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Cultivation through Excavation: Performing Community and Partnership in the Historic First Baptist Church Project

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Cultivation through Excavation:
Performing Community and Partnership in the Historic First Baptist Church Project

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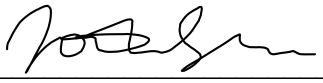

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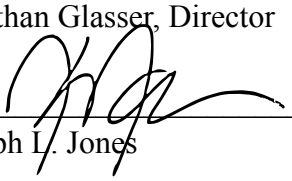

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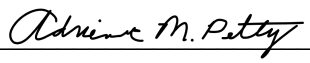

Adrienne Petty

Williamsburg, VA
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Acknowledgements

In August 2020, William & Mary published the following statement:

> William & Mary acknowledges the Indigenous peoples who are the original inhabitants of the lands our campus is on today – the Cheroenhaka (Nottoway), Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Monacan, Nansemond, Nottoway, Pamunkey, Patawomeck, Upper Mattaponi, and Rappahannock tribes – and pay our respect to their tribal members past and present.

In fall 2007, The William & Mary Student Assembly passed a resolution calling for the Board of Visitors (BOV) to recognize and apologize for William & Mary's role in slavery. In spring 2009, the BOV adopted a resolution in spring 2009 recognizing the school's role in slavery and Jim Crow segregation and established the Lemon Project. In 2018, the BOV passed a resolution and released this statement:

> The Board of Visitors acknowledges that William & Mary enslaved people, exploited them and their labor, and perpetuated the legacies of racial discrimination. The Board profoundly regrets these activities, apologizes for them, expresses its deep appreciation for the contributions made by the African and African American members of its community to the vitality of William & Mary then, now, and for all time coming, and commits to continue our efforts to remedy the lingering effects of past injustices.

As scholar and museum professional Rex Ellis and other William & Mary students before me have said, there is a history of white researchers from outside Williamsburg entering and conducting research about the African American communities here. I, too, have been a white researcher from outside Williamsburg asking for the thoughts, memories, and time of so many members of these communities. Everyone I have asked has responded with warmth and willingness, and I am completely indebted to their help as my project progressed over the last

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Introduction

Approaching the Stakeholders of the Nassau Street Project

Let Freedom Ring Foundation President Connie Matthews Harshaw is about to speak. The stage in the grand ballroom is illuminated with blue and purple tones, and the jazz band, previously its sole occupants, has quieted down to a pause. Guests dressed in black-tie attire are seated at several dozen tables gathered around the stage, and they, too, have quieted their chatting. Mrs. Harshaw welcomes us to the 2021 Let Freedom Ring Gala, an annual fundraiser for the foundation of the same name which formed in 2016 to restore and share the story of the First Baptist Church's 1886 bell. Looking out into the audience, Mrs. Harshaw thanks the church members and those who are descendants of past church members, making the promise that the research will be done, and the elders will learn more before they go. "We've got everyone in this room that we need," she said. This is a "compelling point of view, and we are all responsible for piecing it together." This project is telling an American story, in addition to an African American story, and they are planning to do it right.

What is this story? In 1776, a group of free and enslaved African Americans organized a Christian congregation in Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia. These congregants could not worship inside the city limits, as the assembly of Black persons was highly restricted by the Virginia laws of 1723 "for the better government of Negros, Mulattos, and Indians, bond or free" (General Assembly). The congregation therefore met in secret, finding worship spaces outdoors at Greenspring Plantation and Raccoon Chase, just outside of town (Bogger 2006, 10-12). In the 246 years since, the members of this congregation have continued to worship together across Williamsburg and now constitute the historic First Baptist Church, one of the oldest African

American Baptist churches in the United States of America, and at least seven daughter and granddaughter churches on the Virginia Peninsula. The congregation worshipped on South Nassau Street from the early nineteenth century until 1956, then sold that property to Colonial Williamsburg and moved to a new building on Scotland Street, where First Baptist remains active today. The Nassau Street church was demolished by Colonial Williamsburg when they bought the property, and after a brief excavation, the Foundation laid and maintained a parking lot on top until a few years ago. In 2020, partnership among First Baptist Church, the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CWF) led to the launch of a project to research, excavate, and create an exhibit about the church on Nassau Street. As of spring 2022, the archaeological arm of the project will have reached almost two years of work, with completion of the current excavation phase expected at the end of 2022. Garnering extensive coverage from national media outlets like the New York Times, the Washington Post, and PBS, the project has reached wide audiences. On the local scale, the project has a wide reach, too, involving stakeholders beyond the walls of the First Baptist Church and the CWF Archaeological Collections Building. It is building on years of work: artifact preservation by the church community, genealogical tracing and memory work by many individuals, and documentary research by CWF historians. It also draws from the models of descendant community engagement and prioritization developed through projects such as the New York African Burial Ground and the National Trust for Historic Preservation (La Roche and Blakey 1997; Blakey 2010; “Engaging Descendant Communities” 2018).

The First Baptist project diverges from past scholarly appraisals of Colonial Williamsburg's structure and interpretation of the relationship of the past to the present. The parameters of "the past" have shifted through the institution's history, as the perceived role of the museum has changed. This project is built on an understanding that the past sits with us today, and not just through abstract influences; Williamsburg is a living city, and its past is some current residents' personal and familial past. This project centers the Nassau Street site, one to be interpreted outside the eighteenth-century period and one that is an example of the institution displacing and attempting to erase the Black communities of Williamsburg, as scholarly critics have pointed out over the years. This thesis explores the First Baptist project's framing as a move to acknowledge and redress the communities' continuity and the museum's actions by considering processes of co-construction of the site, both in the past and the concrete particulars of the present. Through an exploration of long-standing memories centered in the church, interactions between archaeologists and visitors at the excavation site itself, and discussions about the meaning of community and descent for envisioning future steps for the site, I argue that, in building on the descendant community engagement model, the Nassau Street project may offer a path for re-envisioning this museum in terms of a multipolar partnership that is conscious of its own complicated past, its present fragility, and its future possibilities.

I became acquainted with the project during my internship with CWF archaeology through the National Institute for American History and Democracy in autumn of 2020, just before excavation commenced. My main project was transcribing 1980s interviews with Black Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists, but I was also invited to visit the First Baptist site and help dry screen artifacts. From talking with archaeologists, church members, and tourists, I became interested in the different groups brought together by this project.

The three main stakeholders in this project, those who will be affected by the exhibit's research process and the interpretation produced, are the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the church community, and visitors to the site. These groups then must be further divided and specified for coherent analysis. Colonial Williamsburg is an institution whose name carries weight in the museum field and the local area but is made up of many different departments with partially overlapping goals and tasks; I recognize the ambiguity that I create when describing actions as done *by* "the restoration" or "CWF," but trying to assign responsibility to the individuals that would have collaborated on those impactful actions, like the resettlement of Duke of Gloucester Street residents, is not the purpose of this research. When discussing the current project, I will try to specify departments or individuals. The church community is not only present-day members of First Baptist Church, but also members of daughter churches, relatives and descendants of members, and others who have become involved with the project primarily through their connections to First Baptist or the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, rather than the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation or other stakeholder organizations. For the purpose of this introduction, the "descendant community" is included under the church community, but I will differentiate it later as an essential collaborative constituency. The "descendant community" is an academic term developed by Michael Blakey and scholars of the New York African Burial Ground project in the 1990s, and for the First Baptist project, it is a group that is still defining itself. The final group are visitors to the site, some of whom converse with interpreters. Site visitors do not need tickets to speak with us, so it is sometimes difficult to separate who is a tourist and who may be a local resident walking by. Therefore, I often refer to this group as "visitors," and Colonial Williamsburg personnel call them "guests." The future exhibit will most likely require tickets for entry, so ticketed guests will comprise an essential audience going

forward. As much of the project is centered around the site located on Colonial Williamsburg property, the future exhibit will be evaluated by the public as part of CWF.

Anthropologists meet Colonial Williamsburg

As one of the country's oldest and largest living history museums, Colonial Williamsburg has been the subject of much popular and academic study over more than 90 years of operation. The museum has served as a leader in many areas, including conservation (Williams 2021) and historical archaeology (Poole and Samford 2021), but has also received criticism about the complexity and wholeness of the narratives it presents to the public, and about the overarching goals and intentions disseminated through those narratives. The early restoration was praised for being a shrine to the aesthetics and noble struggle of the past; in the 1950s, John D. Rockefeller III then led the museum in an actively political direction that aimed to inspire a loyalty to democracy in the face of Cold War communism (Greenspan 2008). The "Becoming Americans" theme, with roots in the 1970s, aimed to address the past with an eye to complexity and draw attention to members of colonial society beyond wealthy and powerful white men (Carson 1998). The 1990s brought academics Eric Gable, Richard Handler, and Anna Lawson to the museum in what CWF historian and executive Cary Carson (1994) called "anthropologists' first contact with history museums." Handler and Gable (1997) argue that despite the bend towards social history, CWF still propagated the ideal of consistent progress, in history and in historic interpretation (1997, 222). They argue that frontline employees were tasked to maintain the "good vibes" of each guest's visit in addition to sharing interpretation that, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, was no longer only light (1997). Thus, they conclude, "corporately managed and disciplined frontline employees are a poor conduit for complex historiographical narratives"

(1997, 207). Gable, Handler, and Lawson (1992) also argue that early 1990s CWF used different theories of history-making for white stories and Black stories, embracing historical relativism in Black history interpretation that appeared "conjectural" while giving the impression that "mainstream [white] history is an approximation of the truth" (1992: 803). Lawson (1995) further argues that CWF othered Black history while proclaiming internally that it should be brought to "mainstream" interpretation at the museum (1995).

The research by CWF outsiders is mirrored by employees who also critically review the Foundation's work. Black scholars at the Foundation, especially, have studied the museum's practices of making the Black community in Williamsburg and in the Foundation "invisible" (Edwards-Ingram 2014, 31; see also Edwards-Ingram 1990, 1997; Ellis 2000). Historically, the museum has been "doing race," placing African American employees and residents in non-expert and subservient positions, and further enabling white visitors to do the same (Marcus and Moya 2010 as cited by Edwards-Ingram 2014, 11-12, 30-31). Ywone Edwards-Ingram demonstrates that the Foundation's long reliance on the images and work of the Black coachmen who provided tours of Colonial Williamsburg for decades was downplayed when leaving their names out of publications (Edwards-Ingram 2014). This upheld and replicated white supremacy in the modern day and drew from perceived models of colonial society. The museum has attempted to answer these criticisms. In February 2022, the museum dedicated its new carriage to Benjamin Spraggins Sr., who worked as a coachman from 1934 to 1953 (Feser 2022). The First Baptist project may also be examined as an example of naming integral Black people and organizations in the Williamsburg community.

Models of Descendant Engagement and Sharing Authority

Blakey and colleagues who worked with the New York African Burial Ground in the 1990s pioneered new methods and ethical models of doing history-work with and for present-day African American communities. Drawing from work around the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), these scholars pushed the field of bioanthropology to better protect and respect African American burials by consulting with present-day African American communities that descend from those localities and burials. As more museums and historic sites have begun to interpret Black history, a model of engagement with the communities whose stories they want to tell has emerged. The National Trust for Historic Preservation, at the 2018 National Summit on Teaching Slavery, codified these best practices in what is known as "the rubric," a roadmap for institutions looking to reach out into the communities in which they are situated and include more descendant voices ("Engaging Descendant Communities" 2018). The First Baptist project has drawn purposefully from the rubric in building this partnership in the current era. Colonial Williamsburg archaeologists maintain a facilitator role for the Nassau Street cemetery arm of the project so that the bioanthropologists, including Blakey, can follow the ethical clientage model in working *for* rather than *with* the descendants (Blakey 2010). Antoinette Jackson (2008) and L. Chardé Reid (2021) both discuss the intersections of race, power, and memory in museum spaces, and provide framing for the First Baptist Church project as a collaboration in which the descendant communities find and define their own goals. Reid (2021) analyzes descendant community relationships to Anglo-American colonial sites and the processes of history-making at Historic Jamestowne, a neighboring heritage site to Colonial Williamsburg. Separated by only a few miles, CWF and the various Jamestown museums have been connected through personnel, preservation institutions, and joint ticket packages. One can

draw similarities between the First Baptist project and the Angela Site project today, as both have tried to meaningfully engage with and follow the lead of the descendants of the historic communities whose story their museums want to interpret today. Additionally, they serve as focal points around which descendant communities can organize and define themselves. Angela was one of the first African women to be brought to what would become the United States, documented in Jamestown in the 1620s, and the Angela Site today is the William Pierce property where she lived. Through community research and archaeology, the Angela Site "is opening up space for Historic Jamestowne and local community members to reflect on the history and influences of Africans and African Americans in Tidewater Virginia" (Reid 2021, 43).

