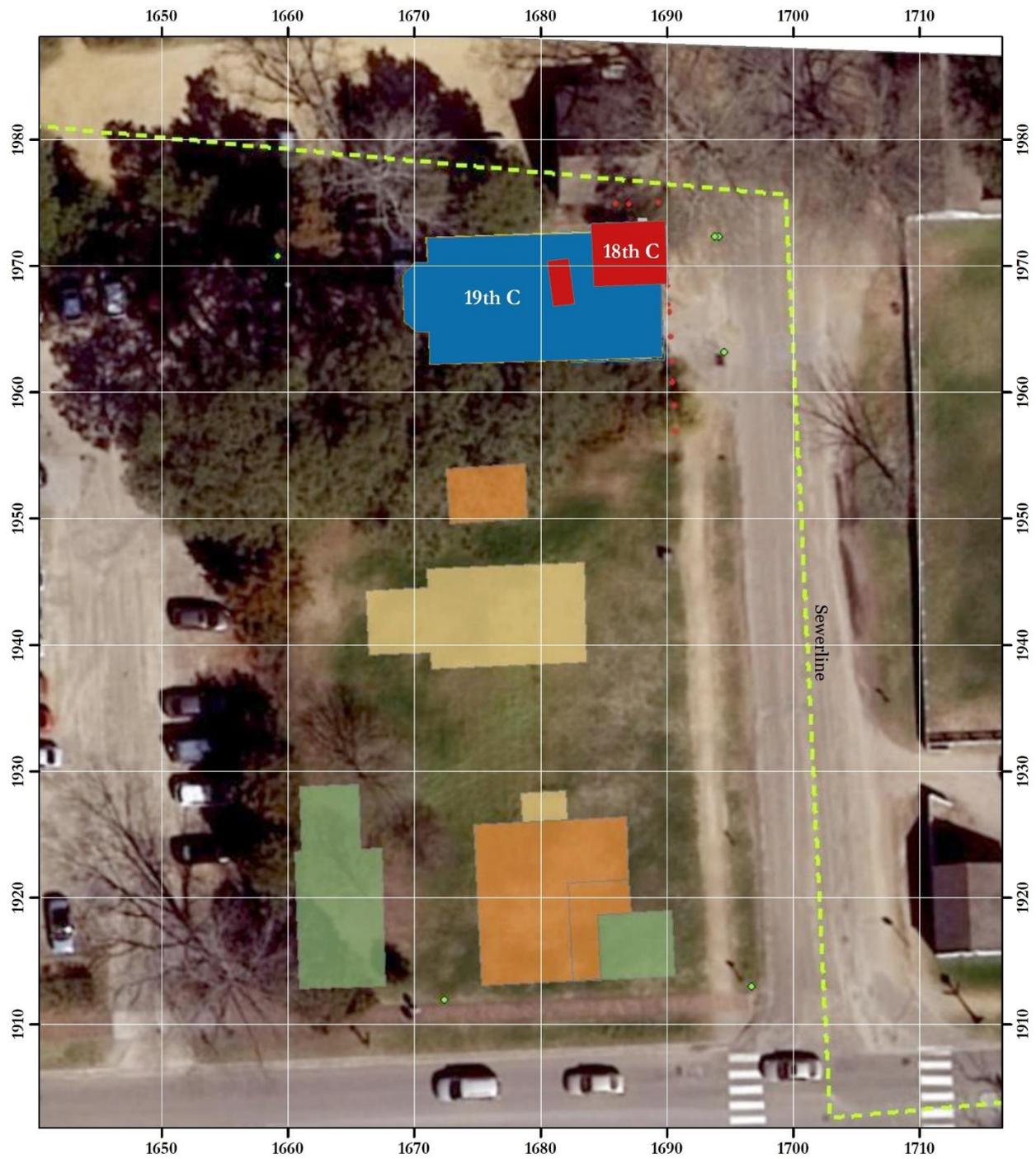
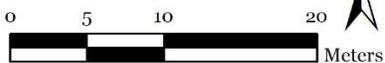


Figure 7: Plan drawing of architectural remains identified during the 1957 archaeological excavation.



