

Archaeologists discover brick foundations near Wren Building

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WMCAR field technicians Cheryl Frankum (l) and Tom Young take measurements at the site of the foundation find as Edward Chappell, Roberts Director of Architectural and Archaeological Research at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation sketches the find in the background. Credit: Stephen Salpukas

A set of undocumented brick building foundations -- "a little island of preservation" hidden for centuries beneath William & Mary's Historic Campus -- will provide a glimpse back into the College's time-shrouded early years.

"It is wonderful that our colonial campus, about which so much is known, still can surprise us after all these centuries," said Louise Kale, director of William & Mary's Historic Campus.

College [archaeologists](#) say the partially unearthed foundation looks to be

the remains of “a fairly massive outbuilding,” a structure that was almost certainly associated with slaves who worked at William & Mary in the early 18th century. The foundation runs 20 feet east-west and more than 16 feet north-south. The remains extend underneath a sidewalk south of the Wren Building. Their discovery prompted postponement of scheduled repairs to the sidewalk.

The precise location of the foundation has been recorded and the areas exposed for examination have been filled in. The site will remain preserved under nearly two feet of earth. The College is already making plans for a complete archaeological excavation of the site.

“The discovery of these foundations is too important to rush the process,” Kale explained. “We need some time to put together a partnership of all the necessary scholars to interpret this site. When we do this project, it’s important that we do it thoughtfully and that we do it right.”

She said that such an archaeological dig calls for a large amount of preliminary research, including a review of all relevant documents and papers. Kale added that the College will also need time to raise the necessary funding for the project and also make sure there is an opportunity for students to be involved in the work.

Joe Jones, director of the William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research (WMCAR), said that the foundation could reliably be dated to the 18th century by the type of mortar used. Other contextual clues led him to believe that construction of the foundation may date as early as the second quarter of the century. Such a figure would put the foundations as somewhat more recent than the Wren Building, which was constructed between 1695 and 1700.

“It’s a substantial outbuilding or dependency,” Jones said. “Based on the

time period, where it's located and the dimensions, it's probably a specific-function building like a kitchen building or maybe quarters for slaves.”

Neil Norman, ACLS/Mellon Foundation New Faculty Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, says the foundation is relatively substantial—three brick courses wide—a finding that tends to eliminate some functions from discussion of the building's purpose.

“It's probably not a privy, probably not a stable, probably not a smokehouse,” he said. “Those kinds of structures are usually wooden and relatively ephemeral. If it was an outbuilding, it was a relatively substantial one and one that could have been used for quite some time. If you are going to invest money into durable materials and energy into creating what, back then, was a relatively massive structure, then it's something intended to endure.”

Norman is a specialist in the archaeology of Africa and the African diaspora. He is a participant in the College's Lemon Project, an ongoing initiative that examines the relationship of the College with slavery. The project draws its name from Lemon, an enslaved man whose name appears in early 19th-century records of William & Mary. Norman says a careful examination of the foundation will provide an opportunity to understand life in the early days of the College more fully.

“At William & Mary, we're surrounded every day with accounts and images of illustrious early Americans,” Norman said. “Thomas Jefferson is ever-present here, but we don't really know about the lives of the people like Lemon who, during Jefferson's time, cooked, cleaned and made academic life possible. This site has the potential to allow us to interpret the conditions of their lives and add them to the emerging narrative of the College.”

Norman says that artifacts still in the ground might show that the building had served several different functions over the years.

“If it was associated with laundry, you might find buttons that were worn and discarded after they were replaced. You might find needles from darning garments,” he explained. “It would be a real boon to find a kitchen area. That would give us a window into cuisine and food preparation. Given that elite young colonial men were educated at the College, Native Americans at the Brafferton, and Africans and African Americans at the Bray School, it would be interesting to see what types of artifacts and food remains are represented.”

Jones said several bags of artifacts have been removed from the test units at the site. Both Jones and Norman agree on the need for a thorough archaeological examination to recover artifacts and other information from what Jones believes will be the important strata below the foundation brickwork. Jones rates the site “a solid 10” in terms of archaeological potential, as indications show that it’s relatively undisturbed.

“This site is like a little island of preservation,” Jones said. “In every direction, if you go more than three, four or five feet out, we know from other projects you get into areas of massive ground disturbance. You can take five steps and it’s a jumble.”

Jones said WMCAR found evidence of the foundations several years ago during test excavations associated with proposed utility line improvements nearby. Given expectations that the foundations might extend near or beneath an existing brick walkway, WMCAR was asked by Kale to conduct a test dig at the site before the sidewalk work began. He added that he’s found no historical record of a building at the site. Edward Chappell, Roberts Director of Architectural and Archaeological Research at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, concurs, adding that

there is no indication of the building on the famous 1782 document, the Frenchman’s Map, used to launch planning of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg.

“There is not something there on the Frenchman’s Map,” Chappell said, “so that suggests that this building is either earlier or later than the Frenchman’s Map—although the Frenchman’s Map is not always completely accurate.”

Jones has reviewed records from the early days of the Colonial Williamsburg restoration, during which teams of workers dug trenches throughout much of Williamsburg’s Historic Area—including William & Mary’s Historic Campus.

“Their whole goal was to find these Colonial-era brick foundations,” he said. “They apparently dug some of their trenches within a step or two of where we found these foundations. These workers weren’t aware of many of the types of archaeological features and deposits that we now know can produce critical information, so it is somewhat miraculous that they managed to miss this site with their trench excavations.”

Provided by The College of William & Mary

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