

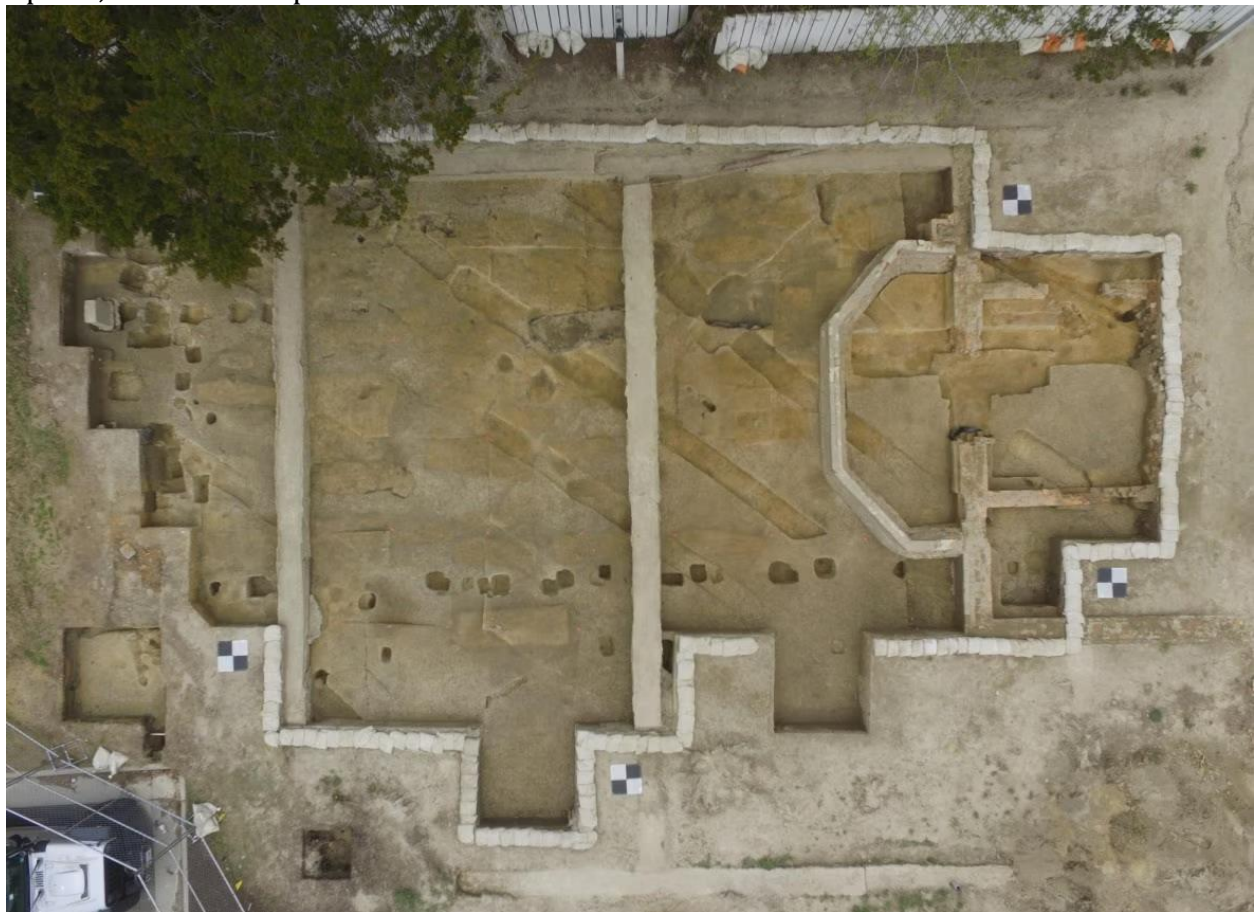
[RETROPOLIS](#)

Lost graves reveal story of African American church in Williamsburg

The body of a teenager had been moved there from somewhere else in the early 1800s

By [Michael E. Ruane](#)

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An aerial view of the excavation site in Williamsburg. Sixty-three graves have been found so far at the site of the vanished First Baptist Church. (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

He was slight, about 5-foot-4, an African American teenager with an impacted wisdom tooth and bones that were still developing when he died in the early 1800s.

But when archaeologists opened his grave recently in Williamsburg, Va., they found that his skeleton was jumbled and his coffin had been reinforced with extra nails, indicators that he had been moved to the old Baptist cemetery from somewhere else.

[Archaeologists find more graves at lost Williamsburg African American cemetery](#)

It's not clear why he was moved. But someone, perhaps a relative, wanted him to rest by the church, Jack Gary, director of archaeology for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, said Thursday.

"It signals a connection with family members or others in this community with this individual," he said. "Even after death."

It was a small clue to the life of the old congregation that came out Thursday as experts briefed members of the church's descendant community on the latest findings from the 2½-year [archaeology project on the site of the long-vanished church](#).

Archaeologists have examined skeletal remains, buried in hexagonal coffins, in three graves on the site on Nassau Street in Colonial Williamsburg. The wood was gone but the nails remained, Gary said.

Two were in poor states of preservation. One was probably a man about 40, who stood about 5 feet 8 inches tall.

Another was a man of roughly the same age and height. But in his grave, three trouser buttons and four vest buttons — one mismatched — were found. Colonial Williamsburg conservators even spotted a fragment of thread on one of the buttons used to hold it in place.

One of the man's teeth was worn in an unusual way, suggesting that he used his teeth in his work.

The teenager's bones were better-preserved. He had been dead for some time when he was moved, Gary said. A single animal-bone button was found in his grave. Part of a wine bottle was buried upside down to mark his new gravesite. And his teeth held other clues.