Local Projected Coordinate System  
 1:400 scale  
 Created by Aaron Lovejoy  
 6/23/2020



**Map showing First Baptist Church project area in the CW Local Coordinate System.**



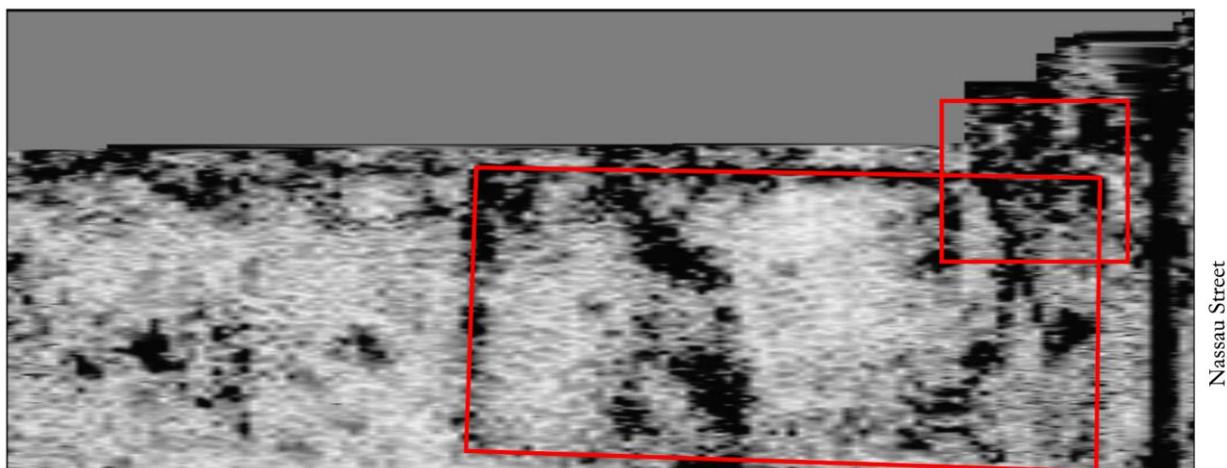
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 Department of Archaeology

Figure 8: Historic structures projected onto modern satellite imagery. Note the sewer line running to the north of Lot M.

## Ground Penetrating Radar Results – 2020

On May 27 and June 9, 2020 members of the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation’s Archaeology Department, under the direction of David Givens, conducted a ground penetrating radar survey of the project area. This work, appended to this document, discovered multiple anomalies that indicate the presence of significant archaeological features related to historic structures on Lot M. The GPR revealed that the foundations of the 1855 church appear to be largely intact. Also revealed is what appears to be a cellar or boiler room for the 1855 church (Figure 9). Several anomalies also appear to show the remains of the earlier structures found in the northeast corner of the property below the foundations of the 1855 church. No obvious burials showed up in the GPR scan, however the southern edge of the Church’s historic property boundary was unable to be scanned due to trees and vegetation bordering the parking lot in this area. To the west of the 1855 church foundations, several anomalies appear that may be structural, some of them possibly related to the outhouse seen in the historic photograph of the church (Figure 9).

The southern portion of Lot M appears to contain a network of drains that emanate from the three 20<sup>th</sup> century houses. A large central drain runs east west, with some of the house drains connecting to it (Figure 10). Of interest is that no foundations or cellars for the 20<sup>th</sup> century houses are visible, suggesting that they may not have had a significant disruptive impact on subsurface deposits. The most interesting anomaly in the southern end of the site appears to be a large H-shaped hearth. This hearth is below the footprint of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century buildings, however these types of hearths are most often associated with 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings so it is not thought to be associated with the later structure. One possibility is that the potential hearth is associated with the structure standing on the property in 1717 when John Custis purchased Lot M. How long this structure stood is unknown but it is not seen on the Frenchman’s map in 1781, suggesting it may have been removed by that time.



