



The Historic
First Baptist Church
est. 1776



Colonial
Williamsburg®

Nearly \$3 million in Philanthropic Support Announced for Ongoing First Baptist Church Archaeological Investigation and Interpretation

*Support comes from Lilly Endowment Inc., the Ford Foundation,
Richard S. Reynolds Foundation and individual donors*

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Jan. 14, 2021) — New chapters will be written in the history of one of the nation's oldest Black churches, thanks to nearly \$3 million in philanthropic support including a \$2.5 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to Colonial Williamsburg to help sustain research and interpretation at the first permanent site of the city's historic First Baptist Church on South Nassau Street.

This month, Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists led by First Baptist Church's congregation and descendants launched a second, 18-month phase of excavation at the site that began in 2020. Archaeologists will return to the location of two potential human burials west of the church's 1856 foundations to determine how many people may be buried there, working in collaboration with William & Mary's Institute for Historical Biology, and resume the search for evidence of the church's original permanent, pre-1818 structure. Phase 1 excavation uncovered older brick foundations north of and beneath the 1856 structure, and structural wooden post-holes dating as far back as the 1700s.

First Baptist Church, its Let Freedom Ring Foundation and Colonial Williamsburg announced grant funding and individual gifts that support Phase 2 research and site interpretation, including generous support from:

1. Lilly Endowment Inc. through its Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative. The \$2.5 million grant will support both research and programming to interpret the site's history.
2. The Ford Foundation, with a grant of \$250,000 to support continued archaeological research and programming.

3. The Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, which has awarded a grant of \$100,000 for continued archaeological research.
4. Multiple individual donors, including a \$100,000 anonymous gift from two friends of history.

The congregation and descendant community of First Baptist Church, founded secretly in 1776 by free and enslaved Blacks, hope to pursue forensic investigation of possible graves and historical research to possibly identify any individuals interred, or to determine relationships to living descendants, and to ensure proper memorialization. The church, which today worships at 727 Scotland Street, has named the site Historic First Baptist Church – Nassau Street.

“This important work to uncover the history of Historic First Baptist – Nassau Street and to present a story, in what we would imagine to be the voices of the free and enslaved African Americans who were brave enough to assemble and worship, could not have come at a better time in our history,” said Pastor Rev. Reginald F. Davis. “We are facing, yet again, a time in our nation when we must step up – and step out – to lead the important conversation on race and unity with the hope that we will understand clearly that we are all members of the human race.”

The multi-year project seeks information needed to accurately reconstruct the earliest version of the church’s first permanent structure, surrounding landscape and topography; to locate burials and to learn about the worship experience of the church’s early congregants.

Connie Matthews Harshaw, a member of First Baptist Church and president of its Let Freedom Ring Foundation, added: “Looking back at what was a difficult year in 2020, we have been able to work with The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, historians, descendants and our community partners to focus on excavating and studying the site of the Historic First Baptist Church – Nassau Street. At a time when the Commonwealth and the nation are struggling with how to tell a complete and more honest story of our complex and segregated history, we stand up front, leading a change to achieve historic justice by telling the whole story of those who lived, worked and worshipped in Virginia’s colonial capital.”

Researchers hope the project will reveal evidence of the first structure the church worshipped in, which stood on land owned by White city merchant Jesse Cole. Scans with ground-penetrating radar in May of 2020 indicated that remains of this early structure may lie beneath the surface. Tax records indicate the congregation was worshipping in a building referred to as the Baptist Meeting House by 1818 on this parcel, and came to own the property later in the 19th century.

“First Baptist Church’s history is significant to our region and the nation as a whole, and our community has come together to reveal it in the greatest detail possible,” said Cliff Fleet, president and CEO of Colonial Williamsburg. “Like all of Colonial Williamsburg’s research, interpretation and preservation efforts, this project would not be possible without generous support of institutional and individual donors. We are enormously thankful for their support of this critical effort to share our history in a more fulsome way.”

During Phase 1 of the excavation from Sept. 8 to Nov. 6, archaeologists discovered more than 12,000 individual artifacts including an inkwell, pottery fragments, glass bottles, architectural materials and personal items like doll fragments, buttons and coins. Also uncovered were the foundations of the 1856 church last excavated in 1957, foundations of the 1893 annex to the 1856 church, and foundations for a planned 1950s expansion of the 1856 church. Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists processed artifacts during November and December.

“This generous financial support will spur the research the U.S. urgently needs, to tell a fuller, more complete history of this country by including important voices who have long been hidden,” said William & Mary President Katherine A. Rowe, who serves on the project’s steering committee. “The pressing scientific work of William & Mary’s Institute for Historical Biology will help establish a clearer picture of our nation’s past and the lives of Black Americans who shaped it. We are grateful to be part of this important partnership in discovery.”

Colonial Williamsburg first investigated the South 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 continue to be investigated with plans to recognize their work.

