



WILLIAM & MARY

CHARTERED 1693



Colonial Williamsburg

THE WILLIAMSBURG BRAY SCHOOL

*PLACING AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION AND RELIGION
AT THE ORIGINS OF U.S. DEMOCRACY*

Case Statement

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An Unique Discovery: Williamsburg's Bray School

- Working together, William & Mary and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation have discovered **the oldest surviving schoolhouse for free and enslaved Blacks in the northern hemisphere**
- After a decade of research and archaeology, discovery of the structure was confirmed by dendrochronology in 2020
- Our ambition is to restore the Williamsburg Bray School as a Black history destination, visited in person and online by millions annually

Historical Significance

- Williamsburg's Bray School, an institution supported by Benjamin Franklin, opened September 29, 1760 and closed 1774
- Teacher Anne Wager educated 350-400 students of *both* sexes, at a time when female education was limited
- Provided basic reading, writing, sewing, and etiquette skills to free and enslaved African American children – and religious instruction to convert and assimilate students to Christian practice while also upholding the institution of slavery
- Archeology has discovered many styluses at the historic site – from a time when it was illegal to teach writing to those who were enslaved
- Local population was 52% African American in 1770s
- Student lists survive for 1762, 1765, 1769 – starting points for descendant research

Impact Now

- The Bray School's story illuminates the complex relationships between Black education, religious life, enslavement and liberation – intertwined at the origins of U.S. democracy
- For some, the seeds of agency under oppression were planted here: *when you learn to read the Bible, you learn to think critically; when you learn writing and math, you can teach others*
- With restoration, robust archeology over the past decade can now be matched with robust analysis of the material structure – and exhibition – to uncover hidden dimensions of early African American education in the Commonwealth and nation
- An outstanding opportunity to begin telling a more complete story of the U.S.'s Colonial Capital
- A site for national conversation and understanding of the links between faith, racism, literacy, and democracy, in preparation for 2026
- A place for reconciliation of complex racial histories and a call to action for education for citizenship and equality

The Bray School Structure

- The original 1760 Bray School was a cottage, now the core of Digges House, a building owned by William & Mary
- Digges House was built around the original cottage, then later moved to its current site at the university



The Bray School Structure



The Bray School Structure

The Bray School Core
inside Digges House



CWF-W&M Partnership for Public History

Re-siting and Restoration

- W&M transfers ownership to CWF
- CWF deconstructs Digges, restores Bray School
- Bray School moved to CWF footprint, to maximize visitation

Research and Exhibition

- CWF leads restoration, exhibition, maintenance, security
- [W&M's Lemon Project](#) leads ongoing research in Black education and religion
- Exhibition evolves dynamically

Curriculum and Visitation

- 1.1M site visits annually, over 22M digital views annually
- Undergraduate and graduate courses, research in W&M Arts & Sciences and School of Education
- K-12 curricula developed by CWF and W&M School of Education

Partnership Vision



First Baptist Dig, January 21, 2020

Together, we are driving a massive expansion in under-represented histories *as* American history, in Williamsburg VA:

- [First Baptist](#): Black community and faith (2020)
- Bray School: Black education (2021)
- Brafferton Indian School: Native American education and sovereignty (2023)
- Phi Beta Kappa: Enslavement, education and democracy (2026)

W&M leads historical research

CWF leads public education, exhibition

- Building on our 20-year partnership, the [National Institute for American History and Democracy](#)

Partnership Outcomes

- A new U.S. destination for African American history visited by millions, in person and online, every year
- Site-specific, material history rapidly expands our knowledge of early Black education and religious life
- Dynamic exhibition, fed by research
- New K-12 curricula developed by W&M School of Education and CWF
- The Commonwealth leads in advancing racial reconciliation: rediscovering hidden stories, hosting sustained, difficult conversations
- Sustainable partnership: complementary expertise and infrastructure
- Via W&M's Lemon Project (racial reconciliation lab): faculty, graduate and undergraduate hands-on in discovery, alongside CWF archeologists, architectural historians, and curators
- A new African American Heritage Walking Trail in Williamsburg, VA: including Bray, First Baptist, and W&M's Memorial to the Enslaved

Governance

Board of Visitors



Architectural Review
Board (AARB)



Governor

- **W&M Management Agreement, Sec. X, Exhibit G**
Demolition of the existing DH would need to be coordinated with VA AARB
- **Va. Code §2.2-2402.B** In order to remove a building on property owned by the Commonwealth, the AARB must review the proposal and submit a recommendation to the Governor
- **Va. Code §23.1-1019.D** Governor's approval needed prior to disposing real and personal property
- **AARB meets monthly** Governor has 30 days to act. If no action, the proposal is approved

Timeline

Feb 2021: Board of Visitors announces intent to enter into a partnership and approve phased path to transfer

- BoV declares Digges House surplus
- Building fenced for security

March: Proposal submitted to AARB with final transfer MOU

April: Approval from AARB / Governor

May: Begin study phase

2022: Bray School Structure moved, W&M site remediated