

Archeologists uncover 63 unmarked graves of African Americans in Williamsburg

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Johnette Weaver says her family has lived in Williamsburg since the 1600's and some of them were members of the church, leading her to believe that her relatives are resting here.



WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — There are many people in Williamsburg who say their family history is rooted deep in the city.

After almost three years of unearthing an everyday parking lot, an archaeologist uncovered a Black church. Recently, they also discovered 63 unmarked graves.

On the corner of Francis Street and South Nassau is an excavation site of the original First Baptist Church in Williamsburg. Archaeologist Jack Gary says the congregation was the foundation of religious freedom for many enslaved African Americans before the church was moved to a different location.



"We knew that their first church was here through documentary evidence and oral history of the church, and we knew there was one burial here. Unfortunately, it was all underneath a parking lot," said Gary.

The team said while they were studying the site, they discovered much more than just one grave.

"As we excavated and expanded... we realized, there's not one, there's not 20, there's 63," explained Gary.

Gary says his team believes this is the burial site of the original congregation.

Johnette Weaver says her family has lived in Williamsburg since the 1600s and some of them were members of the church, leading her to believe her relatives are resting there.

"We know that there are probably at least two or three of my family [members] that are here because I have baptism records of them from the original church," explained Weaver.





Stefan Grimsley/WTKR

She and many other living descendants gathered in Williamsburg on Thursday to hear about three of the bodies that were exhumed. DNA analysis determined that two of the exhumed bodies were in their mid-30s to mid-40s. The analysis also confirmed that the third body belonged to someone between the ages of 16 and 18.

Unfortunately, two of the three bodies weren't in great states of preservation, which is why archaeologists believe it's time for the people buried here to rest in peace once again.

"We felt that the state of preservation of the people buried in the cemetery would also be poor. So if we go in and do more work, at some point, we start to cross a line where we end up harming the burial," said Gary.

Among those three bodies studied, one was well-preserved, which means DNA can be taken and compared from it. Weaver says she's still hoping the person is one of her relatives she's been trying to locate.

"Now I am interested in having some of us take DNA tests just to see if we would match the one good result they got. I'm ready to sign up any DNA of mine they want. They can have it," said Weaver.

With the help of the living descendants and archaeologists, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation plans to create a memorial and reconstruct the church.