

# Let Freedom Ring Foundation: Sharing the Story of the First Baptist Church

A conversation with president Connie Matthews Harshaw

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In 2016, the First Baptist Church in Williamsburg, Virginia marked its 240th anniversary. The church was established for free and enslaved African Americans by Reverend Moses, a free Black itinerant preacher, and later led by Gowan Pamphlet, an enslaved man who served as the pastor until his death.

The celebration of this milestone led to a call to repair the 1886 Freedom Bell that was in the church's steeple, a call answered by the members of [First Baptist Church](#) (FBC) in partnership with The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CWF). What started as a single project led to significant research and archaeology around the church's history, the identification of a burial site in the previous church location on Nassau Street, and the formation of the [Let Freedom Ring Foundation](#) (the Foundation).

The Foundation, with Connie Matthews Harshaw as its president, has as its mission "protecting and preserving the historic building, landscape and artifacts of First Baptist." This mission aligns with Harshaw's strong belief in the importance of this church and its contribution to the full American story. The Foundation shepherded First Baptist's collaborations for capital improvements; and in 2021 the [National Fund for Sacred Places](#) (a program of Partners for Sacred Places in collaboration with the National Trust for Historic Preservation) awarded the church a \$100,000.00 grant.

Learn more about how Harshaw's membership at FBC gave her the opportunity to combine faith and purpose to preserve the historic church and its unique place in American history.



photo by: Brian Sostak/The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. In April 2023, Connie Harshaw, a member of First Baptist Church and president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, opens a meeting with the descendant families of Williamsburg. This meeting was to hear from experts who presented DNA, archaeological, and osteological analyses of three burials excavated at the site of the church's original structure.

## **How did you first get involved with the First Baptist Church and Let Freedom Ring Foundation?**

I've been a member of the church since 2006 when we moved to the area. When we'd been here about 10 years, they started this celebration for the 240th anniversary of the church. And that started to get my attention. We had this bell in our steeple that didn't ring. We entered into an agreement with the CWF, the largest American history museum in the world to fix it.

Dionne Warwick, Jesse Jackson, all of the people, came to ring this bell and to celebrate the anniversary. [In 2016] President Obama rung the bell to open the National Museum [of African American History and Culture, in Washington, D.C.]. When the bell came back, we started to talk more about the story.

The president of William & Mary, the president of Colonial Williamsburg and myself, got together and we said, the first thing that we have to help people understand is that this is not Black history. This is American history.



The moment when the bell from the First Baptist Church was used for the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. (start at 1:47:13)

## **What is the history of the First Baptist Church?**

This church, I believe, in the late or early 19th century, had 500 members. How does that work? [At the time] It was illegal to gather and worship if you were Black.

The reason we say it's an American story is because people that look like me could not own property in the 1700s and 1800s. So how did they get this prime property in the center of Williamsburg, formerly the capital of Virginia? We found the descendants of the white man who donated the land

who said "I will let you use my property as long as you use it for the purposes of acknowledging your faith and worshiping."

So you've got a white wealthy townsman who defied, I'm sure, all of the rules of his time. You have enslaved and formerly enslaved people getting together and establishing this place of worship for Black people, and we now work with their descendants because this place of worship is still an active place of worship. It's just [physically] located in another place. When the Rockefellers came in, [they] demolished the church in 1956, because it did not fit in the fabric of early colonial America. They didn't have the tools that we have now to see if there were burials under the foundation. We've looked, we found them. The Let Freedom Ring Foundation, a partnership of the First Baptist Church and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, plan to have the site completely restored by 2026.

**How is the Foundation working with the congregation in order to get this story out and increase awareness? How is the relationship between the congregation and the foundation continuing?**

Our main mission is to protect and preserve the historic building landscape and to educate the community about the significance of this place in American history.

Every day something wonderful happens. The United States Congress just approved for the first time for an African American Heritage Trail in Williamsburg. The historic church has two places on that trail. Nassau Street, the site of the early church and Scotland Street, the current location, because we've had Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver a sermon in 1962 from our pulpit along with many other icons. We've had Bishop



Michael Curry come in 2017 before he married the Duke and Duchess of Sussex in London

This community has come around this in a way that speaks to the power of faith, the power of healing, and the power of forgiveness, because you've got those that were the enslavers, and you've got those that were the enslaved now sitting and talking about how to tell a more complete story.



**It sounds like this story can play a role in modeling social justice, righting wrongs, and how we can make amends, all very important for the rest of the nation.**

You're absolutely right. We call it historical justice. We call it completing that picture, because there were more than the white colonists here, right? It's not Black history or white history. This is our history, our shared history. It's playing a key role in race relations here and serving as an example to the nation.

**Along with your collaborations, you've been working with universities and scientists. Can you talk about the importance of the melding of science and faith for this project?**

We are honored to have Dr. Michael Blakey, who led the research on Lower Manhattan, New York, the [burial] ground there. He and Dr. Joseph Jones at William & Mary have been our chief scientific investigators in the Institute of Historic Biology. The president of the university, Katherine Rowe, said that she would do whatever we needed to do to help tell this story and she has supported us in many ways that would not have been possible without her support.

We've had a team from the Special Collections Unit of the Swem Library, under the direction of Jay Gaidmore and they're working with us to help us categorize and inventory all of the artifacts, files, photos, etc. that we plan to display by 2026.



Drone photograph showing the extent of the First Baptist Cemetery. The brick foundations of the 1856 church are on the right. Diagonal trenches from archaeological excavations in 1957 run through the middle of the site.

## **Is the ringing of the bell a huge inspiration for you?**

It is. We have people from all over the United States visiting us and as far away as Beirut, as Kenya, because President Obama rang the bell. One of the visitors from Kenya said, I just want to touch the rope that he held to ring this bell, because they're ringing it for justice and equality.

When you hear it, it reaches in places of your soul that you don't even know were there. You asked me, 'you're finally able to ring the bell. What feelings did it inspire in you?' It's a feeling of hope. I'm addicted to hope. I cannot think of a better place to be at this time in this country. Every time you hear that bell, it reminds me of everything that we, as a people, went through to get here. And it can't be as hard as it was not easy, but it can't be as hard as it was. That's what it inspires in me—  
HOPE!