



## **Archaeology Project Will Explore Site of America's Oldest Church Founded by Enslaved and Free Blacks**

### **First Baptist Church, Colonial Williamsburg Lead Community- Supported Excavation to Find Church's First Permanent Structure**

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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Aug. 25, 2020) — The site of one of America's oldest churches founded entirely by Blacks may soon be unearthed. Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists, under the guidance of First Baptist Church, will begin excavating this nationally significant site in early September to find the earliest structure within the city limits where the congregation met. If successful, this initiative will enable Colonial Williamsburg to expand its Black-interpretative programming through voices that have been silent since the Revolution.

Ground-penetrating radar indicates that remains of this early structure used by members of First Baptist Church—originally founded in secret by free and enslaved Blacks at the start of America's Revolution—may lie buried near the intersection of Nassau and Francis streets in Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area. It's here that archaeologists and church leaders hope to unearth evidence of what researchers believe may have been the structure that was offered for their use by a white landowner named Jesse Cole, who owned the property at the time. The team also will explore how the congregation used the structure and seek to identify any burial sites present so they can be protected and memorialized.

“This is a rare and important opportunity to tell the story of early African Americans taking control of their own story, and their own lives,” said Pastor Reginald F. Davis.

“The story of First Baptist Church starts with its foundation, both the physical structure that we hope to reveal and the principles of religious freedom, justice and democracy on which the church and this country were founded. As our community comes together to explore this important site, we hope to also reveal voices that have important lessons to teach us about our country’s roots.”

The first phase of the public excavation, which will last approximately seven weeks, is fully funded through donor support. Future phases are under development and will be informed by the findings uncovered during the team’s initial work.

First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg — in collaboration with the Let Freedom Ring Foundation and a consortium of stakeholders representing William & Mary, local museums, churches, the city and community organizations — plan to host several community open houses to highlight the excavation’s progress and present their findings to the public.

“The church played an integral role in Williamsburg’s complex and divided history. Community involvement in this public history project continues the church’s ministry of inclusivity as we work to heal as a nation and reconcile our past. The exploration of this sacred site will serve as an example to the state and the nation of the work that is still needed to tell the whole story—not Black or white, but the American story,” said Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation.

Colonial Williamsburg first investigated the Nassau Street property in 1957 to determine the existence of any 18th-century structures on the site. Using standard archaeological techniques of the time, excavators dug trenches looking for brick foundations. Most of the excavators were Black men whose identities are being investigated now with plans to recognize their work.

Research resumed this year using 21st-century technology as part of Colonial Williamsburg’s ongoing commitment to explore, honor and interpret the lives of Black men, women and children whose extraordinary contributions helped build the nation. Notes and maps from the 1957 excavation were revisited and the early findings were digitized into Colonial Williamsburg’s archaeological mapping database. Additionally, photographs of the congregation’s later brick church on Nassau Street, built in 1856 and demolished a century later, informed the preliminary research phase of the project and determined the first steps.

In May, First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg teamed up with archaeologists from the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation to conduct ground-penetrating radar analysis on the site. Partially covered by a paved parking lot, the data revealed evidence of historically significant archaeological findings. The site is now being prepared for a full excavation, which includes collaborating with the city to remove 11 parking spaces adjacent to the project site to accommodate the excavation and possibly rebuild the structure.

“There is evidence of a late 18th-century or early 19th-century structure below later buildings used by the church, leading us to wonder if it could be the remains of the first church building. The results of this initial phase will help to inform how we move forward with additional research that will allow us to fully interpret and commemorate this nationally important site,” said Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg’s director of archaeology.

Discussions are underway for future phases of the excavation. Based on the archaeological findings, the foundation is also exploring ideas for presenting and interpreting the site as part of its educational mission.

