



July 24, 2023

Who'll tell your story?

A Faith Matters post from a few years ago told the story of the Bray House, a school funded by a British clergyman to teach African-American children, both slave and free. The building was discovered hiding in plain sight a few blocks from our house in Williamsburg, Virginia, disguised by later architectural additions.

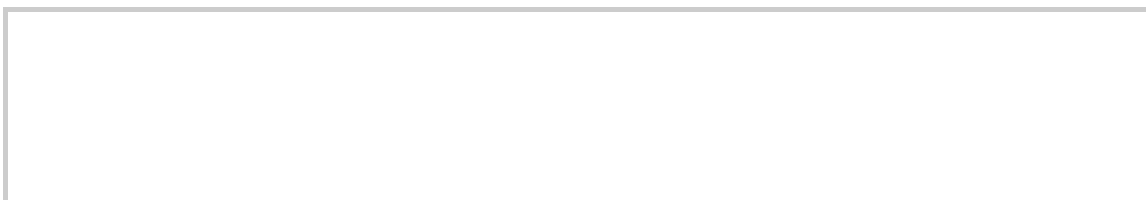
Since then, the Bray House has been moved a few blocks to a new site just off the main street of Colonial Williamsburg. It now stands right next to a current archaeological dig on the site of the first African-American church building in the town, which had housed a congregation dating back to 1776, the year of our country's birth.

During the thirty years we've lived nearby, Colonial Williamsburg has been trying to expand the story it tells of its former residents. In the mid-20th century, the story tended to focus on Future Founding Fathers, antique trades, and the lifestyles of genteel aristocrats, while politely turning away from looking too closely at whose labor made those lifestyles possible.

The African Americans' first church building from 1818 was destroyed by a tornado, then rebuilt, then eventually torn down by Colonial Williamsburg in the 1950s and paved over for a parking lot. The descendants of that original African-American congregation had meanwhile faithfully passed down stories of their church and of burials on church grounds.

Finally, in 2021, archaeologists began excavating the site. Not only did they find the original church foundation, they also found graves. DNA analysis of the remains showed that these were in fact ancestors of some of the members of the current First Baptist congregation. Archaeology confirmed oral history for people who were usually denied any written history.

Now with the Bray School right next door to the site of the historic church and churchyard, Colonial Williamsburg has a physical focal point for telling some of the stories of its former residents that have been overlooked for so long. Whose stories might we be overlooking now in our time and place?





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

THURSDAY, APR 6

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.



~Written by Ruth Griffioen



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