



Sections 

**The Washington Post**

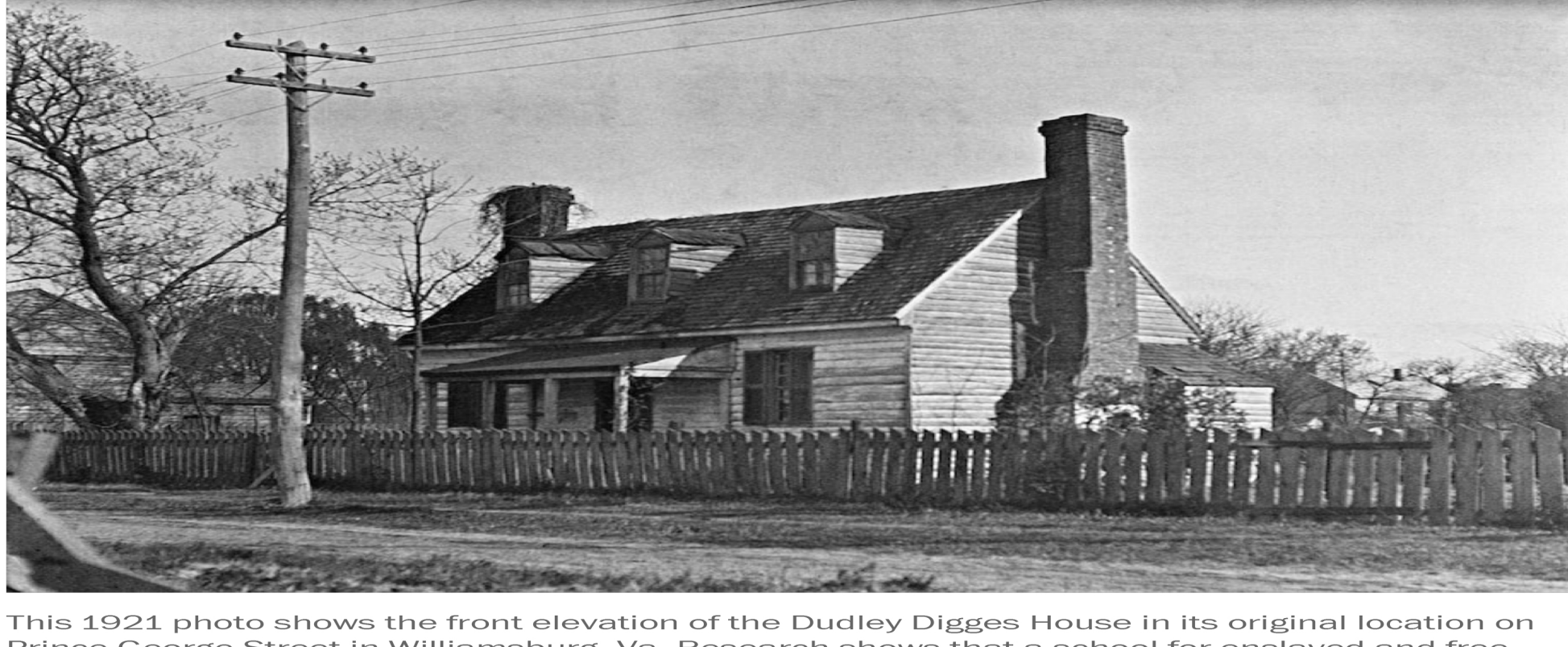
*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

**Education**

# At William & Mary, a school for free and enslaved Black children is rediscovered

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This 1921 photo shows the front elevation of the Dudley Digges House in its original location on Prince George Street in Williamsburg, Va. Research shows that a school for enslaved and free Black children operated in the building in the 18th century. (Earl Gregg Swem/2010 The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

By **Joe Heim**

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It has been more than a decade since academics and researchers began taking a closer look at a small, unremarkable old building on the campus of the College of William & Mary to see if maybe it had a more important story to tell.

Archives were scoured. Centuries-old letters and memoirs were pored over. Archaeological digs were made. Last year, a scientific analysis of the building’s original wood framing nailed down the year of its construction.

With the pieces of the puzzle in place, there was no longer doubt about the building’s identity. Underneath all the coats of paint and interior remodeling and exterior additions was the original Williamsburg Bray School, a school for enslaved and free Black children in Williamsburg that operated from 1760 to 1774. It is, according to William & Mary and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation officials, “likely the oldest extant building in the United States dedicated to the education of Black children.”

Indeed, the unassuming campus building has a much more important story to tell, a story of American education, racism, religion, persecution and perseverance. And a story of the more than 400 Black students who were taught during the school’s existence. Now, 261 years after it was built, William & Mary and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation are expected on Thursday to announce plans to bring to the fore its forgotten history and reconnect with voices that had been silenced for centuries.

“The fact that this building dedicated to the education of African-American children has made it through the last two and a half centuries is miraculous,” Ronald L. Hurst, the foundation’s vice president for historic resources, said in an interview. “And it’s an opportunity for us to talk about another whole segment of society at the time of the Revolutionary War that has been more difficult to interpret because their spaces are often not still standing.”

