

First Baptist Church project awarded \$3M towards research and rebuilding original building

Efforts to uncover the history of one of the country's oldest-known Black churches are receiving much-needed financial help.

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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — Efforts to uncover the history of one of the country's oldest-known Black churches are receiving much-needed financial help.

The Lilly Endowment Inc. awarded a \$3 million grant to Colonial Williamsburg's First Baptist Church Project.

On Thursday, archaeologists were still digging for new discoveries at the site along Nassau Street.

Since 2021, 13News Now has tracked efforts to unearth the history of the historic [First Baptist Church](#), after experts discovered its original foundation under a parking lot.

The work, with the blessing and guidance of descendants of the church, has led to major discoveries. Those findings include a pair of building foundations dating back to the early 1800s.

Meanwhile, researchers are finding a growing number of burial sites. In March of 2022, experts found nearly 30 burials. As of Thursday, they've discovered 60, according to Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology.

The grant money will support key parts of the projects, including reconstructing the church's original structure.

"It's getting us close to that finish line," said Gary. "We still need a little more help."

The funding will also help tell the church's history by establishing an endowment to pay religious interpretive staffers and re-enactors.

Rev. James Ingram has portrayed Rev. Gowan Prophet, the founder of the church in 1776, for several years.

"The first Black pastor to be ordained in Virginia," said Ingram. "The magnitude of this [work] is tremendous."

Once rebuilt, Colonial Williamsburg plans to open the meeting house to the public by 2026.

Ingram, who is also a minister at First Baptist Church, said this is special for the community, especially the descendants.

"This is more important for those families, who have already been here...who have struggled here," he said.

There is a possibility for more money. The Lilly Endowment Inc. agrees to match \$1 million if Colonial Williamsburg also raises that amount by October 31.