Reid (2021) proposes an understanding of Historic Jamestowne as "white public heritage space," a site "constructed to privilege heritage and historical narratives that promote white solidarity through appeals to white supremacy" (2021, 25). Jamestown has catered to white imaginings of Anglo-Saxon settlement as the sole ancestor of the nation today, purposefully excluding African American and indigenous American contributions whilst sometimes relying on the labor of African Americans to share the history of the site (2021, 34-35). As the past anonymity of CWF's Black coachmen illustrates (Edwards-Ingram 2014), Colonial Williamsburg has done the same. Reid notes that Black members of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a segregated federal New Deal program, were the first archaeologists onsite, but were "ultimately silenced in the official narrative" of Jamestown as white public heritage space (Reid 2021, 29). Similarities can be drawn to archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg, where the Black employees who carried out the excavation work of the early restoration, including the 1957 excavation of Nassau Street, were not accorded the title of archaeologist until recently (Poole 2021). The legacies of these museums do affect the projects today, and it is only with

acknowledgment of their institutional past that museums can fully support descendant communities today.

It is necessary to continue reflecting on the power structures involved "in mediating issues of identity and representation with respect to cultural heritage preservation and management" (Jackson 2012, 34). It is also necessary to aim to understand how the non-museum stakeholders in turn grant partial authorship to the museums in the presentation of their stories and heritage. Any given site of remembrance [holds] a "multitude of additional meanings" for individuals (Jackson 2011, 449). It is by gathering and presenting these meanings in their plurality that descendant communities exercise authority in a project that could serve a museum's goals but could also establish further goals. Alongside the enaction of partnerships throughout the project, this thesis explores the ways that the First Baptist community sets the agenda.

Continuity in the Changing Town

Continuity is an important theme of the First Baptist project, even when the term is not explicitly used. In a town where the twenty-first and eighteenth centuries are placed side-by-side, with elements transplanted from one to the other (think costumed interpreters at Wawa and prom photoshoots outside the Governor's Palace), the period in between either fades to the background or is intentionally hidden, to be occasionally let out as tokenized examples of authentic public history work (Handler and Gable 1997). One through line of the past to the present, however, is the historic First Baptist Church of Williamsburg.

Recognition of the continuity of the First Baptist congregation is implicit and expected by its members. In archaeology, continuity often refers to continuous habitation of a site or use of a

practice. In African Diasporic and African American archaeology, scholars often look for African cultural practices still enacted after forced migration to the North American continent (Samford 1996). For example, anthropologists working at the New York African Burial Ground examined tooth modifications and burial practices maintained for African-born and American-born persons buried in this seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cemetery (La Roche and Blakey 1997, 86-87). For First Baptist, continuity is strung through the worshipping congregation's social and family ties. The original members have long since passed, and the name of the church has changed, but the institution has remained an organizer in the African American community of Williamsburg as a church created and led by African Americans. Displays in the Scotland Street church building demonstrate this strength in continuity by exhibiting the life of the congregation in photos, written records, event flyers and more from much of the congregation's twentieth century history. Building on these memorialization efforts, First Baptist community members now work with Colonial Williamsburg personnel to prepare this interpretation behind the scenes whilst the story is already shared at the museum through interpretation at the archaeology site. The first chapter introduces the history of the First Baptist congregation through the 1950s and provides an overview of the Nassau Street archaeology project from the early summer of 2020 through March of 2022. Touching also on the institutional history of Colonial Williamsburg, this chapter develops a basis for understanding the Nassau Street project as situated in "America's largest living-history museum" ("Strategic Plan 2020-2026," 3).

Defining the Terms of Collaboration through Dramaturgical Analysis

Scholars have found applications for dramaturgical analysis of interpersonal interaction across many fields of social science and the humanities, including sociology, linguistics, and

anthropology. These theories have created extensive metaphors likening interaction to a staged performance, featuring principal participants like actors, producers, and audience to parse their relationships to one another and the meanings produced in an interaction (Hare and Blumberg 1988). Dramaturgical analysis engages with the complexity of interaction by showing that an individual interaction cannot be isolated but is often orchestrated and received by people who do not appear to be a speaker or listener at the event. This approach to understanding relationships is salient when considering the interactions between Colonial Williamsburg personnel and visitors to the Nassau Street excavation site, where archaeologists and volunteers acting as interpreters hope to impart knowledge and enthusiasm to every person who stops by. In this project, dramaturgical analysis allows one to see the ways that planned but loosely scripted historic interpretation is the product of a given interpreter's relationship to the material and other members of CWF. Further, it shows that the CWF tourists do not passively take in the information.

Erving Goffman has been influential in the development of dramaturgical theory (Hare and Blumberg 1988). Goffman was drawn into this work through his visualization of the performative front, where he foregrounds the individual's performance, defining it as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (1959, 15). The performance takes place in the front, represented as the theatrical front stage in dramaturgical analysis, which combines the physical setting and the appearance of the participating individual (1959, 22). Goffman's front implies the existence of backstage spaces, where performances are prepared with other individuals, like directors or producers, or off-stage spaces, where writers might reside (Hare and Blumberg 1988). As performers on the same "team" as those participants backstage (Goffman 1981), interpreters

navigate how to share pieces of the narrative(s) that CWF and the descendant community have created to illustrate the project in the present.

Charles Goodwin (2003) also draws on Goffman (1959, 1981) and other dramaturgical concepts to further develop his theoretical understandings, describing reality as co-constructed through multi-modal signs. He argues that, while research focused on single sign systems, like language or gesture, have produced insights, "it is also necessary to investigate how different sign systems work together to build relevant action and accomplish consequential meaning" (2003, 22). To accomplish this, he analyzes "semiotic gestures," multi-modal utterances created by the "juxtaposition" of language, the physical human body, structures in the environment, and more (2003, 22-23). His analysis of co-construction at an archaeological field school is particularly significant to this project, as the ways that instructors draw meaning from the soil has direct parallels to the goals of interpreters at the First Baptist Nassau Street site. Goodwin's (2003) model of close analysis allows me to illustrate how a museum exhibit is created through the interpretation and active excavation site in a single interaction.

The second chapter develops the idea of sharing authority as archaeologists and CWF volunteers extend it to Williamsburg tourists. Through Goffman, I view each interaction as a performance, where interpreters and visitors cooperate to build an exhibit out of both the physical setting of the excavation and available research shared verbally. The various ways that archaeological interpretation can be described allow one to think about the excavation and future permanent exhibit in new ways and consider how they communicate content to visitors.

Goffman's scholarship has further applications to the project when examining the relationships between the descendant community and Colonial Williamsburg personnel, usually enacted away from the Nassau Street site.

Exploring Partnership through Participant Roles

Goffman's (1981) framework of participant roles centers around the idea of one's "footing" in an interaction, breaking beyond the dyadic ideal of an interaction including only Speaker and Addressee (Irvine 1996). Succeeding scholars like Stephen Levinson (1988) have taken up Goffman's work to further define particular participant roles, causing debate over the use of universal roles; Judith Irvine (1996) prefers that the context of an individual interaction determines the complex roles beyond "Speaker, Addressee, and third parties present and absent," (1996, 135). She argues the focus of participation role theory should be on the "fragmentation process," the creation of roles as an utterance is produced and an interaction progresses, and furthermore, on the context which surrounds the utterance event (1996, 134-135). Irvine follows Levinson's (1988) separation of an utterance event and the speech event, where the former is "the maximal unit within a turn [at talk] in which the participant roles are held constant," but the latter is the entire interaction, i.e., a full conversation (1988, 193).

Irvine (1996) refers to Mikhail Bakhtin to further the discussion of third parties to the individual(s) in a performing in given interaction. For Irvine,

> The [Bakhtinian] idea of intertwined voices recognizes the complexity of the sources on which a speaker draws, and the complexity of the speaker's commentary on those sources, which are included in an utterance. The "double-voiced utterance" is one whose form and significance presuppose a second voice, another speaker, whose words are borrowed, mocked, responded to, or given provocation (1996, 151).

As there are countless influences, Irvine transitions to the term "multiply voiced," then further "multiply dialogic" to also recognize the influences perceived by recipient(s); all in all, there are "shadow conversations that surround the conversation at hand" (152).

It is important to be aware of these "shadow conversations," as they can have as dramatic an effect as the term connotes. Partnership is enacted in their omnipresence: at steering committee meetings, during tours and open houses at the Nassau Street excavation site, and in interviews that inform press articles. One may have motivations influenced by family members, or one may have phrasing derived from academia or a news article (Levinson 1988). At this point in the project, the parties are no doubt also influenced by one another, and the shadow conversations enveloping a given speech event could have been among those same participants.

The final chapter examines how museum and church community stakeholders share authority over the First Baptist story through assigning and taking on participant roles at a project steering committee meeting. In the breaking down of these roles, participants draw attention to the relativity of backstage spaces as they refer to and interact with individuals not physically present. The meanings of kinship, descendancy, and community among First Baptist stakeholders pervade the processes of sharing, so I engage with "the descendant community" as an academic term and trace the meaning-making of descendancy locally.

I conclude by asking some of the central questions of this thesis, such as, what does history work look like for First Baptist, and how is that informed by the past and present state of Black history research and interpretation? Who does a museum serve? Beyond the frame of customer service, how do daily visitors affect interpretations of history at Colonial Williamsburg? What does partnership mean? It is proudly discussed at the Nassau Street site and on websites, but how is it referenced in the moment when it is at work? As a project that has been on the docket since before I was born, and which will continue past my time in Williamsburg, the eighteenth months of "present" work that this thesis examines may seem like a blip in the long stretch of past and future. However, it is by examining the here and now, as

situated in history as a narrative, and history as the events of the past (Trouillot 1995), that this project can set an example for the museum's future.

Chapter One:

Remembering, Crafting, and Telling an American Story: The Historic First Baptist Church

Many historical sites across the country are getting ready to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and Colonial Williamsburg is no different. 2026 will be the same anniversary for the First Baptist congregation, and there are hopes for the permanent exhibit on Nassau Street to be finished by that year. The First Baptist Church congregation has made quite a few transitions across its 250 years: from its initial meeting place in Raccoon Chase to two buildings on Nassau Street, then finally to its current place of worship on Scotland Street. At least seven daughter and granddaughter churches up and down the Virginia Peninsula have formed out of First Baptist. Known as the city's first African American church, the history of First Baptist is intertwined with the history of Williamsburg, the revolutionary city, and later Williamsburg, the living museum, though the road to the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's full recognition of that was long. Cooperation and partnerships between congregation and museum professionals have led to an excavation project that plans to leave a permanent mark on the historical record so that the First Baptist story is well known and valued as one of the oldest Black congregations in America. Yet members of the First Baptist Church have been producing and preserving church history and historic material since the first meeting house was built on Nassau Street, with and without the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

This chapter brings together the work that scholars and church members have done to establish the importance and precedence of First Baptist as a Williamsburg congregation and an

"American story." A project of memorialization is woven into the fabric of First Baptist Church, and the current Nassau Street project fits into this long-held mission. This chapter situates the Nassau Street project into the larger past of Black history and memorialization in Williamsburg, through labor by First Baptist members and Foundation scholars.

First, I will trace the history of the First Baptist congregation in more depth, exploring the narratives supplied through oral and documentary traditions.

Formation of the First Baptist Congregation

The congregation now known as First Baptist began worshipping in secret. The congregation's first minister was Moses, a free traveling preacher (Semple 1810, 114-15; Rowe 2012, 14-15). Their second minister was Gowan Pamphlet, who began preaching for the congregation while enslaved but gained freedom during his tenure (Rowe 2012; Bogger 2006, 12-13). He led the congregation to join the Dover Baptist Association in 1793, establishing the church as a Baptist church—and the only African American congregation in the Association (Bogger 2006, 12-13). John Asplund's (1794) *Universal register of the Baptist denomination in North America* is one of the earliest publications to mention this church, listing "Gowen" as the ordained minister of a congregation of 200 members established in 1781 (Asplund 1794: 49-50). Membership in the Dover Baptist Association suggests that the church's existence was public knowledge outside of the Black community at least by 1791 (Semple 1810 as cited in Rowe 2012, 21-22). However, the congregation worshipped outside of the city until the turn of the 19th century.

The necessity of secrecy at the formation of the congregation has led to ambiguity surrounding its beginnings. Furthermore, there are no surviving documents dating to 1776, the

year that church tradition holds as the first gathering of the congregation. Tommy L. Bogger (2006) researched and published an in-house official history for the church, and he synthesized varied sources on early Black churches to make the claim that First Baptist is "the oldest continuous Black congregation in the nation" (2006, vi). Bogger cites John W. Cromwell's (1914 as cited in Bogger 2006) study as the earliest scholarship to publish the 1776 date, as much of the other literature relied on the 1781 recorded by Asplund (1794) and mentions 1776 as church tradition. Linda Rowe (2012) similarly notes that conventional documentation has not clearly revealed 1776 as the beginning of the congregation; however, by synthesizing news articles about Moses, land ownership of the congregation's meeting places outside of town, and tax records and property documents about Gowan Pamphlet's life through tavern owner Jane Vobe, who enslaved him, Rowe posits that 1776 is a reasonable year (2012, 15). Recognizing the meaning imbued in the year 1776, Bogger (2006) remarks that it made sense that "the free Blacks and enslaved persons flaunting of customary precautions [and forming a Black-led non-Anglican church] occurred in the same year that whites proclaimed their freedom from the constraints of British rule" (2006, 10). Religious freedom was a growing discourse in the colony of Virginia in particular, given the adoption of the Virginia Bill of Rights (Bogger 2006, 10). Connection to 1776 allows First Baptist to align itself with a prominent year, one that brings many connotations, though the Independence Day did not mean freedom for enslaved African Americans.

