

Colonial Williamsburg



WILLIAM & MARY

CHARTERED 1693

**Public dedication of Williamsburg Bray School on
Nov. 1 — 250 years after the school closed**



*Photo by Brendan Sostak, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
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WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (Oct. 28, 2024) – The oldest surviving building in which enslaved and free Black children were formally educated will soon reopen its doors, enabling Colonial Williamsburg to educate visitors about the intricate history of the school and its impact on early America.

On Nov. 1, Colonial Williamsburg will formally dedicate a restored [Williamsburg Bray School](#), where as many as 400 students ages 3-10 were taught between 1760 and 1774, in a ceremony 250 years after the school closed. The event, which is co-hosted by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary, is the first of a series of 250th

commemorations planned between now and the end of 2026 that collectively recall our nation's complex origins.

The 18th-century building is the oldest-known structure in which enslaved and free Black children were formally educated. It was identified in 2020 by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and William & Mary as the Williamsburg Bray School and in 2023 moved to Colonial Williamsburg, which has been restoring it to its 18th-century appearance using a combination of modern and 18th-century tools and techniques.

The school itself and its students tell a complicated story. The school's faith-based curriculum endorsed slavery and encouraged Black children to accept their position in society. Yet, [evidence suggests](#) that some of the students used their education to resist the institutions the school was designed to support.

"The fact that the building that housed the Williamsburg Bray School still exists is remarkable," said Colonial Williamsburg President and CEO Cliff Fleet. "The most meaningful aspect of this project is that we are able to use it to share the stories of the students who attended. The Bray School is a focal point for research, scholarship and dialogue regarding the complicated story of race, religion and education in Williamsburg and early America."

At the dedication ceremony on Nov. 1, descendants will gather and read the names of students who attended the school. Tours of the building's interior will allow a limited number of guests to see a main-floor room, restored and appropriately furnished, and an adjacent room, in the process of restoration, providing a rare opportunity to get a behind-the-scenes look at the restoration process. Following the event, the building will be closed to finish the remaining interior work with plans to fully open it in the Spring of 2025.

"In the past few years, we've learned so much about this important school and the students who attended," said Janice Canaday, a member of the Williamsburg Bray School descendant community and Colonial Williamsburg African American Community Engagement Manager. "But we have so much more we can learn, and more importantly, so much more we can tell the world about their experiences and how they helped shape a Williamsburg community that was more than 50 percent Black at the time. It's time their voices, silent for centuries, are heard."

[The Bray School dedication event](#), which is free and open to the public, will be held from 2-3:15 p.m. on the lawn of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg. Event speakers will include Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution; Justice John Charles Thomas, a former justice of the Supreme Court of Virginia and its first Black justice; and Virginia State Senator Mamie Locke. The event will highlight the importance of unity in the Williamsburg community and will commemorate the school's impact in the 18th century and on the generations that followed.

"The history of the Williamsburg Bray School and its students continues to illuminate the roles of race, religion and education in colonial America," said William & Mary President Katherine A. Rowe. "With the opening of the restored building, the Bray School scholars' stories will reach an even wider audience. Many incredible people have made this new beginning possible. I especially thank Colonial Williamsburg, the descendant community and William & Mary student and faculty researchers for their steadfast commitment."

The [William & Mary Bray School Lab](#) is working to amplify these voices in partnership with Colonial Williamsburg. Oral history and genealogy work, done by the team at the William & Mary Bray School Lab, are ensuring that the history and legacies of the descendants of the Bray School scholars can be made accessible to a broad audience.

"It is through our partnership that we are transforming our community, the Commonwealth, and our nation," said William & Mary Presidential Liaison for Strategic Cultural Partnerships Ann Marie Stock. "William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation are making visible the stories that have long been overlooked, giving voice to those who have been marginalized, and ensuring that these critical narratives are woven into the broader fabric of American history."

Williamsburg Bray School Book

This December, Colonial Williamsburg will release [The Williamsburg Bray School: A History Through Records, Reflections, and Rediscovery](#), a book edited by Maureen Elgersman Lee, director of the William & Mary Bray School Lab, and Nicole Brown, graduate assistant at the Bray School Lab who also interprets Ann Wager, the Bray School teacher. Seven letters that trace the arc of the Williamsburg Bray School – from its founding in 1760 to its closing in 1774 – are the foundation for this collection of essays that explore the complex history and implications of the school. The essays reflect on the school's legacy, with some rooted in years of research and writing on the establishment of the school and others reflecting upon recent discoveries and their impact on history.

"One of the goals of the book is to bring the Williamsburg Bray School's story to life by elevating many voices, especially descendants of the Bray School students," Elgersman Lee said. "It's a story that is far from simple and one that challenges all of us to reflect on the legacy these students left on a burgeoning new nation."

Shaping Colonial Williamsburg

The Williamsburg Bray School is the 89th original structure restored by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the first 18th-century original structure to be added to the Historic Area since the 1940s.

Its location is adjacent to the site of the first structure of First Baptist Church, one of the oldest Black churches in the nation. Colonial Williamsburg [began an excavation](#) of that site in 2020 that identified the original structure and ultimately the burial sites of more than 60 people. Colonial Williamsburg will reconstruct the original structure where enslaved and

free members of Williamsburg’s Black community congregated in the early 19th century and unveil that site in 2026.

Together, the Williamsburg Bray School and the [African Baptist Meeting House and Burial Ground](#) (where the original structure used by the First Baptist Church congregation as a place of worship was located) sites will enable Colonial Williamsburg to share more of the complex and compelling stories that contribute to the complete history of Williamsburg in the 18th century.

“These incredible projects are essential to our effort in uncovering America’s shared past and our understanding of America’s founding,” Fleet said. “Williamsburg is home to one of America’s oldest Black churches and one of the oldest schools for enslaved and free Black children. We have a tremendous opportunity to tell the full story about Williamsburg and the origins of our nation.”

At the Williamsburg Bray School site starting Nov. 2, outdoor interpretation will focus on the intersection of race, religion and community. Stories about the children who attended the school and their teacher, Ann Wager, will come to life.

The two sites — along with the [Campbell Archaeology Center](#) and the reconstructed [Custis Square gardens](#), both set to open in 2026, and the recently expanded [Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg](#) — will create a new Nassau Street corridor that reimagines the Historic Area.

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About The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation preserves, restores and operates Virginia’s 18th-century capital of Williamsburg. Innovative and interactive experiences highlight the relevance of the American Revolution to contemporary life and the importance of an informed, active citizenry. The Colonial Williamsburg experience includes more than 600 restored or reconstructed original buildings, renowned museums of decorative arts and folk art, extensive educational outreach programs for students and teachers, lodging, culinary options from historic taverns to casual or elegant dining, the Golden Horseshoe Golf Club

featuring 36 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones and his son Rees Jones, a full-service spa and fitness center, pools, retail stores and gardens. Philanthropic support and revenue from admissions, products and hospitality operations sustain Colonial Williamsburg's educational programs and preservation initiatives.

About William & Mary

*Founded by Royal Charter in 1693, William & Mary is the second oldest institution of higher learning in the country. The Alma Mater of the Nation is a preeminent university, combining the depth and breadth of a liberal arts and sciences education with the disciplined exploration and innovation of a leading, global research university. A vibrant and inclusive community, William & Mary cultivates creative thinkers, principled leaders and compassionate global citizens equipped for lives of meaning and distinction. As a "Public Ivy," the university convenes great minds and hearts to meet the most pressing needs of our time. William & Mary's graduate program in U.S. Colonial history was recently named the best in the country, according to **rankings** by U.S. News & World Report.*