

DNA links excavated graves to today's First Baptist congregation in Williamsburg

By **Sian Wilkerson**

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WILLIAMSBURG — Months after grave excavations began at the site of the historic First Baptist Church, experts from Colonial Williamsburg, William & Mary and the University of Connecticut presented the first of its research into who was buried there.

In a presentation at the Stryker Center, Michael Blakey and Joseph Jones from the William & Mary Institute for Historic Biology and Raquel Fleskes of the University of Connecticut expanded on the results of the archaeological, osteological and DNA analyses, which confirmed that the individuals buried at the Nassau Street site are the ancestors of the First Baptist Church community.

About 100 members of the community and the First Baptist Church congregation were in attendance for the two-hour presentation, according to a Colonial Williamsburg news release.

“This is what we were praying that we would hear,” Connie Matthews Harshaw, a member of First Baptist Church and president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, said in the release. “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.”

The First Baptist Church of Williamsburg is one of the nation's oldest Black churches, first organized in 1776 by enslaved and free Black people. Harshaw is among other living descendants who can trace their lineage to the church's first congregation. In recent years, the descendants have worked alongside Colonial Williamsburg and other community partners to ensure the church's legacy is historically preserved.

In 2021, the Colonial Williamsburg archaeology team [discovered the original early 1800s church building](#) that First Baptist Church's original congregation worshipped in.

The site is now the location of the First Baptist Church Excavation Project, jointly led by Colonial Williamsburg, the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg and the Let Freedom Ring Foundation.

The congregation did not have a permanent structure until the 1800s, when a Williamsburg man, Jesse Cole, offered them a building on what is now Nassau Street in the Historic Area. A tornado eventually destroyed the original building, and a new building was constructed on top of it in 1856 before eventually the site was paved over for a parking lot, remaining buried for 165 years.

Since the excavation process [began in July](#), 92% of the property has been excavated and 63 graves have been located. Three of those graves — burials 1, 13 and 26 — were excavated and bone samples were taken for further research. The three individuals' remains were in various states of preservation.



Jack Gary, Director of Archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg, stands near the First Baptist Church's first permanent church structure brick building foundation Thursday morning October 7, 2021. (Jonathon Gruenke/Daily Press)

“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,” said Colonial Williamsburg Director of Archaeology Jack Gary during the presentation. “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.”

From the analyses, researchers were able to confirm that the individual in grave 26 was a male of African descent, likely 16-18 years old, and the individuals in graves 1 and 13 were also men, both likely around 35-45. Archaeological evidence in the burial sites suggested that all three individuals were interred in the early 19th century.

At the conclusion of the analyses, the DNA samples were returned to Colonial Williamsburg to be re-interred in their original locations.