Another important piece of the origin narrative is the congregation's move to South Nassau Street. Church tradition holds that Jesse Cole, enslaver and landowner in Williamsburg, gave the congregation the portion of land on Nassau Street where the church worshipped until the 1950s (Archaeological Research Design 2020, 4). This was part of what period maps named

Lot M, an acre-and-a-half lot on the northwestern corner of the intersection of Nassau and Francis Streets (McWilliams 1940). Cole purchased this property in 1804, so it can be inferred that the earliest the church may have worshipped in this space was that year (Stephenson 1951; Moodey and Edwards 1993, 2). However, there is no record of the church's presence until 1818, when Cole purchased the Bryan lot, adjacent to Lot M's northern border. As described in a 1953 First Baptist publication,

> Cole heard the fervent prayers and soul stirring songs of these people and was so moved that he decided to give them a better meeting place. Thus, he gave them the use of his carriage house in Williamsburg, just 50 yards from his home (Bogger 2006, 12).

In the present day, the descendants of Jesse Cole have been invited to participate in the memorialization of this site through this story. In fall 2020, Anne Geddy Cross, one descendant, was interviewed about this story alongside Connie Harshaw for a local news segment (Avila 2020). Her words echo the 1953 publication: "and he [Jesse Cole] was *so moved* by what he heard, both the singing and the preaching—and this story came down through the family," Cross said in one clip. She emphasizes the emotional response of Jesse Cole, then interrupts herself to highlight for interviewers that this is an oral history tradition of her family, seeming to appeal to a veneration of first-person accounts as the truth. Right after, the anchors indirectly quote her saying that, "[Jesse Cole] did own slaves, but believed in treating others with respect and compassion," and Cross seems to look for a narrative where her slave-owning ancestor had a saving grace (Avila 2020). This sincere wording was jarring for me to hear and read, but it is important to note that congregants still bring up the Cole family story to discuss the move to Nassau Street inside of town, apart from the paraphrased Cross quote. Church community members still share the story today, except the emphasis has been placed on the music and style of worship mythologized in the story. Cross and her brother were interviewed for the Let

Freedom Ring documentary, *History Half Told is Untold*, showing a desire on the Foundation's behalf to continue a relationship between the Cole descendants and the church into the present.

When I was introduced to this project, a few CWF employees expressed discomfort with the white savior and benevolent slaveowner connotations of the framing of Jesse Cole's act, and I was advised to have skepticism about altruistic interpretations of it. While his motivations cannot be proven, archaeologists told me, it is possible he gave or sold the property to the congregation so that white people could keep an eye on the gatherings of free and enslaved Black people. Furthermore, the landscape of the Nassau Street lot is quite different today from two centuries ago: a swatch of the southeastern quadrant of the lot was sloped, rendering much of it unusable before the church leveled it for the construction of the 1856 church. When entering the field for research, there were many questions yet unanswered about the first building and that transfer of land. Until March 2022, CWF scholars were unsure if the congregation constructed it for themselves or if it was previously built as some sort of outbuilding, then repurposed as a meeting house when the congregation began to worship on the property (Rowe 2012, 31). Recently, archaeologists uncovered a line of bricks that would have supported floorboards, implying it had a constructed floor that a carriage house or other outbuilding usually would not have. From the March 12, 2022 steering committee meeting, it appears that Colonial Williamsburg hopes to emphasize that the congregants built the meeting house themselves.

There are no detailed drawings or photographs of the meeting house as it was razed in an 1834 tornado (The American Beacon 1834). The church was already in a season of upheaval as the 1831 uprising led by literate Black preacher Nat Turner in Southampton County resulted in harsh laws further restricting the meeting of African American churches (Bogger 2006, 15). First Baptist had resumed worship publicly by 1834 after agreeing to hire a white minister, but the

tornado turned them out of their place of worship again (Bogger 2006, 15-19). There is no surviving written First Baptist record of where members worshipped before their next church was built, but attendance records from Zion Baptist Church (the white Baptist congregation) show that Black Americans made up more than half of their congregation in the 1830s, implying some First Baptist members worshipped with them (Mechal Sobel 1979, 308 as cited in Bogger 2006). An oral history from the 1930s offers another possibility: Eliza Baker, a church member born in 1845, recalled worshipping in a "shackledy old carriage house" (Stephenson 1951). It could be that she was referring to the Cole carriage house across the street, which was damaged in the tornado but still standing, so could have served as First Baptist's meeting place for a short time (The American Beacon 1834). However, Mutual Assurance documents demonstrate that Cole had rebuilt the "Stable Carriage House" by 1835 (Stephenson 1951). Only in 1856 did the congregation return to a permanent building fully their own, when First Baptist and Mount Zion Baptist congregations, represented by all-white, overlapping Building Committees, conducted successful fundraising campaigns across the city and surrounding counties to help build new churches for each (Bogger 2006, 17-19).

Shortly after the opening of this building, the Civil War interrupted the church's activities. When the Confederate Army occupied Williamsburg after a skirmish with the Union Army in 1862, churches were converted into hospitals, including First Baptist (Bogger 2006, 27). When the Union Army gained control over the city, they released the churches back to the congregations and services resumed on Nassau Street. In 1863, the first mention of the church as the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg was recorded in the Virginia Baptist State Convention, changed from African Baptist Church (as cited in Bogger 2006, 28). The name was not

recognized everywhere, for as late as 1910, the church is recorded as “Baptist Church, (Colored)” (Sanborn Fire Insurance, 1910).

First Baptist Church continued to be a religious and social center on Nassau Street for the African American community of Williamsburg over the next century. Church leaders were often those invited to represent the Black community at town events (Bogger 2006; Foster 1993, 158). One such event was an integrated luncheon at the Williamsburg Inn in 1951 to celebrate the Independence Resolution, a Virginia House of Burgesses precursor to the Declaration of Independence, heralded in the news as the first time “colored and white persons have sat down together at a luncheon [at the Williamsburg Inn]” (Journal and Guide 1951). Many civic organizations, like Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, held their meetings in the church building (Bogger 2006, 57). Like many churches across the south, First Baptist hosted multiple schools over the years (Bogger 2006, 27-28; Butchart 2020). Much of this information can be accessed today because of the meeting minutes that the congregation preserved from the time. As noted by Luther P. Jackson (1931), the rates of illiteracy amongst African Americans at the time makes this unusual. Furthermore, their survival into the twenty-first century required commitment by multiple parties. First Baptist entrusted much of their meeting minutes archive to the Library of Virginia, and then Colonial Williamsburg Foundation bought copies of the microfilm in 1985. Reinforcing the written record, archaeologists unearthed a slate pencil and writing slate on the Nassau Street property in March 2022, most likely an artifact of one of those institutions.

Records also demonstrate links between First Baptist and their several daughter and granddaughter churches that were founded across eastern Virginia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Daughter churches were often formed in neighborhoods farther outside of Williamsburg to offer members congregational care closer to home. One daughter church, today

known as Oak Grove Baptist, began as a "wing," the outpost of First Baptist for those who lived in the Bruton district of York County. Through the mid-twentieth century, some members of Oak Grove retained their membership at First Baptist, whether for connections to family and social networks, or even inability to pay off backlogged membership dues that rendered them unable to join a new church (Bogger 2006). Many members of these churches trace their family and religious lineage back to First Baptist. As Mrs. Colette Roots, member of Oak Grove Baptist Church said, if First Baptist is claiming to be the oldest African American church, each church in the area after was formed with some relation to this congregation after. In kind, members of the congregation often put much work back into the building; when it was hurt in a 1930 fire, trustees paid out of pocket to cover work that the insurance did not. Further, committees and clubs formed from the congregation for maintenance and painting (Bogger 2006, 56-57).

Establishing a Colonial Town in the Twentieth Century: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation began as a hope to reclaim the grandeur of Virginia's colonial capital as it was perceived almost 150 years after the Revolutionary era. Reverend W. A. R. Goodwin became rector of Bruton Parish Church in 1903 with the provision that the church would restore its building to its colonial-era appearance, and from there hoped to expand this restoration to the entire town (Greenspan 2009, 8). To raise the substantial amount of capital needed, Goodwin slowly drew in John D. Rockefeller Jr., and over a period of three years secured his vital financial support (2009, 17-21). However, Goodwin remained the face of the restoration in order to buy prime properties at the lowest price possible—an impossibility if Rockefeller was known to be the financier (Greenspan: 2009, 17-21). Rockefeller's patronage

was officially revealed in a public meeting in June 1928, and the town voted in support of the restoration, if one considers the "public" and "town" as only the white population of Williamsburg. Black citizens could not attend the meeting or vote, as it was held in Matthew Whaley, a white school (Foster 1993, 103-113; Theobald 2014). This racist exclusion of Black residents is still remembered and discussed in the community today.

Central to establishing this living museum city was acquiring as much land as possible on Duke of Gloucester, Nicholson, and Francis Streets. To accomplish that, the Williamsburg Holding Corporation (WHC), as CWF was named at the time, bought many Williamsburg residents out of their homes (Greenspan 2009, 21-24). Greenspan (2009) notes that Duke of Gloucester Street was integrated to a relatively high degree, but WHC purposefully created segregated neighborhoods when relocating families (2009, 23-24). Foster (1993) posits that neighborhood integration may have been decreasing in the early twentieth century even before WHC began relocation, as the Virginia legislature passed a law on residential segregation in 1912, allowing the establishment of white and "colored" neighborhoods (Foster 1993, 20). The museum exerted influence in settlement of the town decades before the Williamsburg Redevelopment and Housing Authority made further changes to the landscape by acquiring property (most often from Black owners) for development (Meredith 2017).

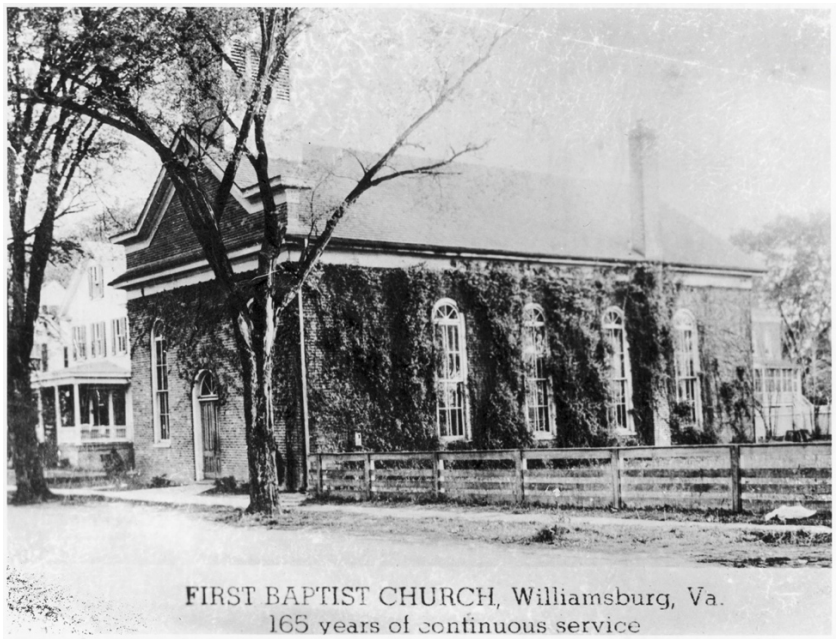
The restoration is remembered as a source of jobs. Rather than the venerable museum and pilgrimage destination that was its noble aim for the white community, Rex Ellis (1989) said, "to those of us who lived in the black community during the 'fifties and 'sixties, it was simply a place to work" (1989, v). Black-owned businesses that had once lined Duke of Gloucester Street were removed from the Historic Area, while Merchants Square was developed for segregated white businesses (Theobald 2014). When very few other non-colonial buildings remained, the

First Baptist Church on Nassau Street stayed for 30 years after the start of the Williamsburg restoration.

The 1856 Church: Too Old and Not Old Enough

By the 1940s, the church wanted to expand the 1856 building to meet the needs of the congregation, but changing support and funding for the project meant it was not started until 1953 (Bogger 2006, 66-69). When the plan to build an annex was announced, a church member identified in the record as Sister Epps (most likely Fanny Epps) said that her great grandfather was buried in the west yard of the church, right where the expansion was planned. Church leaders agreed to allow the Epps family to lay down a memorial inscription in the floor where the burial was, and the plan to extend remained. Colonial Williamsburg made a buyout offer to the church about a week before the groundbreaking ceremony, so they laid the concrete footer before halting construction to "explore" the Foundation's proposal (2006, 69; church committee letter July 2, 1953). This was not the first time that CWF had tried to gain control of church land. In 1949, CWF had proposed combining First Baptist, Mt. Ararat Baptist, and Union Baptist, the three Black Baptist churches in the Historic Area, into one congregation on one property. The Foundation offered $100,000 to build a new church, while in return the two churches who moved would deed their land to the museum (Bogger 2006, 67; New York Times 1949). Mt. Ararat and Union Baptist are not daughter churches of First Baptist, and the three churches would not have the same ties of kinship and religious practice that may have encouraged a merger. This offer was not accepted. In contrast, the 1953 offer was made to First Baptist only, and after a year of negotiation, the church sold their property on Nassau Street to CWF for a 0.54-acre parcel of land on Scotland Street and $130,000 to build a new church there (Bogger 2006, 69-70; New

Journal and Guide 1956; Property File Block 14 #7 First Baptist Church 1952-1982). The new church on Scotland Street was built and opened in March 1956, and the church turned the Nassau Street property over to Colonial Williamsburg that year.



