



## **Bray-Digges House, original home of the 18th-century Williamsburg Bray School, moves from William & Mary to Colonial Williamsburg Historic Area**

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Jan. 18, 2023) — In the early-morning hours of Feb. 10, an 18th-century building with an extraordinary history will travel from its location on the campus of William & Mary to Colonial Williamsburg’s Historic Area. The move marks a new chapter for the building, which served as the original home of the [Williamsburg Bray School](#) and is likely the oldest extant building in the United States dedicated to the education of Black children.

For The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary – the institutions together responsible for uncovering the building’s identity in 2021 – the move signifies another step forward in both organizations’ intentionally inclusive approaches to researching and teaching American history.

William & Mary and Colonial Williamsburg will host a 30-minute ceremony to commemorate the building and its history at 2 p.m. on Feb. 10 on the lawn of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg, across the street from the building’s new site at the corner of Nassau and Francis streets. The ceremony is open to the public and will feature remarks from Colonial Williamsburg President and CEO Cliff Fleet, William & Mary President Katherine A. Rowe, Williamsburg Mayor Doug Pons and others. Key funders of the [Williamsburg Bray School Initiative](#) include the Mellon Foundation, the Commonwealth of Virginia, Truist and The Gladys and Franklin Clark Foundation.

“The Bray School has so much to teach us about our nation’s history, and many who shaped it,” Rowe said. “The Williamsburg Bray School Initiative, and research projects like it, are foundational to William & Mary’s core mission. We are fortunate to have great partners at Colonial Williamsburg and in the local community to help us tell its story.”

The historic structure will become a new and significant component of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s public history programming.

“The Williamsburg Bray School provides us with an incredible opportunity to explore and learn from a complicated piece of our past that – like the Bray School building itself – has been overlooked by so many for hundreds of years,” Fleet said. “Incorporating this building into Colonial Williamsburg’s world-class programming highlights this important piece of our collective history and allows us to share it with the world.”

### **Bray School Descendants**

The history of the Williamsburg Bray School is personal for Janice Canaday, a lifelong Williamsburg resident and Colonial Williamsburg site supervisor of the Randolph House, where several Bray School students were enslaved.

Canaday is a member of the Williamsburg Bray School descendant community, a growing group of individuals across the nation with familial ties to the 86 Williamsburg Bray School students who have been identified in the historic record to date. She and her son, Adam Canaday, who also works for the Foundation, are vocal advocates for Bray School research.

“When most people think of African Americans in 18th-century America, they usually think of slavery,” Janice Canaday said. “But the institution of slavery was something that was forced on my ancestors. It doesn’t say anything about who they were and what they valued. The history of the Bray School and the stories of the children who were students there is a window into their lives beyond slavery. It’s a window into their hearts and minds. It’s an opportunity to connect to their strength of resistance, resilience, endurance and their humanity.”

The Williamsburg Bray School is scheduled to open to the public in September 2024 to commemorate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Williamsburg Bray School’s closing. Together with the original site of the Historic First Baptist Church, the Bray School will be a central point of interpretive focus in the Foundation’s ongoing efforts to tell a more complete story of 18th-century America.

### **89th Original Building**

The location of the Bray School building, originally built as a tenement house in 1760, was uncovered through groundbreaking documentary research by William & Mary Emeritus Professor of English Terry Meyers. Archaeological and architectural research conducted by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation confirmed that the building, moved from its original site in 1930, was in fact the original Bray School. It will be the 89th original structure restored by the Foundation and the first original 18th-century structure to be added to the Historic Area since the 1940s.

“There’s something really incredible about working with an original building,” said Matt Webster, executive director of Colonial Williamsburg’s Grainger Department of Architectural Preservation and Research. “Many of the structural elements of this building including floorboards, door frames and stair rails were actually touched by the students of the Bray School. In a small way, bringing this building back to life brings them back to life, too.”

Webster and his team have spent the past 16 months analyzing the building and removing the many modifications that had obscured its identity for so long. Now that the building has been restored to its original footprint, it is ready to move.

The building will be transported to its new site by Expert House Movers, a company with decades of experience moving historic properties including the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in 1999 and the Colonial Williamsburg Windmill in 2010. Moving the Bray School will result in rolling road closures on Friday morning, Feb. 10, and during the ceremony at 2 p.m. For additional information about parking and viewing areas along the move route, visit [colonialwilliamsburg.org/bray](https://colonialwilliamsburg.org/bray).

Once the building is in place, Webster and his team will continue the restoration process which will include the building’s original roofline. Members of Colonial Williamsburg’s facilities maintenance and historic trades departments including brick makers, carpenters, blacksmiths and joiners will contribute to the restoration of the building using 18th-century tools and techniques.

## **William & Mary Bray School Lab**

While Colonial Williamsburg stabilizes and restores the building at its new site, the [William & Mary Bray School Lab](#) will continue to research, document and disseminate the history and the legacy of the Williamsburg Bray School. The Bray School Lab was launched in October 2021 as a key component of the Williamsburg Bray School Initiative partnership between Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary.

“By combining the preservation expertise of Colonial Williamsburg with the academic scholarship of William & Mary, we are able to achieve far more with this project than either of us could achieve alone,” said Maureen Elgersman Lee, director of the William & Mary Bray School Lab. “Moving the Bray School building to its new permanent site means we are one step closer to our goal of transforming traditional accounts of America’s history into a multi-layered story that centers Black legacy at the heart of U.S. democracy.”

The ongoing work of the William & Mary Bray School Lab includes transcription, research, conference participation, community and descendent engagement as well as the Bray School book project, which is designed to bring the Williamsburg Bray School story to life through archival research and community reflection.

### **Williamsburg Bray School background**

The Williamsburg Bray School was one of the earliest institutions dedicated to Black education in North America. In 1760, the school began in the Bray-Digges House, a 17-by-33-foot tenement building, near the corner of Prince George and North Boundary streets, where a college dormitory now stands. Over the school’s 14 years of operation, a total of between 300 to 400 students from ages 3 to 10 were taught by Ann Wager, the school’s sole teacher.

In February 2021, Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary announced that they had identified a small, white building tucked away on the William & Mary campus as the structure that once housed the Williamsburg Bray School. This discovery led to the creation of the Williamsburg Bray School Initiative, a ground-breaking and innovative partnership between The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary with the shared goal of ensuring that current and future generations learn about the complex history of what is likely the oldest extant building in the United States dedicated to the education of Black children.

For additional information on the Williamsburg Bray School and the Bray School Initiative, visit Colonial Williamsburg’s website at [colonialwilliamsburg.org/bray](https://colonialwilliamsburg.org/bray) and the William & Mary Bray School Lab webpage at [wm.edu/sites/brayschool](https://wm.edu/sites/brayschool).

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

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### **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, 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.*

***About William & Mary***

*Founded by Royal Charter in 1693, William & Mary is the second oldest institution of higher learning in the country. The Alma Mater of the Nation is a preeminent university, combining the depth and breadth of a liberal arts and sciences education with the disciplined exploration and innovation of a leading, global research university. A vibrant and inclusive community, William & Mary cultivates creative thinkers, principled leaders and compassionate global citizens equipped for lives of meaning and distinction. As a "Public Ivy," the university convenes great minds and hearts to meet the most pressing needs of our time. William & Mary's graduate program in U.S. Colonial history was recently named the best in the country, according to **rankings** by U.S. News & World Report.*

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