

University Finds 18th-Century Schoolhouse Where Black Children Learned to Read

The Bray School, which taught Christianity and reading to free and enslaved Black children, was found tucked inside a campus building at William & Mary in Virginia.

By Maria Cramer

Feb. 26, 2021, 5:00 a.m. ET

For years, academics and researchers at William & Mary, a university in Virginia, had known about the Bray School, where Black children, free and enslaved, were taught to read from 1760 to 1774. But no one had ever found the school.

Until last year, that is. In June, workers tore open the walls of what had been believed to be an early-20th-century building on campus and found timber that had been harvested in 1759.

The small, four-room school had been hiding in plain sight, inside William & Mary's military science department.

"As a historian, I always believe that there is a box unopened, that there is a closet that hasn't been looked into," said Jody Lynn Allen, a history professor at William & Mary and director of the Lemon Project, which was created in 2009 to research the college's legacy of slavery. "We always are hoping for clues to find something like this."

The discovery of a 260-year-old structure with such a deep connection to a little-known chapter of the history of Colonial Williamsburg, when the population was more than 50 percent Black and teaching slaves to read was legal, is especially significant, she said.

"It's amazing," Professor Allen said. "What a find."



In 2019, a historical marker was unveiled at the original site of the Bray School. William & Mary

Gov. Ralph S. Northam of Virginia visited the school on Thursday to commemorate the discovery of the building, which was reported by The Washington Post. The college and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation plan to restore the building and relocate it near its original site on Prince George Street.

They expect to open it to the public in 2024, the 250th anniversary of the school's closure, said Ronald L. Hurst, the foundation's vice president for museums, preservation and historic resources. He led a team of researchers who investigated the building last summer.

The discovery of the building can be traced to at least 2004, when Terry L. Meyers, emeritus chancellor professor of English at the college, found a memoir by a Williamsburg resident who described an 18th-century cottage that had been relocated down the block around 1930.

When Professor Meyers went to the address he could not find a structure that old. Still, he decided to research the building and concluded that additions had been made to it and the roof had been changed.

As he kept digging, he learned of two young children, Fanny and Adam, who had been owned by the college and educated at the Bray School, which was founded by a philanthropic group that espoused the mission of Thomas Bray, an English clergyman who preached the need to educate Black slaves in Britain's North American colonies.

More clues fell into place. Professor Meyers found records of lease payments to the owner of the building, Col. Dudley Digges, by the group, called the Associates of Dr. Bray, which opened various schools around the colonies, including one in Williamsburg.

In 2013, clay marbles, slate pencils and a small piece of slate were found during an archaeological dig on Prince George Street, where Colonel Digges's building had originally been.

By 2019, academics and archaeologists knew where the school once stood, but still needed evidence that the building down the block had once housed the school.

An analysis of the building's timber framing finally corroborated Professor Meyers's long-held theory.

The school "was very cheaply and very quickly built," Mr. Hurst said. "It was not even painted on the inside."

The children, who were sent there by their owners, were taught exclusively by a white woman named Ann Wager.

She worked at the school seven days a week for 14 years, said Nicole Brown, a graduate student in the college's American studies program and an actor who has portrayed Ms. Wager for almost four years.

The children were taught Christianity and learned to read Bible stories and sermons about slaves who loved their masters — an effort to reinforce the idea that slavery was benevolent and ordained by God, Ms. Brown said. Girls were taught needlepoint.

A slave who could read might also fetch a higher price on the auction block from a shopkeeper who needed someone to keep accounts or a homeowner who wanted a cook who could read recipes.

"It doesn't seem that it was altruistic by any means," Mr. Hurst said of the school's mission.

Professor Meyers said academics and archaeologists were still debating whether the students had been taught to write. The pencils uncovered in 2013 would seem to suggest they were, but Professor Meyers said researchers had not been able to find any documents that list writing as part of the curriculum.

There is evidence to show that education inspired students to rebel against their circumstances, Ms. Brown said. Professor Allen said there were accounts suggesting that some of the students became clandestine teachers, passing on what they learned.

One student, Isaac Bee, ran away twice, Ms. Brown said.

A trustee who sent an enslaved girl to the school complained in a letter that while the girl appeared to be progressing well in her studies, she had remained stubbornly unchanged in the face of efforts "to reform her."

"She is clearly resisting," Ms. Brown said. "Education, once it is unlocked, cannot be contained. And that is a big, big part of the story of this school."

Professor Allen said the goal now is to track down the descendants of the children who learned at the school and find out as much as possible about the lives of the students. Some 400 students, ages 3 to 10, were taught at the school.

"I think we owe it to them," Professor Allen said. "And we owe it to ourselves."