First Baptist Church on South Nassau Street (North side view), circa 1950.
Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

1957 excavation of the First Baptist lot on Nassau Street, exposing foundations of 1818 church (thinner, outer) and 1856 church (thicker, center).
Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Once the Foundation had possession of the property, they carried out the standard course of action for the early years of the restoration: they demolished the 1856 church and conducted a short investigation in 1957 to look for foundations of earlier buildings they might reconstruct for exhibition (Archaeological Design 2020, 9-10). Finding none they wanted to rebuild, a parking lot was laid down in the 1960s.

During the moveout, however, First Baptist congregants brought many pieces of the old church with them to Scotland Street. Two marble tables from the former sanctuary now flank the dais in the current one. In the upper level of the building, many more objects from the first church have been preserved and displayed. Choir loft seats, a bookcase and table, and a sign board listing weekly hymns and biblical scripture are exhibited. On a tour given to Let Freedom Ring interns in October 2021, a group of church trustees, elders, and clergy, all women, led us through the entire property, showing us all these pieces of Nassau Street. Photographs and flyers from various past events are displayed prominently; pausing at a group of photos of church youth in the 1960s or 70s, those of our guides who had grown up in Williamsburg looked at each person they knew in the photos and began to discuss memories of church life growing up. This was a moment of impromptu reminiscing and continued instruction as the women shared specific experiences and broader statements of social life.

Black History at Colonial Williamsburg

In their exhibitions and interpretation, too, Colonial Williamsburg excluded Black Americans. A main criticism that CWF has faced, and one that grew rapidly in the 1960s, concerned the lack of African American historical interpretation at the museum (Greenspan 2009: 121-162). This lack did not mean a total absence. As Greenspan (2009) notes,

representation of African American historical presence in Colonial Williamsburg was an ongoing matter during the restoration's early years and started long before the first Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations was established in 1979. But while there were African American perspectives offered in Colonial Williamsburg from the early days, they were not foregrounded. For example, Ywone Edwards-Ingram (2014) discusses the contributions of Black coachmen who worked for the Foundation as front-stage employees, and argues that "over the years, many scholars and other evaluators have ignored strong evidence that before 1979, Colonial Williamsburg's interpretation did include portrayal of a diverse history" (2014: 10-11). However, Edwards-Ingram (2014) does not dispute that CWF erased these Black interpreters' legacy by leaving them unnamed in publications and underestimating their expertise (2014: 28-34).

The First Baptist Church acquisition fits with the historic moves of CWF to remove African Americans (and anyone or anything else who got in the way of their vision of a colonial appearance of Williamsburg) from the center of town. This vision ignored that Black people made up over half of the town's population in the late eighteenth century (Lawson 1995). In the 1950s, it was still "part of the program" to remove buildings that were not eighteenth-century, so First Baptist's need for expansion offered CWF an opportunity to move toward that goal ("Research Design," 2). Earlier foundations were revealed in that excavation, but no plans were made to research them further (Samford 1985). These foundations, today interpreted as the first meeting house of the church, were simply covered back up after the 1957 project finished photographing it (Samford 1985; Finley 2021).

It is striking that the possibility of interpreting the colonial-era Black congregation was never raised, even if the standing 1856 building was constructed later. This may have stemmed

in part from skepticism among some scholars about continuity between the eighteenth-century congregation and the nineteenth-century congregation, but it still overlooked the church's importance in its nascency. Luther Jackson (1931), a prominent Black Virginian historian, noted a break in the "continuous existence" of First Baptist, though he did not specify the source (1931, 188). Thad Tate (1965), a faculty member at William & Mary, echoes this, citing the second edition of Robert Semple's (1810) account that purports that the contemporary congregation was not the same as the eighteenth-century congregation (1965, 162). Bogger (2006) argues that this was a misprint since Semple relied on the Dover Baptist Association's record of each congregation; as First Baptist briefly left the Association when it refused to accept Black delegates, it appeared to be inactive in that time (2006, vi-vii, 17). Tate's (1965) work, written as an internal report for CWF in 1957, and later published in 1965, demonstrates care for what the congregation represents, but not the congregation's own interpretation of its legacy. Tate argues that the church's main significance was as the "first manifestation of the Great Awakening in Williamsburg" (1965, 163). Semple's (1890 [1810]) statement that the First Baptist congregation today is separate from the 1776 congregation is no longer reported today, and CWF recognizes it to be the same church, aligning with First Baptist's timeline (1965: 162). At the time, however, the Foundation knew that a Black congregation did exist by the 1780s (Tate 1965: 158), so it was a willful decision not to look for ways to interpret the colonial church's history, even if in disagreement with current First Baptist about congregation continuity.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation organized the first African American interpretation department in 1979 and opened the reconstructed quarters for the enslaved at Carter Grove Plantation in 1989, one of the first buildings to be built to interpret Black history from the outset (Greenspan 2008). In 1994, Black interpreters performed an estate sale, which

included the auction of four enslaved people. The auction was protested by members of the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference but was performed to great emotion and "mixed reviews" (Krutko 2003, 2). In my experience, the event is still discussed in public history courses today. This is also the same period in which Gable, Handler, and Lawson conducted fieldwork at CWF and noted continued disparities in the way that Black history was presented throughout the museum.

First Baptist Church – Nassau Street Archaeology Project 2020-2022

As early as the 1980s, CWF was planning to revisit the Nassau Street site. In 1993, Meredith Moodey (later Poole) and Ywone Edwards (later Edwards-Ingram) submitted a briefing outlining the historical importance and archaeological potential of the First Baptist Church Nassau Street property. It drew from the notes from the 1957 excavation and reports written in the 1980s. However, the project stayed "on the docket" for over two decades until the confluence of donations and the partnership between First Baptist and CWF led to its fruition in 2020.

The partnership concretely began in 2015 when a group of Williamsburg residents, including former Williamsburg City Council and First Baptist Church member Robert A. Braxton, Mason School of Business Professor Ronald Monark, and Vice President of Strategic Communications at CWF Michael Holtzman, created a plan to restore the First Baptist Church bell that had not been rung since the congregation's move to Scotland Street. The 1886 bell was named the Freedom Bell, meant to be heralded alongside Philadelphia's Liberty Bell but as a celebration of African American community flourishing. From this restoration project, the Let

Freedom Ring Foundation launched in 2016. Securing funding from CWF, the bell was restored and subsequently rung at the grand opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. (Ostroff September 20, 2016). Connie Harshaw met with Cliff Fleet, President of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, early in his term to talk about further projects between the church and CWF. Mrs. Harshaw had seen the lack of First Baptist interpretation accessible to visitors outside of the African American Religion exhibit across the street and the plaque on the field south of the church site. From an informal canvassing of passersby, she easily confirmed that more information needed to be available. As Mrs. Harshaw related from that first meeting,

> We talked about both our experiences [with CWF's interpretation of First Baptist], which were similar but separate, and then he said, "Well what do you think we should do?" and I said, "It's pretty simple to me. You restored everything else in Colonial Williamsburg, why don't you restore that church?"

From there, the First Baptist Church, Let Freedom Ring, and Colonial Williamsburg strategized what has become the First Baptist Church–Nassau Street Archaeology Project.

The archaeologists began a Phase I excavation in September 2020, following a prayer vigil with speakers and music from FBC, Bruton Parish Episcopal Church, and other local organizations. As Jack Gary remarked one year later, "I had never prayed for archaeology before, but maybe I should have been" (field visit September 30, 2021). In the 12 months prior, archaeologists had made significant progress with the research questions published in the archaeological design, a publicly available document that outlines the project background and goals ("First Baptist Church and Lot M Archaeological Research Design" 2020), which included:

- What is a potential archaeological signature for an 18th century church? Specifically, what would be the archaeological signature of a carriage house or barn as related in the oral history?
- Do the foundations of the structure that preceded the 1855 church still exist? Are there any dateable features associated with these foundations?
- Can any structural information about the 1855 church building be gained from excavating the foundations, cellar feature, or other architectural features? Can we locate the planned annex from 1953? [the 1855 church is same as the 1856 building, I but tend to use the latter date as that is when the church opened for services]
- Is there any archaeological evidence for post-in-ground structures?
- Can we confirm the presence or absence of burials anywhere on Lot M?
- Is there intact stratigraphy to the west of the 1855 church? ("Research Design" 2020, 14)

These research questions drew from the documentary record, previous excavation, and questions from descendants, and they guided the direction of the project. In early summer of 2020, CWF contracted with the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation to use ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to locate and assess the state of foundations at Nassau Street ("Research Design" 2020). This also informed the "what's still in the ground?" questions that the preliminary excavation aimed to answer. The following timeline summarizes the project's progression onsite and my involvement as an intern, volunteer, and researcher.

When breaking ground in September 2020, two senior Staff Archaeologists, three full time field technicians, multiple graduate fellows from William & Mary, and occasional volunteers made up the excavation crew. This Phase I excavation involved digging 50cm^2 shovel test pits (STPs) every ten meters, excavating some one- and two-meter square units where features were known to be located ("Research Design" 2020). As a NIAHD intern, I visited a

few times to help dry screen and was introduced to many of the archaeologists onsite. During this time, the first two grave shafts were found, and the project steering committee was notified. From the steering committee, and notably from Connie Harshaw, this discovery was shared with members of the First Baptist community. This Phase I project accomplished its initial goals by establishing that there were still two foundations in situ, and that there were most likely some portions of the site left intact by the 1957 excavation.

The archaeologists extended the project into the late fall as they dug some test units on the southern portion of Lot M, outside of the church lot boundaries. While they were not directly tied to the church, excavating these units meant that archaeologists remained on Nassau Street, able to interact with visitors and share the story of the First Baptist Church and project. After completing those units, excavation ceased as the next phase was planned.

Full-time work began again in the first week of January 2021 with a staff of four field technicians and an assigned project archaeologist. This began the 18-month excavation, scheduled through June 2022. Establishing the existence of the graves and the placement of two foundations, the project focused in on the research questions above. On February 22, 2021, Connie Harshaw led a steering committee meeting over Zoom, hosting Jack Gary to give a project update and Michael Blakey to share the Institute of Historic Biology's (IHB) role in identifying bone fragments found in the field. The practice at Nassau Street is to put any bone that cannot immediately be identified as faunal into labeled bags to be examined by the scientists at the IHB. Blakey reported that there were a few bones identified as human found during excavation, establishing that at least one grave had been disturbed by previous activity on the site. The gravity of disturbed graves was acknowledged as Gary reaffirmed that the current excavation would not intentionally expose remains, rather, they look for the signs of a grave

shaft and stop digging when one is found. As excavation continued into the spring, more graves were found on the western third of the property.

When the busy season of visitation began in March and April, CWF introduced volunteers to talk to visitors onsite two days a week. The archaeology department has employed groups of volunteers for many years, but this was the first time they were reintroduced after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. To aid in interpretation of the site, a box of artifacts representative of those found at the Nassau Street site was left in the equipment shed for volunteers to show. In May, the Nassau Street site held an open house that allowed visitors to walk through the site. Many church members were also in attendance, as visitors and as docents themselves, answering questions and passing out informational brochures. To one tourist, Connie Harshaw described First Baptist of Williamsburg as "the first First Baptist." This quote is one that I have shared with visitors in the year since to express the local and national significance of the church. After the spring semester at William & Mary ended, I was at the site at least two days most weeks. Some days I helped screen for artifacts behind the fence, and some days resumed the docent role in front of the fence.

As the summer continued, more grave shafts were uncovered. After a steering committee meeting in July, The Washington Post reported that 21 graves had been found at the site. Until the release of this article, interpreters at the site avoided disclosing exactly how many grave shafts had been uncovered. Information was meant to be released only after the steering committee had heard it and were able to disseminate it to the wider community. Furthermore, archaeologists knew that more could be found anytime. Demonstrating this, another grave was found the week of the article's release. As an interpreter, I would say that "over 20" graves had

been found if someone asked, so that the number would not be inaccurate nor reveal information that had not been disseminated to the church community yet.

On July 30, Project Archaeologist Katie Wagner found an 1817 coin underneath the brick pathway adjoining the thinner, earlier foundation which had been previously interpreted as the best candidate for the first meeting house, alongside many straight pins. The 1817 coin was the closest confirmed date to 1818, the year by when the church was known to worship there. Through an official press release on October 7, Colonial Williamsburg announced that the straight pins and 1817 coin found in the sub-walkway units helped archaeologists to determine that the older foundation on the site is the first congregational meeting house ("Press Release" October 7, 2021). This news was reported internationally, and by the end of the month, there had been an estimated 80 million tweets about this project (Steering Committee Meeting, October 30, 2021). The October 30 steering committee meeting's purpose was to hear descendants' questions and concerns about moving forward with cemetery analysis. Four panelists, Dr. Jajuan Johnson, Dr. Michael Blakey, Dr. Joseph Jones, and Dr. Raquel Fleskes presented their research on ancestry and human burials, and Mrs. Harshaw presented a few of the questions collected from the community so far.

