

HISTORIC FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH PROJECT

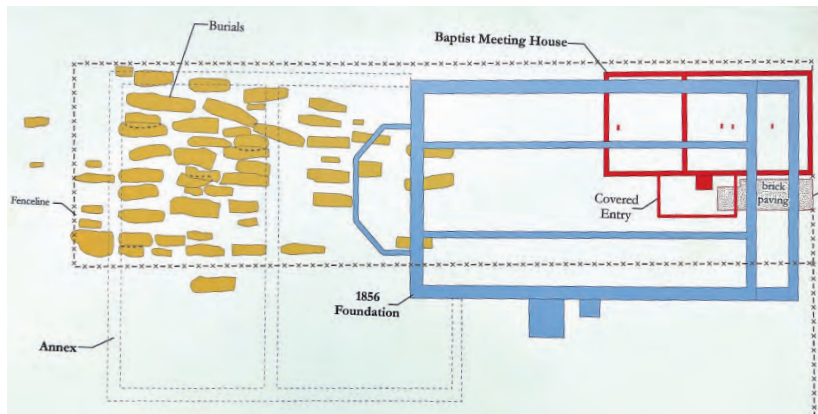
- > *The Historic First Baptist Church will serve as a nexus for expanded African American programming.*



Additional interpreters and programs will help visitors from around the world more fully explore how the enslaved and free 18th- and 19th-century Black community lived, worked, worshiped and celebrated.

The First Baptist Church Project

Right: Map showing the footprint of the original 1818 meeting house structure, the 1856 foundation as well as burials located on the property.



In 2020, an archaeological exploration of the church's 1818 meeting house began. This partnership will determine how best to understand, interpret, preserve and commemorate the site.

“Understanding religious history provides the context for how the founding fathers felt about liberty, freedom and equality.”

- Rev. James Ingram

Colonial Williamsburg is partnering with First Baptist Church, the church's descendant community and the Let Freedom Ring Foundation to locate and reconstruct the Nassau Street site of the church's first permanent home. Founded in 1776 by enslaved and free Black worshipers, First Baptist Church is one of the country's earliest African American congregations. This project will guide how the site is interpreted and commemorated so present and future generations can learn about this nationally significant church and those who worshiped there.

First Baptist Church initially gathered secretly just outside Williamsburg, led by a free Black itinerant preacher known as Rev. Moses. In 1781, the group organized as Baptists under enslaved pastor Gowan Pamphlet.

Years later, white businessman Jesse Cole gave the congregation land on Nassau Street, where they built a small structure in which they worshiped until an 1834 tornado destroyed the structure. The congregation built a new brick church on the site in 1856. A century later, Colonial Williamsburg acquired the land and the congregation moved to a new location on Scotland Street. The 1856 building was demolished and the site became a parking lot.

The project revealed the foundation of the original building, more than 60 graves and 12,000 artifacts. Colonial Williamsburg will reconstruct the Historic First Baptist Church structure, which will be a nexus for expanded African American programming.

The site will feature current Nation Builders Rev. Gowan Pamphlet and Ann Wager, a white teacher at the Williamsburg Bray School. New interpreters and programs will help visitors from around the world more fully explore how the enslaved and free 18th- and 19th-century Black community lived, worked, worshiped and celebrated, and bolster the Foundation's efforts to tell the accurate and authentic story of those who lived and worked in 18th-century Williamsburg.



Right: Senior Missionary Society at the Dedication Services and 180th Anniversary of the First Baptist Church, Williamsburg, Virginia. [Oct. 7, 1956]