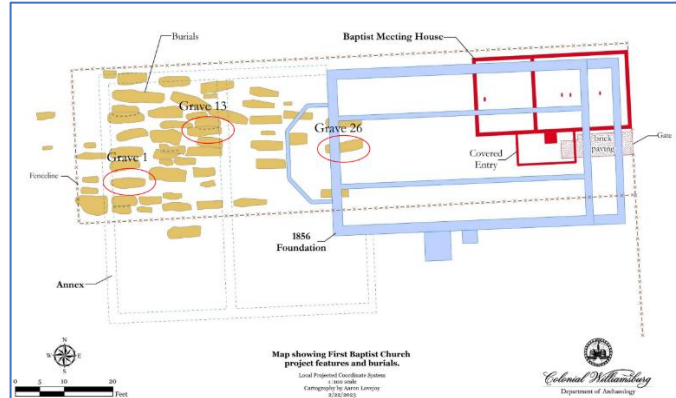


DNA, archaeological and osteological analyses connect First Baptist Church to individuals buried on site of original structure



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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (April 6, 2023) – The descendent community of The Historic First Baptist Church, one of the nation’s oldest Black churches, received confirmation today of what many already believed to be true. Experts from Colonial Williamsburg, William & Mary and the University of Connecticut presented the results of the archaeological, osteological and DNA analyses of three burials excavated at the site of the church’s original structure located in what is today the Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg. The results confirmed that the individuals buried there are the ancestors of the First Baptist Church community, which extends well beyond the current Scotland Street congregation.

“This is what we were praying that we would hear,” said Connie Matthews Harshaw, a member of First Baptist Church and president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation. “To know for certain that these are our people and that this was our congregation is such a powerful step forward in the ongoing work of reconstructing our history and telling a more complete story.”

Approximately 100 members of the community and the First Baptist Church congregation gathered inside Williamsburg’s Stryker Center to hear the details of the DNA and osteological analyses. Of the three burials that were excavated over the summer, only one produced a DNA

sample that was preserved well enough to yield information, according to Dr. Raquel Fleskes, National Science Foundation post-doctoral fellow at the University of Connecticut, who conducted the DNA analysis. DNA recovered from the burial site known as Grave 26 confirmed that the individual was male and of African descent.

Remains from the less well-preserved burials, along with the remains from Grave 26, underwent osteological analysis at the Institute for Historical Biology (IHB) at William & Mary. Dr. Joseph Jones, biological anthropologist and research associate of the IHB, and Dr. Michael Blakey, Director of the IHB, confirmed that analysis of those remains provided information pertaining to age, chromosomal sex, and quality of life. Based on femoral head diameter and dental wear, the individuals from the less-preserved burials (Grave 1 and Grave 13) were men in the 35-45 year range minimally and therefore likely among the generation that first worshipped at the Nassau Street site. Teeth retrieved from Grave 26 indicated that the individual was likely in the 16-18 year range and had experienced early childhood stressors.

Archaeological evidence, including coffin nails, the tip of a straight pin, buttons from one of the burials, and the indication of fence posts delineating the outline of the cemetery, was also presented at the descendant meeting by Colonial Williamsburg's Director of Archaeology Jack Gary. This evidence, combined with the placement of the burials in the context of the other grave sites, suggests that the burials took place in the first half of the 19th century and were associated with the church's first permanent structure.

“All three lines of evidence – DNA results, osteological analysis, and archaeological findings – provide support and create a compelling argument that these are indeed the ancestors of the First Baptist community,” Gary said. “That has always seemed like the most logical explanation for these burials, but without definitive proof we couldn't rule out the possibility that the burials were associated with another group or from a different time period. Now we can say for sure that these are people connected to the earliest years of First Baptist Church. Now the congregation can decide how to move forward.”

Fleskes informed descendants at the April 6 meeting that the date of the burials makes them too old to establish biological kinship connections using genomic data with contemporary communities. The mitochondrial and Y chromosome lineages obtained from Grave 26 are also not able to definitively establish direct kinship connections without archival identification of the burial and additional genealogical research tracing the connection.

The excavation and analyses of the three burials is part of the [First Baptist Church excavation project](#) – a partnership of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, First Baptist Church and the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, in collaboration with William & Mary and other stakeholders. In the process of [locating and identifying the church's first permanent structure](#), Colonial Williamsburg's archaeologists have also identified 63 grave shafts on the site.

In March 2022, the First Baptist Church descendant community voted in favor of archaeologists excavating three grave shafts with the goal of obtaining a deeper understanding of the geographic origins, age and chromosomal sex of the individuals buried at the site to establish a connection between the interred individuals and First Baptist Church. Excavation of the three burials began on July 18, 2022 with a private ancestral blessing ceremony held by the First Baptist Church descendant community, and concluded in early September 2022. Bone samples taken from the petrous, part of the temporal bone located behind the ear where the DNA is the best preserved, were collected from each of the three individuals and transported to the University of Connecticut for analysis. Remains that were stable enough to be removed were

transported to the IHB for cleaning and analysis. At the conclusion of the archaeological, osteological and DNA analyses, all human remains will be re-interred in their original locations with plans to memorialize those interred on the land once work at the site ends.

Excavation of the Nassau Street site has been supported by [generous gifts from the Lilly Endowment Inc.](#), The Ford Foundation, the Richard S. Reynolds Foundation, Ferguson Enterprises, the Kern Family Foundation, and numerous individual donors, including a \$100,000 anonymous gift from Two Friends of History.

For more information on the history of the First Baptist Church and details of Colonial Williamsburg's previous work with the community on this archaeological project, read the [Aug. 25, 2020 press release](#) announcing the project, the [Jan. 14, 2021 update](#), and the [Oct. 7, 2021 announcement](#) of the discovery of the church's first permanent structure. Visit firstbaptistchurch.org and colonialwilliamsburg.org; follow [Colonial Williamsburg](#) on Facebook and [@colonialwmsburg](#) on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

First Baptist Church history

The First Baptist Church was organized in 1776 by enslaved and free Black people in defiance of laws of the day forbidding the congregation of African Americans. First led by the Rev. Moses, a free Black itinerant preacher, the congregation 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 the 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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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 and 18th-century inspired culinary options from historic taverns situated along historic Duke of Gloucester Street. Colonial Williamsburg Resorts complement the experience, offering guests five unique hotel properties including the iconic Forbes Travel Guide Five-Star, AAA Five Diamond Williamsburg Inn, newly renovated Williamsburg Lodge-Autograph Collection, Williamsburg Woodlands Hotel and Suites, the Griffin Hotel, and authentic 18th-century Colonial Houses. The resort offers a range of events and amenities including four historic taverns, 15 food and beverage outlets providing exquisite culinary experiences from casual to elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club featuring 36 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones Sr. and his son Rees Jones, a world-class full-service spa and fitness center, pools, meeting and flexible event spaces, and scenic gardens providing the perfect venue for weddings and special events. Merchants Square, built alongside the Historic Area in 1935 as one of the first planned shopping districts in the United States, features more than 40 specialty boutiques with products ranging from apparel to fine jewelry, art, specialty foods and gifts. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives.

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