As announced March 12 at the next steering committee meeting, archaeologists revised their interpretation of that first church building. Originally thought to be a 16 ft by 20 ft structure, it is now thought to be 16 ft by 32 ft. Excavation in these units further west showed a few purposefully placed bricks that supported meeting house floorboards. From those bricks, architectural historians can interpret the direction of the floorboards. From the newly understood dimensions, they now see that the door was in the center of the building, so there were most likely windows on either side, and the pulpit may have been in the center of the back wall. As of

the week of March 14, 2022, these latest interpretations are actively shared with the public. Since the first training of volunteers last March, many more have joined the group that works at the Custis Square site or the First Baptist.

Conclusion

As the excavation project continues to capture headlines in the press, the remembrance and exhibition of First Baptist history continues in multiple locations and in multiple forms. This is not a new occurrence because, since the eighteenth century, First Baptist has been included in studies of Virginia Baptist and Black Baptist congregations. While Colonial Williamsburg's interest in historic interpretation of First Baptist was long delayed, interactions between the First Baptist Church and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in the last century have laid precedence for this partnership that has taken concrete shape since 2016 with the founding of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation. First Baptist purposefully functions as an educational organization and has a clear understanding of its historic importance as a religious organization for the greater Williamsburg area, in and outside of the Black community. In touring the memorialization projects surrounding the First Baptist congregation thus far, this chapter has tried to lay a foundation of the project's context for the reader. This history stands as the backstage to collaboration between all stakeholders of the project, permeating each act of cooperation as individual stakeholders bring their understandings of history to the table. In the next chapter, I will move to the Nassau Street site excavation and interpretation in Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area to further focus on representations of First Baptist's history for the public visitor.

Chapter Two:

Co-constructing an Exhibit at the Nassau Street Excavation Site

"I hope you find something old and important," a visitor told us, expressing his gratitude for our time before continuing on his way to Duke of Gloucester Street. These best wishes followed a conversation between him, a fellow archaeologist, and me, and left us with a good summary of what archaeology might be to the general public: the search for old stuff. Archaeologists, of course, do want to look at older contexts, and at Nassau Street, that's the early nineteenth century. Their definition of what is important may differ from that of the visitor—post holes and straight pins do not always seem like captivating subjects. However, he also contributed to another of the goals of the excavation, which is developing interpretation of the First Baptist site for the future permanent exhibit. In the five minutes that he stayed with us, this visitor's questions focused on his physical orientation to the site; we pointed him to the north and south walls of the two building foundations and discussed how far down archaeologists dig (to subsoil, most often). In this back-and-forth of conversation, we as interpreters were able to learn and respond to what he needed to connect to the site. In this case, the visitor needed to locate himself in the spaces of the church and of the archaeological excavation, so all three of us worked together to put him there. Following this interaction, the archaeologist and I were better equipped to share this site with future visitors and to consider their need to imagine the space. This influences the permanent exhibit. All visitors, then, participate in the creation of the exhibit through their interaction with the content presented to them.

At the beginning of my thesis research, a concerned party, also a white woman, asked me why I would ever pay attention to tourists. In her mind, these were mainly white people who

might only see this as an African American story, separate from themselves, though stakeholders from the church and Let Freedom Ring have said multiple times that this is an "American Story." At the time, I had only worked onsite a few times to assist in screening during my fall 2020 CWF internship and could not answer with anything other than some surface-level anecdotes, and the obvious, "Because the tourists are there."

There is agreement about visitors between this critic and the literature on Colonial Williamsburg. After viewing a Christmas program in December 1990, Handler and Gable (1997) interviewed two older women from Tennessee (1997, 102-112). The program depicted a seasonal scene in George Wythe's household, where four people Wythe enslaved discussed their feelings towards the holiday and the increased labor expectations of the season; it was bookended by a flattering introduction to Wythe and a scene in which he discussed the demerits of slavery with Reverend Henley and granted Charles, one of the enslaved men in the first scene, a pass to see his family. The two visitors latched onto the white characters' "troubled conscience" about slavery, rather than the Black characters' "resiliency and resistance," and Handler and Gable conclude that the enslaved characters' storyline also served to celebrate Wythe (111-112). This thirty-year-old example is familiar, and I do not disagree with my reviewer's complaint that visitors often do miss the point; if I am not careful in discussing Jesse Cole's contribution of the Nassau Street property to the church, someone will immediately latch onto the benevolence of this white enslaver. Since no documents of this land agreement exist today, I choose to say he "transferred" the land rather than "gave," "sold," or "leased." These anecdotes reveal an important consideration in the interpretation of the historical Black community to a non-Black audience: situating a story in its historical context but making sure that is it not centered around the actions of white people (Jackson 2011, 2012; "Engaging Descendant Communities" 2018).

Perhaps these anecdotes also reveal why it is important to look closely at the narratives that interpreters build together with visitors: to see how guests' understandings of archaeology and history affect their engagement with memorialization of the church.

In the extensive output of their research, Handler and Gable (1997) focus on the many layers of the museum's corporate structure, from "frontline" interpreters to vice presidents. An overarching critique of the museum's hierarchy, employees, and messaging, the anecdotes about visitors often serve to frame the tensions between these three. In their argument, Handler and Gable (1997) analyze the creation of the visitor experience without digging into conversations between interpreters and the visitors themselves. Delving deeper into this public history research has shown me how tourists are an active audience to whom much thought is given by project partners. Colonial Williamsburg's 2020-2026 Strategic Plan establishes their commitment to "experiential learning" and "engaging" interpretation for their guests, but the establishment of a volunteer schedule at First Baptist and other archaeology sites demonstrates commitment to including visitors along the way (Colonial Williamsburg 2020, 7). Through the repeated tagline that the First Baptist story is an "American story," First Baptist community members construe the Nassau Street site as a place where all visitors can learn and participate in memorialization. As established collaborators, the members and personnel of First Baptist Church, Let Freedom Ring, and Colonial Williamsburg necessarily come together in private spaces to share authority in developing this research, but when considering its public presentation, an eye is cast to the experiences of the visitors in the Nassau Street site of the present. When asking how authority is shared, one must include the visitors.

In exploring how visitors enact this power in participation at Nassau Street, the dramaturgical approach (see Goffman 1959, 1981; Hare and Blumberg 1988) to analyzing

interpersonal interaction is useful. The framework of theatrical metaphors allows one to analyze all contributing factors of an interaction, beyond the words and postures of participants. Any given interaction is a staged performance, with front and backstage, with actors and audience, and with a set and boundaries. At the excavation site, volunteer docents and paid archaeologists perform interpretation of archaeology and the congregation's history. Visitors respond and exert their influence over the performance.

Goffman's Front and Back at Nassau Street

We first turn to the setting, the physical surroundings in which the action takes place. Classic dramaturgical scholars have classified this space in various ways, which will factor into understandings of the Nassau Street site, but first it is helpful to describe the physical scene that visitors walk up to on a weekday.

South Nassau Street has become a busier thoroughfare for Williamsburg visitors since the art museum renovation was completed in summer 2020, and those who know to take advantage of the free parking there will walk up the road to reach Duke of Gloucester Street. As an open cross street through the Historic Area, cars and school buses drive up and down the road alongside the occasional horse-drawn carriage. As one crosses Francis Street towards Duke of Gloucester, one is first met by grassy fields on either side: on the right, a fenced-in one that often houses livestock, and on the left, a wide-open one with a large mound of dirt. As the visitor gets closer, the open field on the left meets a drainage ditch and a rope fence, and the visitor meets the excavation site.

Approaching the dig, visitors can see right in. For most of the excavation, the fence has been made of rope and metal stakes along the gravel sidewalk, so the vision of passersby is not

blocked. However, the barrier is meant to deter visitors from stepping into the archaeologists' units, and in the time of a pandemic, keep them socially distanced as well. The archaeologists excavated units right by the sidewalk from September 2020 to February 2022, and by summer 2021, the large group of units where the 1818 foundation was uncovered had been partially dug and was visibly weathered. Monday to Friday from 8:30am to 3:30pm, archaeologists would be part of this view, and perhaps a volunteer interpreter too. Wheelbarrows, buckets, trowels, shovels, screens, and popup tents complete the picture. When an individual or group walks up to the site, the next performance begins, and the setting takes on new meaning. Drawing from Goffman (1974), Hare and Blumberg (1988) posit that one "function of the setting is to provide a frame for the action" (70). At the Nassau Street site, the buckets, trowels, and open excavation units may function to tip off visitors to what is happening at the site: archaeological excavation.

Goffman (1959) joins the physical setting together with the appearance and manner of the performing individual into what he names the *front*: that "which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (1959, 22). At Nassau Street, the front is the setting as described above, along with the volunteers and archaeologists and the box of artifacts we use as visual aids. Interpreters, the term I use to refer to both the volunteers and archaeologists onsite, then build upon the front through performance. When these elements come together, the excavation site can be treated as an exhibit for CWF visitors.

Scholars have applied Goffman's front to museums, where curators and scholars communicate to visitors—perform to them—through exhibits. Many do this to demonstrate breaches of the front and back spaces, a Goffman-inspired construction of the front stage and backstage or offstage spaces (Hare and Blumberg 1988, 4-8). Vivian Van Saaze (2011) applies

Goffman to comment on art museums bringing images and instruments of the back preservation laboratory to the curated front exhibition, which is traditionally the only space where the guest has access. She terms this the "blurring of boundaries," and sees it as an educational opportunity, where the public can learn more about conservation and preservation practices (2011: 247). In their *Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums*, Deborah Ryan and Franklin Vagnone (2015) encourage curators to let visitors into back rooms, like broom closets or unrenovated bathrooms, to engage with their "voyeuristic cravings" (2015: 120-24). Dean MacCannell (1973) transforms the opposing concepts of front and back into the two "ideal poles of a continuum," showing that audiences can be let into the backstage to varying degrees (1973: 589). He describes six points on this spectrum, where Goffman's front (stage one) is a barrier that tourists would like to transcend, and the back (stage six) is the closed location they aspire to reach (1973: 598). MacCannell (1973) adopts Goffman in exploring tourism as part of "the search for authenticity of experience that is everywhere manifest in our society" (1973: 589), a topic that has been well explored at Colonial Williamsburg by Richard Handler and Eric Gable (1996, 1997).

The concept of front and back spaces is useful for beginning to understand the way the Nassau Street is set up and to reflect on what a visitor might glean when first approaching an interpreter to hear the basic spiel. If the Nassau Street front includes all that a visitor can see and what the interpreter initially shares, there are some obvious back spaces. The shed, for one, holds equipment and paperwork and the occasional snack. It is also a place where archaeologists can go for shade breaks in the summer. The archaeological collections building, a mile away off Botetourt Street, is a backstage place. Archaeological field technicians work there during inclement weather, and the whole research team participates in further analysis of the site and the

project. The less obvious back spaces are those in plain view at Nassau Street, notably the cemetery. Especially when the parking lot west of the site was still under renovation, guests most easily approach from the street side, so the cemetery looks like a big group of trenches and rectangular units. Since the archaeologists do not dig deep enough to expose human remains, guests would not see anything that looks obviously like a graveyard, even if they were close enough. Most times, interpreters do not bring up the cemetery unprompted, wary of the voyeuristic way that people relish in finding the dead and aware of the dangers that cemeteries face from graverobbers or those without respect. However, my partner on one volunteer shift did bring it up unprompted, perhaps to illustrate the collaboration between descendants and archaeologists. The project's working theories and research answers in progress are also part of the back. For example, before the discovery of the 1818 building foundation was announced on October 7, 2021, interpreters were explaining it as the "best candidate" for months. Once the straight pins and 1817 coin were found at the end of July 2021, time was taken to analyze the artifacts before sharing their existence and significance with the wider public.

Analysis of Nassau Street must depart from the front stage frame that MacCannell (1973), Van Saaze (2011), and Ryan and Vagnone (2015) adapted from Goffman because this exhibit is constructed through the interaction between interpreters and visitors in a way that inanimate objects and pre-printed signage cannot mimic in their permanence. The performance front is not the whole exhibit, so a breaking of the front is required if guests engage in interaction beyond a smile or word of thanks. In this way, breaking of the front does not seem revolutionary, but the negotiation of the exhibit that follows shows interpreters what interests visitors and what pieces of information might be relevant to their knowledge of the project. For the creation of the future permanent exhibit, this could be revelatory.

It is important to clarify that breaking through the front does not mean reaching the back. Like MacCannell (1973) suggests, there are levels of back spaces, and tourists are not likely to reach those furthest back. The volunteer interpreters may not be privy to those. Upon occasion, CWF hosts tours of the collections building for the public, and there have been open house days at Nassau Street. The Custis Square Project is open for ticketed CWF visitors to walk through every week. But when interpreters are told by senior archaeologists to not talk about the 1817 coin, we do not tell visitors about it. For much of the excavation, an exact number of grave shafts has been kept under wraps from site visitors. Other times, information about the excavation process or the church's history are not included in the front-space spiel or easily gleaned from looking at the site. They are not part of the back to us, but a visitor might need to specifically ask for us to explain. The amount or depth of this information shared in an individual interaction is what I call negotiation of the exhibit.