“We continue to be honored and humbled that First Baptist Church put its faith in us to conduct this important work,” said Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg’s director of archaeology. “What we’ve uncovered so far not only is exciting in what we’ve found, but also in the stories that we can attribute to these structures, burials and artifacts. We’re captivated by what more we can learn about this historic church and its trailblazing members over the next 18 months.”

In December, City of Williamsburg Mayor Douglas Pons announced in the biennial State of the City address plans for establishment of an African American Heritage Trail commemorating sites prominent in local and national Black history, and the city’s Board of Zoning Appeals approved changes to Colonial Williamsburg’s P4 parking lot, now accessible from South Henry Street and Francis Street West, including permanent removal of 15 spaces, 11 of them to allow preservation and interpretation of the historic church site.

“We are always seeking opportunities to more inclusively display Williamsburg’s rich history,” Pons said. “Now that the City Council have set forth the goal to create an African American Heritage Trail downtown, city staff will begin planning for this project, which aims to better reflect the story of our city. The First Baptist Church is certainly a significant part of that story.”

The first monthly 2021 program in Colonial Williamsburg’s new discussion series “US: Past, Present, Future,” titled “CW Conversation: Religious Freedom,” takes place at 4 p.m. this Saturday. The event features panelists Harshaw; James Ingram, the actor-interpreter who portrays First Baptist Church organizer and Colonial Williamsburg Nation Builder Rev. Gowan Pamphlet; and Razi Hashmi, foreign affairs officer and South Asia advisor with the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom. The program will stream live at colonialwilliamsburg.org/us and on Colonial Williamsburg’s [Facebook](#) page.

Colonial Williamsburg is one of 18 organizations from across the United States receiving grants through the Lilly Endowment Inc. Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative. The group includes fine arts museums, historical societies and history museums, museums dedicated to serving children and families and museums dedicated to particular geographic locations and cultures.

Lilly Endowment awarded grants totaling more than \$43 million through the initiative. These grants will enable the organizations to develop exhibitions and education programs that fairly and accurately portray the role of religion in the U.S. and around the world. The initiative is designed to foster public understanding about religion and lift up the contributions that people of all faiths and diverse religious communities make to our greater civic well-being.

“Museums and cultural institutions are trusted organizations and play an important role in teaching the American public about the world around them,” said Christopher Coble, Lilly Endowment’s vice president for religion. “These organizations will use 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.”

Lilly Endowment launched the Religion and Cultural Institutions Initiative in 2019 and awarded planning grants to organizations to help them explore how programming in religion could further their institutional missions. These grants will assist organizations in implementing projects that draw on their extensive collections and enhance and complement their current activities.

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 thanks to a generous grant from the Ford foundation. That same year the bell traveled 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.

“The Ford Foundation is delighted to continue our critical partnership with First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg,” said Ford Foundation President Darren Walker. “This transformative project’s research and programming are especially significant at this moment in our nation’s history.”

Excavation continues weekdays 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. weather permitting. Additional information is available by visiting firstbaptistchurch.org and colonialwilliamsburg.org; by calling 1-855-296-6627 toll free, and by following [Colonial Williamsburg](#) and [Colonial Williamsburg Archaeology](#) on Facebook and by following [@colonialwmsburg](#) on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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-18th 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.

Note: High-resolution images and caption content are available [to download here](#).

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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

Colonial Williamsburg operates the world's largest living history museum, preserving Virginia's 18th-century capital as a fully functioning city. Fun, engaging experiences transport guests back in time and highlight the relevance of America's founding era to contemporary life. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed buildings, historic trade shops, 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 45 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. and his son Rees Jones, a full-service spa and fitness center managed by Trilogy Spa, pools, retail stores and gardens. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization; philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and operations sustain its educational programs and preservation initiatives.

About Lilly Endowment Inc.

Lilly Endowment Inc. is an Indianapolis-based, private philanthropic foundation created in 1937 by J.K. Lilly Sr. and sons J.K. Jr. and Eli through gifts of stock in their pharmaceutical business, Eli Lilly and Company. While those gifts remain the financial bedrock of the Endowment, the Endowment is a separate entity from the company, with a distinct governing board, staff and location. In keeping with the founders' wishes, the Endowment supports the causes of community development, education and religion and maintains a special commitment to its hometown, Indianapolis, and home state, Indiana.

About the Ford Foundation

The Ford Foundation is an independent, nonprofit grant-making organization. For more than 80 years it has worked with courageous people on the frontlines of social change worldwide, guided by its mission to strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement. With headquarters in New York, the foundation has offices in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

About the Richard S. Reynolds Foundation

Since its inception in 1955, the Richard S. Reynolds Foundation has provided over \$58 million in grants to community and worldwide organizations, supporting a broad range of causes such as education, the arts, health, science, history, the environment and those in need. From scientific research to educational initiatives, the Foundation is devoted to building strong communities and creating a positive and enduring impact on the world around us.