“We are still in the initial phases of the excavation, but we are excited about the possibilities for interpreting the First Baptist Church site as part of Colonial Williamsburg’s mission to share America’s enduring story. This public archaeology project underscores our community’s commitment to telling a more complete and inclusive story of the men and women who lived, worked and worshipped here during our country’s formative years,” said Cliff Fleet, president and CEO of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Students and scholars from William & Mary will assist Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists as they dig in the ground and through church and foundation records to explore the church’s history. As they do, they will also explore the complex relationship between the two institutions to gain a better understanding of their shared history. The university is offering two foundation-funded fellowships for graduate students enrolled in its anthropology program, as well as opportunities for undergraduates enrolled in the National Institute of American History and Democracy program. Additionally, university faculty representing multiple fields, including community archaeology, historical biology and public history, are offering their expertise.

“We’re delighted to be a part of this collaboration and to be supporting historical discovery of such consequence,” said William & Mary President Katherine A. Rowe, who serves on the project’s steering committee.

“The First Baptist dig represents a significant step in Williamsburg’s commitment to document and tell a much fuller story of the defining role of African Americans in our nation’s history,” Rowe added. “For W&M, it’s particularly important that our students can directly contribute. Our graduate students will be working on the Nassau Street dig and our undergrad NIAHD students will be involved in the archival search.”

The First Baptist Church archaeology project continues an ongoing collaboration between the church and Colonial Williamsburg. In 2016 the institutions joined to conserve First Baptist Church’s Freedom Bell and renovate the church’s bell tower, allowing the bell to ring that year for the first time since segregation. That same year the bell travelled to Washington, D.C. for the dedication of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. There it was rung by then-

President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama and the late Ruth Odom Bonner, the child of an enslaved father, and three generations of her descendants.

### **First Baptist Church history**

First Baptist Church was organized in 1776 by enslaved and free Blacks in defiance of laws of the day forbidding the congregation of African Americans. First led by the Rev. Moses, a free Black itinerant preacher, they built a brush arbor at Green Spring Plantation several miles from Williamsburg to gather secretly in song and prayer. Organized as Baptists by 1781 under the Rev. Gowan Pamphlet, an enslaved man in Williamsburg, worshippers moved to Raccoon Chase, a rural area just outside the city. Moved by their stirring hymns and heartfelt prayers, Jesse Cole, a member of the city's white Cole family offered the congregation use of a building on property that is now part of the Historic Area on the northwest corner of South Nassau Street and Francis Street West. By 1818 a structure referred to as the Baptist Meeting House stood on this property and may have existed here as early as the late-18<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1834 a tornado destroyed the Baptist Meeting House along with several other structures on the Cole property. The African Baptist Church, as it became known before the Civil War, dedicated a new brick church on the site of the earlier building in 1856. Several years later, in 1863, the congregation was renamed First Baptist Church.

In 1956 Colonial Williamsburg acquired the land on South Nassau Street from First Baptist Church and tore down the 19th-century building. Payment for the Nassau Street property covered the land and construction costs of the congregation's current church at 727 Scotland Street, which opened the following year.

Media contact:  
Sean Ryan  
804.647.4459  
sryan@hodgespart.com

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#### **About First Baptist Church**

*The Historic First Baptist Church exists to honor and glorify God by obeying Jesus' command to make disciples of all people groups. We accomplish this through our Mission and Core Values. As a Christian church, we believe in unity, inclusiveness and diversity as essential keys for the strength and growth of our congregation. Our mission is to seek divine guidance concerning Jesus and to proclaim as effective witnesses that He is Christ so that others may know, worship and follow Him. As Disciples of Christ, we demonstrate his love and compassion by helping to meet the needs of all people. By the fruit of the Holy Spirit, we minister to the members and community to grow the church, inspire our youth, witness to the lost, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, work for justice and peace and do the work of the Kingdom of God in the 21st Century.*

#### **About The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation**

*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, including the Forbes 5-star Williamsburg Inn, culinary options from historic taverns to casual or elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf*

*Club featuring 45 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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