The roots of his impacted tooth were not fully developed, an indication of his youth.

Another tooth bore subtle lateral marks suggesting stress as he grew up.

"It could be any form of under- or malnutrition," said Joseph Jones, research associate at William & Mary's Institute for Historical Biology, where the remains were studied. "Any form of infectious or other forms of disease. There are a wide range of stressors."

"What were those political economic conditions in which these individuals lived that would have induced stressors?" he said. Although there were a few free Black people, most African Americans in Williamsburg in the early 1800s were enslaved.

"It either represents the conditions of an enslaved childhood, or, less likely but possibly, conditions of a free African American in childhood," said Michael Blakey, director of the institute.

Raquel Fleskes, a University of Connecticut specialist in Colonial-era DNA and descendant communities, said limited DNA information was gleaned from samples of the remains because of the poor condition of most of the bones.

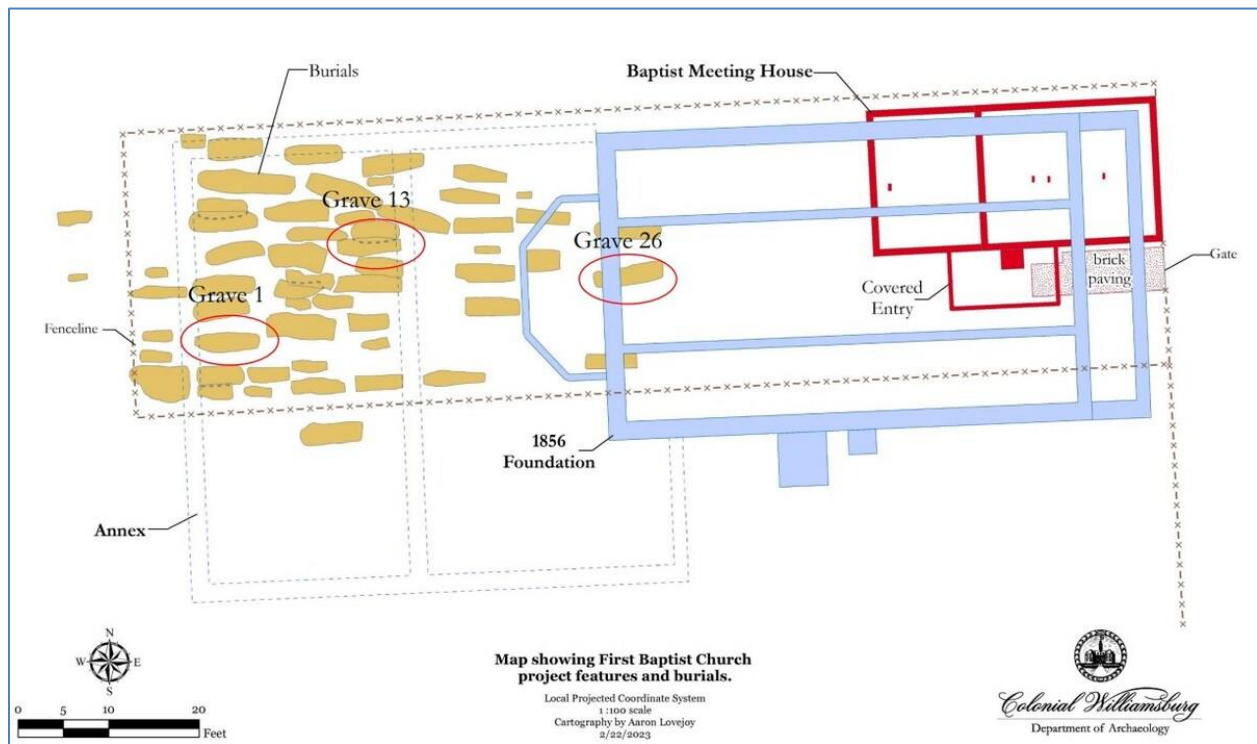
But overall, the bits of information filled in a still foggy portrait of the church's early members.

"The individuals buried there [were] part of the community that established the church on Nassau Street," Gary said. "This is the generation that established the meeting house ... and worshiped in that space."

“They’re ours,” said Connie Matthews Harshaw, president of First Baptist Church’s Let Freedom Ring Foundation.

These were probably people who worshiped in an early structure that predated the brick church that was built in 1856 and stood on the site until it was purchased and torn down in the 1950s to make way for Colonial Williamsburg.

Gary said 92 percent of the site has now been excavated and 63 graves have been found. The project began in 2020, with a rumor of one forgotten grave.



A map shows the First Baptist Church project features and burials. (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

The First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, organized in 1776, is one of the oldest Black congregations in the country.

It dates to a time when enslaved and free African Americans around Williamsburg worshiped in a remote forest shelter made of tree limbs and underbrush.

Church tradition says that a local White businessman, Jesse Cole, while walking his lands one day, came upon the congregation meeting and singing in such a shelter.

Moved by the scene, he offered them a carriage house he owned on Nassau Street.

In 1818, a “Baptist meeting house” was reported on the site. In 1834, a newspaper

reported that the “colored people’s meeting house” there was blown down by a

tornado. In the 1850s, it was replaced by the church that would stand for 100 years.

Williamsburg was the capital of Virginia from 1699 to 1780, and by 1775, more than half of its 1,880 residents were Black.

In the mid-20th century, an effort was underway to re-create the Colonial world of the former state capital as a tourist attraction. African Americans who live there today say much of the history of Black life in Williamsburg was erased as a result. The 1850s church did not fit with a 1750s motif. It was torn down in the 1950s, after Colonial Williamsburg bought out the congregation and paid for the new church outside the historic district.