*Figure 9: GPR timeslice of northern surveyed area. The large red box represents a line of anomalies likely associated with the foundations of the 1855 brick church structure, the smaller red box represents anomalies potentially associated with the earlier brick foundations identified during the 1957 excavation.*

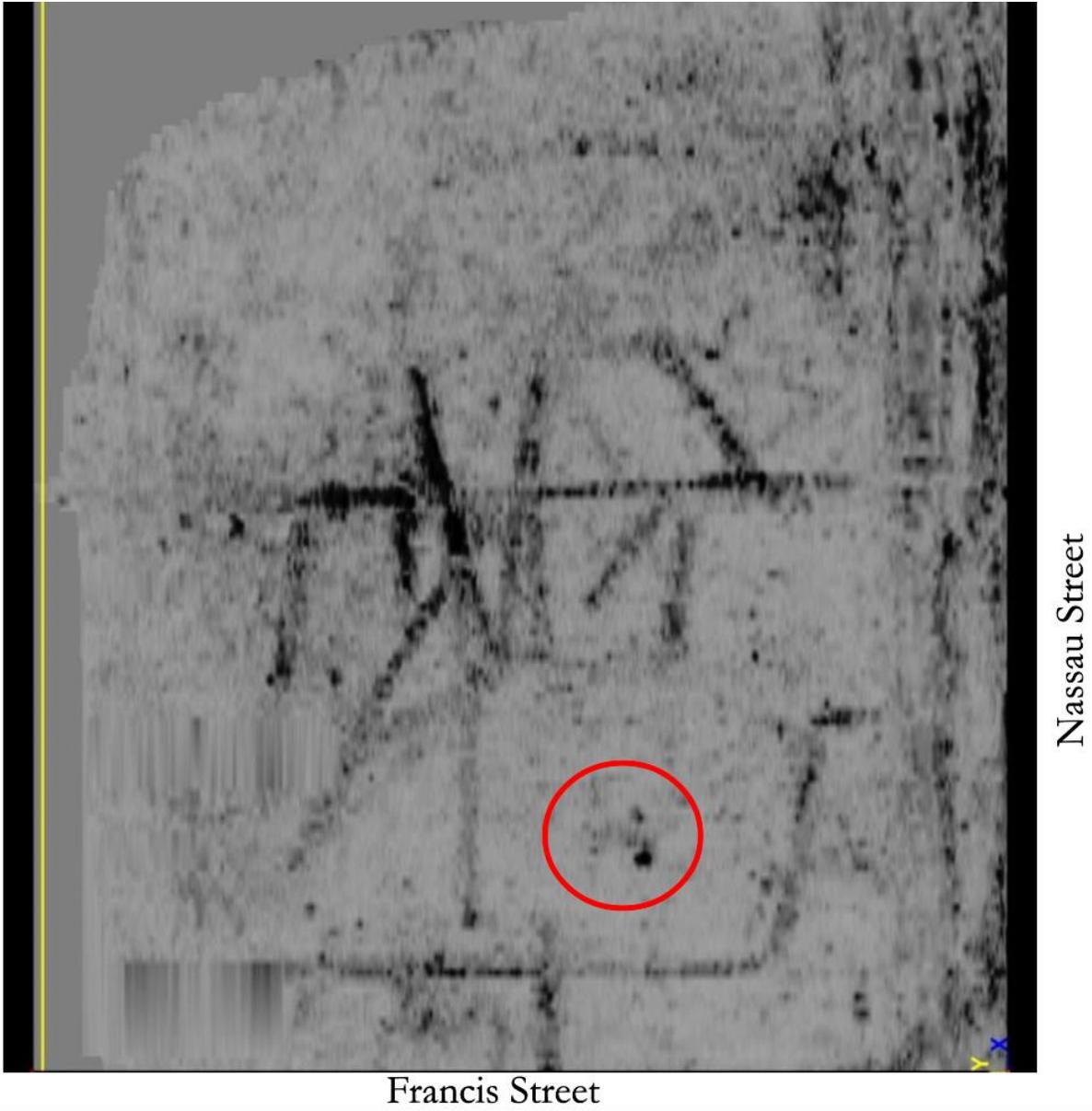


Figure 10: GPR timeslice of the southern survey area. The large linear anomalies represent early 20<sup>th</sup> C. drains, the red circle marks the location of the "H" shaped chimney base.

