

The Williamsburg Bray School Teaches New Lessons

By Lizzie Henry

White walls, light wooden floors, and a brick chimney make up what would have been the classroom for students at the Williamsburg Bray School. On a table are recreations of “The Child’s First Book” and the Book of Common Prayer, their curriculum. The building itself is plain, but its history is deep, complex and only recently unearthed. Now open for almost six months, the unassuming building on the corner of Francis and Nassau streets serves as the place where these children’s stories can finally be brought to light.

The Bray School is thought to be the oldest school to teach free and enslaved Black children in the nation. It was founded by the Associates of Dr. Bray, an Anglican charity dedicated to educating Black children. The original building was used between 1760 and 1765 before the school was moved to a larger building. Schooling continued until 1774 when the white schoolteacher, Ann Wager, died. The original building functioned as both the classroom and Wager’s home. There, children as young as 3 were taught literacy, domestic skills, and Christian morality six days a week. Additionally, and most importantly, they reported to the school on Sundays to go to church.

Though the Bray School was created to educate Black children, the lesson it intended to give was explicitly pro-slavery.

“The church at that time went by one phrase,” said Rodney Pressley, a reenactor at the Bray School, “a place for everybody and everybody in his place.”

The teachings of the Bray School were meant to inspire obedience in Black people. However, records show that learning literacy empowered Bray School scholars.

“I think what happened is the enslavers underestimated the power of those young minds because all you had to do was teach them how to read and write,” said Connie Harshaw, President of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, the supporting organization of the Historic First Baptist Church. “You could not control the way they thought; you could not control what they did with the knowledge that they gained. That is the part that is so encouraging for us, that there are no boundaries when you teach a child to read. And we believe that that's what happened in the Gowan Pamphlet case.”

Gowan Pamphlet was the founder of the First Baptist Church and the first ordained Black minister in America. He may have been educated at the Bray School before he began preaching to his secret Baptist congregation during the Revolutionary War.

“That’s the ultimate irony, and it tells you things don’t always work out the way you want, but that’s the story of the American Revolution,” said Pressley, noting that Baptists are anti-slavery and Pamphlet preached equality to his mostly Black congregation. “It doesn’t work out the way they thought.”

The restoration of the Bray School has been a collaborative effort in the Williamsburg community. Terry Meyers, chancellor professor emeritus of English at William & Mary, was one of the first to push the theory that the Prince George House on William & Mary’s campus was actually the former Bray School. Meyers read a 2002 memoir by Ed Belvin that mentioned a building on campus that was an 18th century home. “Someone, I can’t even remember who it was, suggested that that structure might have housed the school, and I got interested in that and started looking into the Bray School.”

The existence and location of the Bray School was eventually confirmed, the building was moved and it has now been restored and opened to the public. As part of the continuing effort to restore and research the Bray School, William & Mary created the Bray School Lab.

“The Lab was publicly launched in October of 2021 as part of the Williamsburg Bray School Initiative, which is the partnership between William & Mary and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation to advance the study of what we know at present, commitment to uncovering more information and certainly preserving the building itself,” said Dr. Maureen Elgersman Lee, director of the Bray School Lab.

The Lab is largely focused on research and community engagement. The Foundation, while also doing research, is in charge of the restoration and preservation of the Bray School building. The Lab and Foundation do their research separately but regularly share their findings.

“Of course, they have excellent researchers, interpreters,” said Elgersman Lee, “but if we put all of our resources together, then I think the interpretation is even that much better, and then the public benefits even more.”

The Bray School Lab also involves students in research on the Bray School. They first worked with students in February 2022, when they helped to transcribe letters of correspondence between the colonies and the Associates of Dr. Bray in London. Students are welcome to contact the Lab and work with them for short-term or long-term projects. The Lab’s multi-disciplinary approach allows all students to be involved.

Tyler Lewis, a senior at William & Mary, is a Thought Partner with the Lab. He spent the summer of 2025 doing a genealogy internship with the Lab and is now continuing his research. He focused on learning the histories of specific Bray School students including Hannah, Squire and Sarah during the summer and Roger, Adam and Fanny during the fall.

“It’s a very magical feeling to see them in the records, to finally be able to write more about them,” said Lewis. “There are numerous questions. I wish I could answer them all.”

Community members and descendants of Bray School scholars are also deeply involved in restoration and research of the Bray School. They provide oral histories and sometimes even personal records.

“The graciousness and the welcomeness of the descendant community members really can’t be understated, because without them kind of guiding and encouraging this work, it really wouldn’t be possible at all,” said Elizabeth Drembus, the Bray School Lab’s genealogist. “I want to give a lot of credit and a lot of thanks for their involvement and their trust in this work, their trust in us.”

