

Williamsburg African American Heritage Trail to tell un- and under-told story of city's Black community

WHRO | By [Nick McNamara](#)

Published February 17, 2025 at 4:38 AM EST



Janice Canaday (left) and Johnette Gordon-Weaver (right) stand inside First Baptist Church, a site on the Williamsburg African American Heritage Trail. The women served on the trail advisory committee. *Photo by Nick McNamara*

Trail advisory committee member Janice Canaday wants it to ensure Black residents today “will never walk around like I did trying to find themselves in the story.”

Johnette Gordon-Weaver walks through a leafy, grassy path that winds behind several homes heading toward the Historic First Baptist Church.

She pointed to the church and the Triangle area across the street, once “the center of Black businesses” and a place to gather to discuss politics and life.

The path will be the first leg of Williamsburg’s African American Heritage Trail, beginning in Harris Bottom – named for Samuel Harris, the owner of Harris’ Cheap Store. Harris died in 1904 and owned the land where the trail will begin.

“Sam Harris was totally the richest Black man in town, but had enough money that when the college needed some funding the college president went to him and asked him for money, and he lent them money,” Gordon-Weaver said. “It became a displaced Black community.”

Gordon-Weaver serves on the trail advisory committee. Williamsburg identified the trail as a project in 2020. In 2023, the city convened input sessions to start homing in on where it should go and what stories it should tell. Williamsburg still needs \$1.8 million to complete construction.

“The city felt one thing it was good at, really good at, is infrastructure ... actually building the trail,” said Michele DeWitt, Williamsburg assistant city manager. “But the most important part was to work with the community on the narrative of the trail.”

[Williamsburg contracted with marketing agency JMI in 2024](#) to tie the narrative together, focusing on places and stories about notable people and moments. Three themes underpin the storyline: strength derived from faith, power gained from education and resilience built from community.

City Council approved the storyline in December.



A map of the planned route for the Williamsburg African American Heritage Trail. *Courtesy of the city of Williamsburg*

“I kind of look at the trail as being an igniter,” said Janice Canaday, vice chair of First Baptist Church’s board of directors and trail advisory committee member.

“I want it to spark interest in the community so that the community would collectively come back and take ownership of their history.”

The 2-mile trail will be accessible to people with disabilities and stretch through downtown starting with a trailhead at Harris Bottom across Lafayette Street from Williamsburg's Municipal Building. Signs will list other primarily-Black communities that were displaced and gentrified by the government and Colonial Williamsburg over the years.

A dozen sites will be featured along the trail. It includes Braxton Court, built by Robert Braxton, which housed Black residents uprooted by Colonial Williamsburg's restoration starting in the 1920s, and the Cooke Building, built on the site that housed the city's first NAACP office and is named for businessman and civil rights leader Herbert Cooke. It also reaches onto the campus of William & Mary to include the Sankofa Bird Statue and Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved.

Canaday, though, said it's about more than any one location.

"It's this whole vibrant community because we were dispersed like seeds if you look at our history," she said. "We've done things, we've created things, we've used our ingenuity throughout this town and community – and we've helped start other communities."

The history of Williamsburg's Black community has long been unacclaimed, its stories un- or under-told despite Blacks making up more than half of its population in the 18th and 19th centuries. Next to the names of white figures such as George Washington, George Wythe and James Blair, Black Williamsburg-born people didn't see themselves reflected in the city's stories.

Canaday hopes the trail can play a role in changing that for Black residents today.

"But I want them to do that in such a way and be so involved that the generations that come under me, like my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, will never walk around like I did trying to find themselves in the story," she said. "They'll know their story."

"That's our responsibility: Not to let it fall under that cement and get paved over, like, ever again," Gordon-Weaver said.

Gordon-Weaver and Canaday, though, stop short of calling it a centering of the African American experience.

They say Williamsburg won't begin to start down that road until residents can access more historical documents and photos about the Black community – and until Black businesses can resurge in and around the Triangle area.

Canaday plans to be one of those business owners and one day open a restaurant downtown.

“I want to honor all those women who were the backbone to make it anything,” she said. “I love feeding people and I think through conversation and food and music that we can heal a nation and we can create a better community. And I want to be a part of that.”