The Williamsburg Bray School Initiative, a joint venture of the university and foundation, will use the site as “a focal point for research, scholarship and dialogue regarding the complicated story of race, religion and education in Williamsburg and in America,” the institutions announced in a statement. Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam (D) is [scheduled to speak](#) at an event at Colonial Williamsburg commemorating the history and rediscovery of the Bray School on Thursday afternoon. A \$400,000 grant from the Gladys and Franklin Clark Foundation will help fund the project.

Work will soon begin to prepare the building, which was also once known as the Dudley Digges House, for its move to a nearby location on the Colonial Williamsburg grounds. There, preservationists will reclaim the original look and design of schoolhouse. Historians and interpreters will develop programming so that visitors will have some experience of how the school operated. Information and interactive opportunities will help them understand the school from a modern perspective. If all goes to plan, Hurst hopes that by 2024 the school will be open to Williamsburg’s visitors.

One of the challenges for presenting the school is to do it in a way that both celebrates this early example of Black education while not flinching from the reason the school was created — which was to convert African Americans to Christianity and continue to subjugate them.

“Christianizing people was used as a way of controlling them to making sure that they understood their place in society,” said Jody Lynn Allen, assistant professor of history at William & Mary and director of the school’s Lemon Project, a program named after a man who had been enslaved at the school, to research and report on William & Mary’s legacy of slavery. “The purpose of the school was a way to teach them and to establish within them an understanding of their status.”

[\[William & Mary approves design for memorial to those the school enslaved\]](#)

But education is a hard lion to tame. What students took away from their classes may have been far more than instructors intended, Allen said.

“You can’t control what they may have been reading at home,” she said. “They may have taught them to read the New Testament stories about slaves obeying their masters. But if they can learn to read, they can also read the Exodus story.”

Educating Black students at the time was considered dangerous because enslavers worried they would learn to write and forge passes that allowed them to travel freely and possibly even escape. In the 19th century, Virginia would essentially ban enslaved people from learning.

The state’s legal code stated: “That all meetings or assemblages of slaves, or free negroes or mulattoes mixing and associating with such slaves at any meeting-house or houses, &c., in the night; or at any school or schools for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered an unlawful assembly.”

Punishment for breaking that law was up to 20 lashes of a whip.



A historical marker was unveiled in 2019 at the original site of the Bray School. Pictured, left to right, are Jody Lynn Allen, director of the Lemon Project; history professor Susan Kern; Terry L. Meyers, emeritus chancellor professor of English; Mark Kostro, senior staff archaeologist for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; and William & Mary President Katherine A. Rowe. (Stephen Salpukas/William & Mary)

[\[How is slavery taught in America’s schools?\]](#)

Nicole Brown, a Colonial Williamsburg actor and scholar, has for the past four years portrayed Ann Wager, the White woman who taught at the Williamsburg Bray School for its 14-year existence. She has approached the role as a way to not simply portray how Wager would have acted as a schoolteacher, but to explain how deeply rooted notions of white superiority and colonialism fed efforts to educate Black and Native Americans in early America.

“Ann’s story is interesting, but ideally she’s a conduit to a bigger idea, which is about the relationship or intersectionality between slavery, religion and education in our country,” Brown said.

Brown expects that with the addition of the school to Colonial Williamsburg, there will be an opportunity to see the classroom in action and to have the voices and stories of its Black students take a more central role in the narrative. The evidence is overwhelming, Brown said, that even while students were being taught to follow religious doctrine and know their place, they took full advantage of their education to strengthen their situation.

“In spite of this education that she provided, time and time again we see examples in primary source documentation of students resisting that subjugation to inferiority,” Brown said. They were taking “the education Ann gave them and rising above and beyond that to use the education to make meaning in ways that neither Ann nor the school likely ever anticipated.”

[\[St. Mary’s College of Maryland unveils memorial to enslaved people on its campus\]](#)

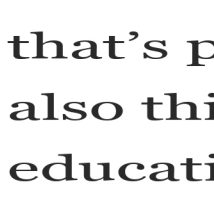
While plans go forward for programming and teaching around the Bray School, it’s noteworthy that the discovery of the original building might never have happened had it not been for Terry L. Meyers, an English professor at William & Mary who was

In the early 2000s, Meyers learned of a building in Williamsburg that in 1930 had been moved a block onto the college campus. As he explored the reasons for the move he began to discover the connections between the building and the Bray school. That sent him down a historical rabbit hole where he eventually uncovered more evidence that the building that had been moved was possibly the original schoolhouse.

Meyers consulted with architects about construction methods. He came across letters from Benjamin Franklin to the Bray Associates in England recommending Williamsburg as a site for the school. (Franklin had visited Williamsburg in 1756.) Later, Meyers found documentation mentioning Adam and Fanny, two children enslaved by William & Mary who received their education at the Bray School.

Meyers said he was delighted last year when he heard that the scientific testing had confirmed the long-forgotten structure was the Bray School. And he’s looking forward to a time when visitors can step into the refurbished building.

“I think there has always been in the Black community, just an overwhelming thirst, an interest and desire to be educated, and so that’s part of what I hope people learn when they visit,” he said. “I also think, being a teacher myself, that almost all teaching, all education is to some degree subversive. It makes people start to think; it gives them a kind of independence.”



**Joe Heim** joined The Washington Post in 1999. He is a staff writer for the Metro column. He also writes Just Asking, a weekly Q&A column in the Sunday magazine. Follow [@jheim](#)