



## **Sunday: Prayer Vigil at First Permanent Site of First Baptist Church**

**First Baptist Church and members of surrounding faith  
community will offer joint prayer to open archaeological  
excavation in partnership with Colonial Williamsburg**

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Sept. 2, 2020) — On Sunday Sept. 6, 2020 at 5 p.m., the city's historic First Baptist Church will hold a prayer vigil at the South Nassau Street site where on Sept. 8, Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists will launch their search for evidence of the church's first permanent structure. Rev. Dr. Reginald Davis, pastor of First Baptist Church, will be joined by Rev. Christopher Epperson, rector of Bruton Parish Church where enslaved and free Blacks worshipped before First Baptist Church organized in 1776. The community will come together in prayer, song, and praise to bless the work that will begin on this nationally significant and sacred space.

The members of the faith community will lead a prayer for success in excavating this site with a hope that the archaeologists will find artifacts that tell the story of the people who lived and worshipped here nearly 250 years ago.

“This clarion call for the community to come together to understand the past, acknowledging that some of it was filled with pain, and some of it filled with hope, serves as an example to the Commonwealth and the country that there is no better time than now to uncover important history and to engage in important conversations that will lead us all to a place of understanding, hope and reconciliation,” said Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of First Baptist Church's Let Freedom Ring Foundation.

The Williamsburg Symphony Orchestra's string ensemble, under the direction of Reginald Fox, a nationally known conductor and accompanist, will feature a commissioned work – “Devotion” – composed by Jeraldine Herbison, a local Black artist and composer. Alvy Powell, a celebrity baritone, will give voice to the powerful poem written by the Commonwealth's 17th

Poet Laureate Henry Hart, that was dedicated this year to the church's founders. A spirit-filled selection to close the ceremony will be offered by a talented quartet from First Baptist Church with actor-interpreter James Ingram, who portrays church founder and Colonial Williamsburg Nation Builder Rev. Gowan Pamphlet, offering remarks on the significance of this project and the historic occasion.

The vigil will dedicate a blessing to the members of the church and its partners, which include The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary, for the important work that will begin to explore the site and tell of its rich and diverse history.

**In order to comply with state guidelines and limit health risks associated with COVID-19, event attendance is strictly limited and participants are required to observe social distancing and wear protective face coverings. For those unable to attend, the event will stream live at [colonialwilliamsburg.org/firstbaptist](https://colonialwilliamsburg.org/firstbaptist).**

### **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.

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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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