Prior to the negotiation of the exhibit, one participant must initiate the conversation. Busy with excavation tasks, the archaeologists often greet visitors when noticing them at the fence for more than a minute or two. They say something like, "Let us know if you have any questions!" which leaves it up to the visitor to initiate. When volunteers are present, we will often greet anyone walking past the site since visitor interaction is our main purpose. Goffman (1981) terms this "preplay," as the first exchanges of pleasantries are so routine to us in American society that they feel like a prelude to an interaction (1981, 142). For Nassau Street, this "Hi, how are you?" that interpreters offer to visitors is essential, as guests will then know we are someone to speak to. This is not immediately obvious in the context of Colonial Williamsburg, where most interpreters wear period costume.

The east end (Nassau Street side) of the excavation site on July 16, 2021. Photo by author.

As a volunteer at the fence, I often started with, “Have you visited the site before?” so I can gauge visitor familiarity before launching into my spiel, the rehearsed and/or repeated introduction to the site that is my term for what Goffman may call a “routine” (1959, 8-9). When visitors initiate, they often ask, “Find anything interesting?” or remark that “that looks like painstaking/hard work.” Those trying to be funny will often start with “digging for gold?” or “find any dinosaurs?” or “need some help?” From there, archaeologists will direct the conversation back to First Baptist Church and the Nassau Street excavation. Each of these initiations help establish the footing for each party. Goffman (1981) demonstrates how footing can change frequently throughout a single interaction, as code-switching or change in alignment and stance can occur at any moment (1981, 128). It can be seen very plainly when archaeologists respond to Indiana Jones jokes with a genial return to the project. Some guests approach with “what are you all doing over here?” or “what’s going on?” This is partly an information request, but the visitors are also looking to the interpreter to define the tone of the interaction and cue the footing of each performer.

In a series of interviews with the First Baptist archaeologists, I asked each of them how they know when a visitor wants to "deepen" the interaction, or in the terms used here, when they break the front. One archaeologist finds it easiest to respond to specific questions, giving an opportunity to share expertise guests may not have had a chance to learn elsewhere. Another archaeologist looks for "cues" and "visual clues" in a visitor's speech or body language to gauge their interest in site interpretation:

> When they're excited about something, when they have enthusiasm about a question, that's what signals to me, oh, okay, this person appears to be enthusiastic, appears to be excited about this—let me match that enthusiasm and mirror that back to them and show them that yes, you are correct in being enthusiastic in this, that this is a really cool project… that kind of draws them in a little bit more like, "Oh, this person seems to be really jazzed about this so maybe I'll pay attention to what they're saying."

This archaeologist's sincerity here is always matched in interactions with guests, and she often takes time to engage with them conversationally. In this interview, she expanded on the "wonderful opportunity" that this site can be for educating visitors who may not have any previous knowledge of archaeology or Black history in Williamsburg since Nassau Street, as a public-facing archaeology project "connects the current with the past and… ideally connects people."

Each archaeologist recognized patterns in guest interactions, and how recurring themes, questions, or attitudes affect their interpretation:

> When someone says, "tell me what you're doing," [I think about] what are the main points that I need to hit if I'm going to tell them, like three or four things that they're going to walk away with, what do I want those three or four things to be? … and then if I get the same question enough times, I'll add that in later, like, well, the last three people have asked me about the mortar and the bricks, so the next person that comes up, they

> might not be interested in mortar, but I'm probably going to say something about it because I've gotten that question a lot.

I recognize this in my own interpretation, too. After one guest responded to interpretation with comments on the sacredness of the site as a church and a place of Black history, I began to emphasize that piece more to impart to other guests the emotion and importance it holds for the community.

These examples from First Baptist archaeologists demonstrate that each of the parties of the interaction contribute to negotiating the exhibit, and what information will be shared with visitors. However, to understand how that information is shared, and how that creates the exhibit, we need to take a closer look. Charles Goodwin's (2003) framework of embodied interaction and co-construction provides this opportunity.

Co-Constructing the First Baptist Exhibit on Nassau Street

Goodwin (2003) provides a framework for understanding reality as co-constructed and the centrality of the relationship between the voice, body, and environment in communication. His observations at an archaeological field school offer the framework in a setting that is connected to this study. Goodwin (2003) argued that "rather than being lodged in a single modality, such as the body, talk, or structure in the environment, many forms of human action are built through the juxtaposition of quite diverse materials, including the actor's body, the bodies of others, language, structure in the environment, and so on" (2003, 22-23). He terms these composite movements "symbiotic gestures." In his study, identifying and grasping meaning of an archaeological feature requires effort from multiple parties: a change in the soil color or texture and the hands and voices of two archaeologists at its most basic level. In a similar way, the interactions at Nassau Street contain many symbiotic gestures as interpreters use

the environment, pointing with fingers, photos, and artifacts to share the story of First Baptist. Drawing from Goodwin, Graham Jones and Lauren Shweder (2008) demonstrate that talk "can produce a certain experience of seeing" (2008, 53). In our performances as interpreters, we are doing more than pointing out a line of bricks that made up the foundation of the 1818 structure—we are inviting visitors into the process of interpreting archaeological features as material pieces of the historical narrative this project is building.

I: 00:24 The second church building is what we've outlined with the brick around here,

I: 00:27 you can kind of see the foundation on the ground there

V: 00:28 mmhmm

I: 00:29 um and then, u:h here as well [gesturing to north wall of foundation]

The figure above is a still from a video one guest recorded of me, where I am showing the brick foundation of the 1856 church in ground. Modifying Goffman's (2003) format to demonstrate action in tandem with speech, the yellow line demonstrates the arced motion of my arm as I point to the bricks in situ. The orange line below follows the midline of the bricks. As

the visitor was holding out the phone but looking above it, the arc of my arm's motion would have been closer to the bricks in her actual line of sight. Through gesture and speech ("you can kind of see the foundation on the ground there"), the line of bricks is given meaning in this performance, and a place in the narrative that we are building. Prior to this screen frame, I was drawing a shape in the air analogous to the formation of the red, modern bricks which are tracing the shape of the 1856 building. Because the modern bricks do not touch the actual foundation and do not form a complete outline, the connection needs to be demonstrated for visitors with more than spoken language.

Jones and Shweder (2008) apply Goodwin's framework to theatrical magic, analyzing a magician's lesson teaching "splookie," a napkin ghost magic trick. They highlight the importance of the audience participation. To fully perform the magic trick, a magician must have "explicit confirmation" from the audience about the reality created for the trick (2008, 62). By agreeing, like the magician's student did, that there is an invisible ghost moving the napkin, they are co-constructing the narrative. At Nassau Street, the visitor's "mmhmm" confirms that she identifies the bricks in situ and agrees that they mean what I am stating they do.

Later, while I was responding to her question of what artifacts we have found, she switches the subject to the removal of the 1856 church.

2:24 Ye:s, now how did this get buried, was it a parking lot?

This switch may be similar to a visitor who stops reading and moves on from the artifact information panel in a traditional exhibit. I had to switch to the topic of her interest because she no longer wanted to interact with artifact anecdotes. This shows truly how important guest participation and cooperation is.

Nassau Street guests do not always see the site as we want or expect them to. Visitors identify "structure[s] in the environment" and propose pieces of the exhibit just as interpreters do. One topic that came up quite frequently towards the end of summer 2021 demonstrates this well. The group of units at the front of the site that exposed the 1818 and 1856 foundations had a portion in the middle that was not yet excavated. At this point in the project, archaeologists were not sure they would dig this portion since much of the surviving 1818 foundation and brick walkway had been uncovered. The rain and sun visibly weathered these units over time because they had been scraped flat when the sub-parking lot sand was removed. The area had a considerable amount of the 1957 back fill on top, so artifacts were slowly emerging onto the surface and catching the attention of visitors. For a few weeks, a glass bottle shard was sticking out of this portion five feet from the front fence, and visitors would ask about it. They would motion to the glass shard, usually at the feet of or right behind the interpreter, and in doing so, made it an item of the exhibit. When kids mentioned it, it was a moment of discovery, and they would be enthusiastic to point it out to us. One adult visitor presented it as cautionary, implying that we would not want to lose this piece in carelessness. Interpreters in turn use this moment to share an excavation practice. Archaeologists could not remove the artifact from its current place because they were not working on those units and had not begun maps or other paperwork for them. We could use the opportunity to speak about to the 1957 excavation's cross-trenching methods and how practices have changed over time in archaeology. This communicates the importance of taking note of what was found and where, tying nicely into explanation of provenance and how the artifacts in the volunteers' box had unknown origins.

In these scenarios, shared authority is demonstrated at the individual interaction level. The visitors' confirmation is necessary to the exhibit formation in the moment, and in turn can

contribute new elements. The co-construction of the Nassau Street site also has consequences beyond the singular interaction. Each of these interactions will affect the next as interpreters glean how guests learn and what performance materials they need for that process, leading towards the permanent exhibition to be built at the conclusion.

Conclusion

The museum will not forget its audience in this project, and instead hopes to expand it further by expanding interpretation of the history of Williamsburg's Black community. Having specifically trained interpreters and archaeologists onsite to answer questions during this excavation research process shows CWF's commitment to constructing it as a public site of memorialization in the present and future. This kind of public archaeology is common for the museum and repeated at the other two active excavations, Custis Square and the Powder Magazine, but here interpretations also draw from the backstage conversations with the descendant community as well, with their intentions in mind.

Handler and Gable (1997) portray visitors as a passive audience on the whole, where only an outspoken few make impacts on interpretation. They focus more on relationships within the Foundation and tend to see visitors as those who understand the museum's vision, or those who do not. This chapter has focused on the co-construction in front stage conversations with visitors to demonstrate that their presence is more than a diagnostic of an interpreter's skills. The next chapter turns toward the spaces where co-construction of the descendant community and its purpose among the First Baptist community members assert further current and future possibilities in the project. We proceed in the understanding that these spaces are front stages for the participants there, introducing new back stages as well.

Chapter 3:

With Whom is Authority Shared? Defining Descendancy of the First Baptist Church

The goal of shared authorship has been clear from the beginning of the project, as the language of partnership between Colonial Williamsburg, First Baptist, and Let Freedom Ring is presented in all public opportunities. For example, the portable standing sign at the excavation site and the project's webpage on the CWF site begin with the same paragraph that "Colonial Williamsburg has partnered with" the two others. As the previous chapter has noted, multiple parties are given input, even the public audience. However, from both foundations' perspectives, the church is the intended authority and audience when continuing the project.

Sharing authority has fraught connotations in anthropological fieldwork, as scholars in the field have struggled to accord power to their interlocutors while recognizing their privileges as final editors in the publishing and dissemination of said work (Buckley 2008, 13-15). In the museum field, professionals deal with much of the same, and have an additional challenge of explaining these relationships to the public. First Baptist's project progression requires an understanding of who individually or collectively has a say. So far, I have used the terms "descendant" and "descendant community" somewhat casually for brevity's sake. In public interpretation at Nassau Street, the trajectory of the cemetery part of the project is often described as what the descendants will choose to do. For one sentence of interpretation, this could be sufficient. In actuality, the "descendants" or the "descendant community" taking an action or position requires the coordination of many people. Furthermore, defining who is a descendant and who is the descendant community is an ongoing task. From the organization of the project, some members of First Baptist were immediately identified as or identified

themselves as descendants. But as the potential burials were confirmed to be an entire cemetery, defining descendancy and organizing the descendants has further purpose.

The two banners which met visitors in February 2022: the 245th Anniversary of the First Baptist Church, and the project name under the Colonial Williamsburg logo, repeated around two sides of the site. Photo by author.

The concept of the "descendant community" was first developed by Michael Blakey and other researchers at the New York African Burial Ground (NYABG) Project to collectively refer to the present-day New York African American community that came together to advocate for the individuals whose buried remains were uncovered. Blakey (2020a) recognizes that slavery interrupted bloodlines, so consanguineal kinship is not always a requirement for descendancy "plausible" to stakeholders (2020, 190). Instead, Blakey states, "the descendant community is defined by those asserting stewardship because they care about the disposition of ancestors in question" (2020, 191). This term draws connections between kinship, care, and responsibility,

and as an academic term, is situated in the long history of kinship studies. As an applied term in projects such as First Baptist, the "descendant community" is situated in community-specific ideologies of descent.

Studies of how kinship relations are defined and maintained is a longtime matter of anthropology. Conflict over whether kinship has a biological or social basis informed early work as scholars like Lewis Henry Morgan (1871) attempted to categorize kinship systems across the world (Trautmann et al. 2011, 162-164). The proposition that all kinship is fictive, that "whatever is construed genealogically may also be constructed socially," is one now widely held among anthropologists, and it is "affirmed" by fieldwork examples (Sahlins 2011, 3). However, the historical tension between social and biological understandings of kinship is ongoing outside of academia, and it plays out in projects like First Baptist's with the organization of descendant communities. This final chapter explores the meanings of descendancy and the "descendant community" in the First Baptist project. First Baptist descendancy is closely tied to consanguineal kinship but further defines belonging through connections to place and a local definition of Blakey's (2020) "plausible descendancy."