During their research, Drembus and Tonia Meredith, the former oral historian at the Bray School Lab, made their way to rural Virginia looking for leads. While in Boydton, a small town in Mecklenburg County, Virginia, they found a card at a local library with a familiar name.

“It was a woman by the name of Loretta Burwell,” said Drembus, “and she was looking for any information for anybody who had the last name Burwell or was researching Burwell, and it had a phone number and an address in Georgia.”

Meredith called Burwell and, after some initial confusion, she revealed that she had left the card 30 years ago.

“She told us all these stories about her ancestor Fanny, her ancestor Dolly, and these are names that are really familiar to us from the Blair household, and people from the Blair household end up within the Burwell household because of the family connections,” said Drembus. “Because we know her ancestors, we can put her ancestors in the same plantation as descendants of the Bray School students.”

In April, Burwell drove to Williamsburg to attend Descendants Week, a series of events hosted by the Bray School Lab focused on members of the Bray School descendant community. Not only did Burwell meet and connect with other Bray School descendants, she also met a descendant of the white Burwell family whose ancestors had enslaved her own.

“I still get goosebumps thinking about it,” said Drembus. “It’s just, this is what this work’s all about, is this reconnection.”

The Lab does more than just research. It also participates in Juneteenth celebrations, helps support the Lemon Project Symposium, hosts monthly hour-long Zoom sessions about various topics which they call their Bray School Stories, and more. They support community programs involving descendant community members like the Village Initiative. They also have their own Seminar.

“We wanted to have a solid, research oriented program, so we have what we call our Slate Seminar, which is our annual conference,” said Elgersman Lee. “It’s current research, things that we’ve discovered or that we’re diving deeper into. But what’s been exciting is that increasingly descendant community members and community members more broadly are participating in the program as presenters. It’s no longer us just talking at people. They’re right there with us.”

The opening of the restored Bray School was meaningful for a number of people, but it has special meaning for the members of the descendant community and the Black community in Williamsburg. For a long time, Colonial Williamsburg has ignored the Black history of the town, despite revolutionary Williamsburg being 52% Black.

“There was a certain story they were pushing my entire life,” said Johnette Gordon-Weaver, a lifelong Williamsburg resident and a member of the descendant community.

“And it was, you know, the feel good kind of happy slave, slave master kind of relationship. And people like that... Well, white people liked that story. Black Williamsburg knew that it wasn't exactly that way, and there was a lot of resentment between Colonial Williamsburg and descendants in Williamsburg.”

The College also contributed to feelings of division in the community, because it is a major employer of Black community members but is also relatively inaccessible to them. Gordon-Weaver described it as a “catch 22”, though she had caveats.

“Those who feel that way haven't had the same experiences that I had,” she said, remarking on the summer programs for Black children to expose them to higher education and her past experiences with students. “Olivia [Blackshire], I think, worked for the Bray School lab, and I enjoyed commuting with her, walking through the historic area with her, telling stories to her, and she's like another daughter. Absolutely students are an integral part of me being involved in that.”

Janice Canaday, a descendant community member and the manager of African American community engagement at Colonial Williamsburg, said the Foundation has had a “plantation mentality”, using Black labor but not telling their stories. Weaver described the relationship between the descendant community and the Foundation as “schizophrenic”, with the stigma around colonial history creating a barrier for Black community members.

“It's not just the white folk that you get problems or weird questions from,” said Weaver. “It's also Black people, and it's Black people who live here who are like, ‘Why would you be in a slave costume, and what are you doing?’ And I have an answer: I'm teaching you, and I'm making sure you know who you are and why you are and the greatness that you have inside, because we can make a difference.”

Canaday wants to push the foundation to become more inclusive and make sure that they are telling Black peoples' stories.

“I want them to know that when they come here, there's not a space that they can walk or touch that has not already been touched by their ancestors, and that everything here is part of their legacy,” said Canaday.

Despite their past involvement with enslavement, segregation, and discrimination, the College and the Foundation are now taking steps to reconcile with the communities that they've neglected and finally tell a more complete story of American history. The Bray School is only one step in their long journey of reconciliation.

“Carly Fiorina made a remark at the opening of the Bray school, and I will never forget it,” said Gordon-Weaver. “She talked about the...trauma that affected Black folk in Williamsburg, and then she talks about the fact that that trauma didn't stop in the 18th century or in the 19th century..., because even in the 20th century, places like the Foundation dislocated and took land from Black folk who lived there, and that was the first time I heard anybody on any official level who worked for the Foundation recognize and say out loud that Black people were living on Duke of Gloucester street the entire time. It wasn't an apology, and it didn't need to be. It needed to be exactly what it was, which is telling the story. Two plus two is four no matter what, and it will always be four. And what happened happened no matter what, and you can't erase that.”