## Research Questions

Archaeological excavations have the potential to expand our knowledge of the Church's early history by confirming the presence of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century structures, features, and deposits on the lot. The primary goals of this phase of work will be to determine the integrity of previously located archaeological features associated with the Church, determine the nature of new archaeological features found in GPR scans, and provide a better understanding of the stratigraphy across the entire half acre lot. The results of this phase of excavation will guide the scope and scale of future archaeological research. Specific questions we will address with this phase of the project include:

- What is a potential archaeological signature for an 18<sup>th</sup> century church? Specifically, what would be the archaeological signature of a carriage house or barn as related in the oral history?
- Do the foundations of the structure that preceded the 1855 church still exist? Are there any dateable features associated with these foundations?
- Can any structural information about the 1855 church building be gained from excavating the foundations, cellar feature, or other architectural features? Can we locate the planned annex from 1953?
- Is there any archaeological evidence for post-in-ground structures?
- Can we confirm the presence or absence of burials anywhere on Lot M?
- Is there intact stratigraphy to the west of the 1855 church?
- What is the nature of the central drain line seen in the GPR scan?
- What is the date of the possible H-shaped hearth seen on the GPR scan?
- Is there evidence of 18<sup>th</sup> century occupation on the southern portion of Lot M?

## Survey Methodology

The site will be initially surveyed with a grid of shovel test pits (STPs) excavated on a 10 meter interval. The grid will conform to the town-wide grid established in 2019 for the Custis Square project. STPs will be excavated stratigraphically as 50cm x 50cm squares with all soil passed through ¼ inch mesh. All artifacts, with the exception of brick, mortar, and coal, will be retained. It is estimated that 24 STPs will be needed to cover the site. The STPs will be followed by the excavation of strategically placed excavation units that will target GPR anomalies, the locations of known foundations, and areas of interest discovered in the STP survey. Excavation unit size will vary on the location and purpose of the unit and may take the form of trenches to re-expose previously uncovered foundations, 2m x 2m blocks of units, or 1m x 1m units. All units will be hand excavated with shovels and trowels and all soil will be screened and artifacts retained. Features will be documented through measured drawings, photographs, and all locations recorded with a total station. Maps will be created using ArcGIS and all field records entered into the Department of Archaeology's EMu database.

All artifacts will be removed to the Archaeological Collections Building where they will be washed, sorted, and bagged prior to being catalogued into the EMu database. Metal and fragile artifacts will be flagged for conservation and moved to the Archaeological Conservation Lab.

Excavation within areas thought to contain human burials will proceed with caution in order to expose only the top of the grave shaft. Any features resembling grave shafts will be recorded, however the shaft will be left intact and no excavation will proceed to the point of exposing human remains.

## Public Outreach

An integral component to this project will be public outreach with members of the First Baptist Church, the local faith community, the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, the local African American community, the College of William and Mary, Colonial Williamsburg's guests, and other local stakeholders. We will work closely with the steering committee that is being formed in order to coordinate outreach efforts with the church and other organizations. We envision holding multiple open houses to showcase the archaeological findings and intend to make the process and results transparent to all stakeholders. This transparency extends to the process of artifact conservation and the activities undertaken in the Archaeological Conservation Laboratory. Members of the church will be invited to participate in the excavation on select days and displays of artifacts will be made available either in the archaeology lab or onsite depending on social distancing guidelines and restrictions in place at the time of the project. Presentations on the results will be given to the steering committee, congregation, and the Church's leadership. Signage conveying the importance of the site and describing the current archaeology will be developed to display on the protective barriers that will surround the site while the work is taking place. We will also select two graduate fellows from William and Mary's Anthropology Department to assist with the archaeology and background research. Undergraduate students in William and Mary's National Institute of American History and Democracy program will also be involved in documentary research associated with the project. Other programs and outreach efforts will be developed during the project with the input of the stakeholder groups.

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