In steering committee meetings, each participant brings their understandings of descendancy to the table as definition and scope is worked out in real time. By examining the purpose of participants through Goffman's (1972) framework of participant roles, we can better understand how members of the descendant community define descendancy and their individual role and role of the group within this project. Further, we can look at the enaction of partnership between parties that have not already involved themselves directly in the project.

Defining Descendancy across Two Virginia Museums

The NYABG example is particularly important for the First Baptist project as it deals with human remains and bioarchaeology, but ideas of descent are at the forefront at all types of museums and institutions reckoning with their past. The 2018 National Summit on Teaching Slavery met at James Madison's Montpelier and produced a rubric to evaluate and guide institutions in "engaging descendent communities in the interpretation of slavery." The rubric begins with a basic definition of the "descendant community" as those "whose ancestors were enslaved at a particular site," but asserts that the definition can "transcend" those boundaries:

> A descendant community can include those whose ancestors were enslaved not only at a particular site, but also throughout the surrounding region, reflecting the fact that family ties often crossed plantation boundaries. A descendant community can also welcome those who feel connected to the work the institution is doing, whether or not they know of a genealogical connection (2018, 1).

Their definition is crafted to show the dynamism of the idea of a descendant community and its particularity to each project or group.

Montpelier and Monticello, the plantations of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson respectively, have both established relationships with the descendants of those enslaved there as they interpret the legacy of enslavement today. However, they define membership differently, and the tension between biological and social kinship becomes a matter of who is a descendant of the ancestor(s) in question and whether other stakeholders, self-selected or invited by members, count. Montpelier's definition, as one might assume, is similar to the 2018 rubric definition. Montpelier's descendant community has grown in scope since the early 2000s and has become a "large stakeholder group of people who are interested in, and feel connected to, African American history at Montpelier, regardless of personal ancestry" ("Descendants' Project"). While still centered around those whose ancestors were enslaved at Montpelier and in the surrounding area, the project endeavors to echo what Blakey (2020) asserts, that slavery

disrupted family lines and their documentation, but that kinship persisted and "the world of enslaved people did not conform to the boundaries of white-owned plantations" ("Descendants' Project"). In 2019, the community organized a 501(c)3 non-profit called the Montpelier Descendants Committee to represent the wider community in the administration of Montpelier. Monticello's engagement with descendants through the Getting Word oral history project focuses more on the experience and memory of the individual, however, and therefore requires a definition for individuals as descendants. For Getting Word, descendants include people with direct relationships (consanguineal or adoptive) to those enslaved at Monticello, documentation of which can come from genealogical research, DNA matching, or "credible" oral history accounts ("Participate in the Getting Word Project"). The project also accepts accounts from people who trace their ancestry in the same way to white and free Black employees and artisans connected to Monticello.

These examples represent two major approaches to descendant engagement developed in the last few decades. Neither of these projects (yet) involve buried ancestors who could potentially be linked through DNA to living community members, and they also appear to differ from First Baptist in their leadership. Monticello's is museum-based or for a museum-led project, and from the information publicly available, it appears that the museum is deciding how a contributing descendant will be defined. The First Baptist excavation project does take place on museum property under museum-employed archaeologists, but CWF employees do not try to define descendancy or specify who may contribute. Furthermore, the burial examination branch of the excavation will be led by non-CWF scholars contracted for this project. Overall, the First Baptist Church and the Let Freedom Ring Foundation are institutional partners in the project where there are First Baptist descendants in positions of authority.

Descendant-defining relationships may change as partnerships continue, which has effects outside a single region or museum. In March 2022, the Montpelier Foundation board voted to strip the power of the Montpelier Descendant Committee to appoint descendant representatives to the board, a reversal of a publicized agreement from 2021 (Schneider 2022). The Committee alleges that the board has also been pushing legal agreements that would limit the descendants' authority on the board while still celebrating the leadership of the Montpelier Foundation in descendant parity (Cultural Heritage Partners). This news, reported nationally, spread quickly through the Virginia historic archaeology field, where networks of colleagues and peers reach into many museums working with descendants. The day of the vote, a Williamsburg archaeologist sent me a petition in support of the Montpelier Descendant Committee which collected five thousand signatures within a week. In late April 2022, The Montpelier Foundation board fired senior employees who had worked with descendants and had published in March a statement supporting the Committee. In this current example of Montpelier rescinding its promises, one can see the continuous conflict of institutions still gripping tight the power they have over historic interpretation, trying to protect "the values of America's dominant white culture," as Anna Lawson described of Colonial Williamsburg's Black history in the 1980s and 1990s (Lawson 1995, v). Blakey noted that the First Baptist project has tried to follow rubric's standards in working with descendants from the outset, "before the troubles" started, but news such as this reminds that partnerships can crumble (personal communication).

Naming Descendancy at the First Baptist Project

In this ongoing project, the people who consider themselves or are considered by others to be descendants do not have one collective name. Rather, "the descendant community" is often

used by outsider academics and museum professionals, while "the descendants" is more often used by descendants or members of the First Baptist community. However, both terms referred to the same people: those who were related by blood to historic members of First Baptist Church. Those using "descendant community," like myself, have often been supplied that term by other projects like the one at the New York African Burial Ground. In the case of First Baptist, using the term "descendant *community*" may imply a larger binding force or boundary around only those who are descendants. Outsiders could be placing artificial circles around certain people when those divisions do not exist in the space of "community" as used by the Williamsburg African American community (or communities, as explained later). This is not to say that self-identified descendants do not claim a difference from non-descendants.

Those who are involved in the project will tell you whether they are a descendant. Some of the descendants most vocal in the project trace their family roots back many generations in the Williamsburg area. Other African American stakeholders have mentioned their family ties to Virginia and even the Tidewater region, but do not claim descendancy, which also may relate to their other roles in the project. As cemetery research continues to be guided through community consensus, rather than CWF archaeologists' initiative, naming oneself as a descendant commands a certain amount of responsibility or authority. There is recognition that non-descendant African American folks involved may have a special connection; this has been extended to various anthropologists working on the project. However, non-descendants focus on bringing their talents and work to the project or aim to act as advocates. One archaeologist has heard from church members that this is her heritage, too, because "even though I'm not a member of the actual church community, I am a member of the African American community." The

expansion from descendants to other stakeholders is recognized officially through the steering committee, which brings together other church members, scholars, and Williamsburg leaders.

One time I directly asked Mrs. Janice Canaday, a First Baptist member who is a lifetime resident of Williamsburg and longtime employee of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, to define a "descendant of the project." Mrs. Canaday traces her heritage to many of the prominent families in town and to many of First Baptist's daughter churches and is herself a descendant. She said,

> Well, the descendant community, that looks like me and you. It's not all African American people, you know, and it's all those people who participate and are impacted by the laws and the processes that were going on…so people born here and people who descend from folks that were first here.

Rather than a community *of* descendants, this is the community descending from the past Williamsburg community. Mrs. Canaday's meaning presents Williamsburg today as a continuation of its past and demonstrates how history is given further meaning when someone forms a personal connection to it (Filene 2012). This also introduces an informal tenet of descendancy: coinciding with the importance of Williamsburg family ties, having the experience of growing up here and knowing the history of the area accentuates the authority of a descendant. Descendancy outright gives you "a voice," Mrs. Canaday said, recognizing that there are generations and branches of the descendant families that no longer live in Williamsburg.

An immediate reason for organizing the descendants, and therefore deciding who qualifies, is the issue of proceeding with cemetery analysis. Since the presence of burials was confirmed in the fall of 2020, project leaders from CWF and Let Freedom Ring have looked for cues and permissions to determine next steps. The organization of descendants has already changed over time and will continue to develop alongside the burial ground analysis. At the

steering committee meeting in February 2021, the first that I attended, some descendants had been identified and were asked to voice questions and concerns after hearing the updates from Michael Blakey and Jack Gary. Eight months later, in October 2021, the number of self-identified descendants present seemingly increased. They spoke explicitly about descendancy, in addition to cemetery project matters.

Defining Community in Committee

The October 30, 2021 steering committee meeting hosted presentations about genealogy, human osteology, and DNA analysis, then closed with a question-and-answer period to discuss matters about the burial ground analysis. First, Mrs. Harshaw read out some of the questions that had been received "from the community" prior to the meeting, noting panelists would most likely not be able to answer them directly that day due to time constraints. The four questions below can lend insight to use of descendancy and community amongst those present. Mrs. Harshaw's own attribution of the questions to "the community" is unclear, as she has used both "descendants" and "descendant community," seemingly interchangeably.

1. How can we get the community to investigate, trace, document, and share their ancestry with family members and the community?
2. Is there anything you can think of that would cause the descendants to make a decision to not open the graves and study the remains?
3. What can the descendants do now to accelerate the DNA collection, matching process, suggestions?
4. How can African American descendants of Williamsburg register and create a list like that of Ellis Island from what history has uncovered about Williamsburg?

The first and fourth questions are getting at similar ideas of large-scale collaboration amongst those who would submit for DNA analysis or do further genealogical work. The first

uses “community” twice whereas the fourth specifies the “descendants,” but neither mention First Baptist (nor do the other two). This first question’s “community” implies boundaries, but since it comes from a self-professed member, they would be personally clear about what those are. The fourth question clearly outlines the relevance of Williamsburg and being African American, and we are left to fill in how we interpret descendancy. The last three questions, in their use of “descendants” alongside science or documentation, imply a meaning of descendancy like that of Monticello’s Getting Word Project, where evidence of a consanguineal or adoptive relation to a person part of the historical group is required.

After, Mrs. Harshaw solicited comments from the present audience and the microphone was brought to whoever wanted it. Some in attendance began to share their thoughts about whom this project is for. Together, the speakers began to define who is a descendant. The act of speaking up in this meeting was an assertion of their own descendant status, but each of them used their turn to further expand upon the definition, and what this effort (defining and gathering the descendant community) means to them. Three speakers below illustrate this cooperative definition.

Mrs. Canaday spoke up first. The bracketed words are ones she inserted for clarity when we discussed her statement after the fact.

> I just want to suggest something in the room to be considered while we are gathering [with] questions and information. When I look around the room, I don’t know everybody here, I don’t know if there are a lot of people who are actual descendants here. So, I’m wondering if all those families really know what’s going on…
> I want to make sure we identify what the *community* is, how far out reaching it is; it is not always the immediate Williamsburg area…
> We get representatives [from] the *communities*. Sometimes there are people who can’t come here. I have an 87-year-old sister who isn’t going to come in, but that doesn’t mean

> she's not interested. We have to understand what slavery did to people. The shame that people live with is not theirs to own, but they are carrying it. So there's a lot of people who want to participate, but won't come up and say because [of] their undue burden. (italics mine)

Mrs. Canaday makes the first step to voice that not every descendant is in the room, and that there are descendants who may not even know there is a room. In reviewing this transcription, she reemphasized the extension and "strong connection" of familial ties in Williamsburg, but that "because of slavery, a lot of times you don't know who's your family and who's not your family." Creatively and persistently reaching out to those who have not yet entered the discussion spaces is important, because there are more descendants, ones who would be contributors. These are often the elders, like Mrs. Canaday's sister, or Mrs. Roots' father, and physical barriers are just one kind. Distrust of the project or the project leaders also raises barriers to participation. For example, multiple displacements of Oak Grove and its congregants, some directly involving CWF through land transfers, contributes to the hesitancy of some.

Mrs. Canaday frames descent in the present, and she recognizes DNA-based relations as "family." Furthermore, in developing an understanding of the use of community in conceptualizing the descendants and stakeholders, one notices that Mrs. Canaday switched from singular "community" to "communities." The first seems to be a reference to descendant community as spoken by Mrs. Harshaw, where the second may be referring to different congregation communities or neighborhoods, both of which she has used to illustrate the history of Williamsburg residents and her own family history. In response, Mrs. Harshaw seconded Mrs. Canaday's call to reach out, and said that bringing this information to descendants, who know the stories best, could "connect the science to the human part."

The second commenter was Mrs. Mildred Walker, who was born and raised in James City County:

> [The history is] far reaching, outside of Williamsburg city limits, into the counties that surround us. There are Charles City County,… all of James City County, York County. We have so much history in this area, in reference to slavery, and everything that's going on, in and out of Williamsburg, Virginia. So, I am delighted that we have been invited to—as community members, to come in and share stories because they are far-reaching, far beyond Williamsburg city limits and even in the broader community around us…I vow to participating in any way I possibly can.

Mrs. Walker expands upon the purposes of organizing the (descendant?) community: to gather the body of knowledge that exists in individual memories. She establishes her own status as a lifetime resident of the county, representing expansion of the boundaries of the "community." Her mention of "so much history in this area" echoes the statements that many make about the Historic Triangle. But here, she was talking about African American history of the area, and the depth and breadth of personal pasts that the project can bring together.

The final commenter to speak was Mrs. Colette Roots, who has been a leader of Oak Grove Baptist's restoration and has coordinated efforts with CWF to map and restore their cemeteries, of which a second had been recently located. She gave an update about working with CWF on those projects and finding out that she was a "descendant of the Bray School," an eighteenth-century school that educated free and enslaved Black children in Williamsburg. Mrs. Roots, like Mrs. Canaday, knows well the family names of her Williamsburg ancestors, and was able to trace her consanguineal relations back to Bray students. Her statement identifying her descendancy from the Bray School, an institution, is similar to the fourth question above, mentioning "descendants of Williamsburg," a place. It is possible that Mrs. Roots submitted that question.

Turning to the collection of descendants' DNA for matching to burials, Mrs. Roots made an important reference. "When we give you that DNA sample and you see it light up like a match [all laugh]… we're okay with that because our kids will have [their own] like Ellis Island." This was the second reference to Ellis Island, a comparison I had not yet heard, but one that harkens to one shared American experience. Oral histories are passed down of immigrant ancestors being processed at Ellis Island, and many European Americans have such a story. Some of the first Africans enslaved in British North America were brought to the Virginia Peninsula in 1619, so the history of Africans and African Americans is long here (Reid 2021). The references at the committee meeting, though, are to the database compiled by The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, with millions of records from passengers ("Passenger Search"). This online database is one genealogical search tool made available during the genealogical research boom of recent decades (Filene 2012).

Mrs. Roots garnered some laughs when she said, "most of us are kin, whether you want to admit it or not." She had expressed this a few times over the months I had known her, and it contributed to her position in February 2022: every African American in Williamsburg is a descendant. Being a member of Oak Grove Baptist, she knows the webs of family ties that keep daughter congregations connected to the parent church; a look through Bogger (2006) and Oak Grove record books shows many of the same surnames.

As noted above, making a comment was a statement in itself. In the lecture hall-like setup, there was not much possibility for back and forth, though Mrs. Harshaw briefly spoke in between comments. The three commenters did build on one another to establish a few tenets of descendancy as relevant to this project. Descendants have blood relations to African American people who lived in Williamsburg in the past, a time that has not been explicitly stated but must

be at least as far back as First Baptist on Nassau Street. Furthermore, not all descendants are current members of First Baptist Church, and not all descendants live in or are from the city limits of Williamsburg. Importantly, they each resolved to further the reach of the project to descendants outside of the room. Thus far focusing on the contents of each community speaker, we see how they work together to define descendancy, but by looking at their speeches in relationship to the rest of the participants in the room, we can explore the role of the descendants going forward.

Giving and Accepting Participant Roles to Enact Partnership

Irvine (1996) suggests entering an event with four general participant roles: "speaker, recipient, and third parties present and absent." From there, analysis can follow the creation of more specific roles that the folks present assign themselves and those not there. Irvine (1996) and Levinson (1988) focus on the utterance event; from there, my focus can shift to the wider speech event so that I can draw conclusions about how the roles that participants take on in this meeting build on the cooperative structure of the First Baptist project and the role of the descendant community. The auditorium setting of the October 30 meeting lends itself to an assumption of a lecture hall style interaction, and on the surface many of those in the tiered seats were audience by Goffmanian standards, a group that "give[s] the floor but (except during the question period) rarely get[s] it" (Goffman 1981, 138). The "question period" almost fits the opportunity given to the three community members above and others there. However, that framework is set for expert and novice interactions, whereas these presentations to the steering committee could be likened to preliminary proposals in front of an executive board, where every individual acknowledges the overlap and divergence of knowledge bases in the room but that each comes to contribute.

In his matrix of production, Levinson (1988) divides roles through four attributes: (ratified) participation, transmission, motive, and form. A ratified participant, drawing from Goffman, is one whose presence is accepted as part of the speech event. A transmitter physically makes the utterance. The motivator has the "desire to communicate" a specific message whereas the formulator structures the given message (1988, 171-173). While listing out each of the fourteen production and categories would not serve this, considering these helps point to instances of collaboration that reach beyond the utterance event. Levinson (1998) calls one who is positive (is responsible) for all four the "author." When Jack Gary delivered an update of the site, he was the author, though there were co-"devisers" (participants who shared the motivation and contributed to format) also involved in this project, as the work of excavation and interpretation is an entire team of Colonial Williamsburg scholars. The panelists, Dr. Johnson, Dr. Blakey, Dr. Jones, and Dr. Fleskes, each can be considered authors by Levinson (1988), though their collaborators and editors from over the years of their scholarship may be able to claim ghostwriter and co-deviser credit.

Alongside production roles, one must also look at what recipient roles participants at the meeting created with their performances. Levinson's (1988) roles of reception concept differentiates to whom a message is addressed and who is the intended recipient, considering ratified participation and ability to understand a message (1988, 171-174). Most important for defining the descendant community are the first two, if we consider everyone in the room a ratified participant. Dr. Fleskes most directly engages in creating receiving roles through personal pronouns, first acknowledging her position in this project as a white woman not from Williamsburg. She began by saying, "I am incredibly grateful to be here today," and "I take this work very seriously." Then, she specifically addresses her statements to two different recipients:

"Today I hope to equip you guys, you as the individual and you as the community, with knowledge on whether… you want to decide to undertake ancient DNA testing of those First African Baptist ancestors." Dr. Fleskes acknowledges dual roles that some sitting in the auditorium may have, as interlocutors (those who the message is addressed to and intended for) and as intermediaries (addressees with a different recipient) between the committee and other descendants. Mrs. Canaday makes these roles explicit from her position as a descendant, and further notes that there are intermediaries who were not present either, saying "we [must] get representatives [from] the communities. Sometimes there are people who can't come here." Mrs. Canaday is accepting the recipient roles while acting in a production role. When revisiting this moment later, she said she was thinking about the elders she knew who carried those burdens, and she wanted to get these messages across so that people who have not grown up in Williamsburg are able to understand as the project goes forward. She acted as an author and a spokesperson in this moment, engaging with the multi-dialogic as she brings up experiences of others in the descendant community. By addressing and claiming multiple roles in this speech event, Dr. Fleskes and Mrs. Canaday begin to build this network of intention and reciprocal responsibility.

Mrs. Walker positioned the presenters in a reception role in speaking about her excitement to share descendant stories, creating another relationship line that extended to the speech event as a whole. The presenters were each prepared to answer questions, but this receiving role was planned for the Q&A section of the event. But Mrs. Walker framed the event as one where community members came to share. By giving the presenters and non-community members this role, Mrs. Walker makes visible the reciprocity of sharing authority. Colonial Williamsburg has much of the power over the property, but to accomplish their goals for the

final exhibit, Colonial Williamsburg needs the First Baptist current congregation and descendant community to share their knowledge and permission with them. Mrs. Walker's vow of participation is perhaps one link extended to CWF. As a descendant herself, she is building on who *are* descendants, to what descendants *do*.

Conclusion

Descendants have continued to identify themselves and contribute to the discussions happening since the project's conception. No one I have heard speak or have spoken to wants to tighten the definition of a descendant or stop expansion beyond First Baptist members. They recognize existing boundaries in the greater Williamsburg area, of race or class or neighborhood, but simultaneously acknowledge the family ties that crossed those boundaries. In this way, descendants write local meanings into descendancy that can be carried through this project and into the future. Mapping Levinson's (1988) participant roles into the conversation at the October 30 meeting only as people create them follow's Irvine's (1996) argument that Goffman's roles should not be divorced from context. From the October 30 meeting, this revealed how different individuals present aligned themselves with larger stakeholder groups. Because everyone who spoke presented themselves sincerely, claiming that the motivation behind their statement was theirs, even if part of a collective, they also defined the goals of their group. Through the giving and receiving of participant roles in this steering committee meeting, stakeholders collaborate to define the terms of this partnership going forward. The reciprocity expected shifts in the cemetery project, however, as CWF personnel and non-descendant leaders like Connie Harshaw assume the role of facilitators that do not try to exercise power in decision-making.

The division of participant roles also make clear that not all the necessary work can be completed at a steering committee meeting or between those that would attend one. As Mrs. Canaday pointed out in October, some of the essential conversations about shared and personal experiences in Williamsburg happen outside of the steering committee meetings, kept between family members or those who have known each other for a long time. Understanding the project as multipolar, moving through many stakeholders, means one must acknowledge it as multi-spatial, and so we return to the Goffmanian stage.

Conclusion:

Looking Forward: The Possibilities of the First Baptist Project

One of my most recent interviews with Mrs. Colette Roots took place in the gutted interior of Oak Grove Baptist Church. In her retirement, Mrs. Roots has worked tirelessly on restoration projects for Oak Grove, coordinating with Colonial Williamsburg, First Baptist project leaders, and William & Mary scholars, including myself, on top of producing fundraising videos and interviewing with The Virginia Gazette. Oak Grove's church building on Waller Mill Road is currently in the middle of a restoration in consultation with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources while preparing the formal nomination to the Virginia Landmarks Register and the National Register of Historic Places. We sat on two folding chairs amidst the construction, approximately where the front row of pews would be, and she explained what the First Baptist project could mean. She maintained that she is not really involved in the project but said that she and others from daughter churches would be "coming to the table" because this is the history of all African American churches in Williamsburg. "The reason I got involved—I am listening to—*we all* are listening to First Baptist is because First Baptist is claiming to be the first African American church in Williamsburg. So we all from Williamsburg, if you're claiming to be the first one, and we came from slaves, that mean all of us, every church in Williamsburg branched out there."

She and other project stakeholders have situated the First Baptist project among wider social movements and the responsibility to effect change in the Williamsburg community. Mrs. Roots and Mrs. Canaday shared about the strong network of mutual support between the Black Baptist churches when she was growing up. Events like sing-outs, concerts gathering the youth

choirs from the area, would raise money for one church or another when they needed. More generally, Mrs. Roots sees the possibility for using the network created to advocate for the unhoused people in town, career paths alternatives to university education, and affordable housing, among other causes.

Having the understanding as a self-identified African American woman from Williamsburg and a Colonial Williamsburg museum professional, Mrs. Canaday sees the opportunities for this project and the developing Bray School project to connect African American people with families from Williamsburg to their heritage in the city.

> Somebody went about the business of making this town look very white, erasing the communities, the homes, the businesses, kind of taking your footprint away. But it's just like when you write on paper—you can erase, but the impression is still there. You took out the people, but their work is still here. This whole town, and community, is a testament to those people. It's a monument, it's the biggest monument to those people. So we have to wake the African American community up so they can make sure that people know their story. *They* have to know their story. A lot of folks don't know how big their story is.

The 246-year history of the First Baptist congregation is told through displacement, and negotiation, and family bonds still being uncovered. The infrastructure of Williamsburg tells it, too, and would be more complete with the addition of the First Baptist meetinghouse. This thesis has aimed to explore power and memory, and the longevity of the memorialization project throughout First Baptist's past, and more closely, the last two years of the Nassau Street project.

The First Baptist project is part of a wider movement amongst American historical sites to engage more strongly with the communities whose stories they now want to tell, and with Colonial Williamsburg's international recognition and size, the project has the potential to be another example to the broader museum field. Further, it has potential to teach many non-local

visitors the community-informed interpretations and the importance of this approach. The spring 2022 news from James Madison's Montpelier demonstrates, however, that the partnerships formed between museums and descendant community stakeholders can be fragile, and require ongoing commitment: "Building trust takes time" (("Engaging Descendant Communities" 2018, 13). In the celebration and exploration of the First Baptist partnership, one cannot overlook the long-held power of educational institutions, as the actions taken by the board at the Montpelier Foundation demonstrate a quick seizure of full control, less than a year after their commitment to "structural parity," which, at Montpelier, was promised equal power and authority on the board for Committee-chosen members and other board members.

Concluding my research only about two years into this project and partnership, I recognize that the relationships in the collaboration will change, and goals may shift. A system of structural parity has not been codified at this point in the First Baptist project, which raises questions about sharing power going forward, though the archaeologists I have spoken to at Colonial Williamsburg have committed themselves to following the lead of the descendant community. As Jack Gary asserts,

> While the expected in-ground signatures and material culture resources excite archaeologists, it is the collaboration with descendants, the modern congregation, the Black community, and other stakeholders on how those resources are interpreted that give the project its true purpose—further empowering the community to tell its history (2021, xvi)

In using "empowering," Gary (2021) engages with the language that the 2018 rubric uses. The rubric posits that "achieving structural parity ensures that descendants are represented—and empowered—at every level of the organization, from the board to the volunteers" (2018, 9). With the large corporate structure of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, I cannot predict

how structural parity would be achieved. The formal organizing of the Montpelier Descendant Committee, a path that other Virginia descendant community groups are following, may also provide a way forward for the First Baptist descendant community to collectively negotiate this. Time will tell. It is essential that Colonial Williamsburg personnel at every level in this moment continually *re*commit themselves to following the descendant community's lead.

As it stands now, the project offers new opportunities for Colonial Williamsburg's mission statement, "that the future may learn from the past." Or, as Mrs. Roots said, "This historic part is good, but now we got to show you all the future part—what we all can do as Black and white and any other race… that's what I'm looking forward to."

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