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Liz Covart [\(00:00:05\)](#):

Ben Franklin's World is a production of the Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

[\(00:00:19\)](#): Hello, and welcome to Episode 331 of Ben Franklin's World, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart.

[\(00:00:36\)](#): In a town as old as Williamsburg, Virginia, which was established in 1638. It's often the case that historic buildings with interesting pasts stand unnoticed and in plain sight. Such was the case for the building that once housed Williamsburg's Bray School. The school founded by a group of Anglican clergymen with the express purpose of educating Black children in the ways of the Anglican faith. It was an education that included reading, possibly writing, and The Book of Common Prayer.

[\(00:01:05\)](#) After many years of additions, different uses, and standing in plain sight on William & Mary's university campus. One of William & Mary's English professors, Dr. Terry Meyers alerted William & Mary and its next-door neighbor, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, that he thought this old, but certainly not 18th century looking building was quite possibly the Bray School. If it was the school, then this building would be the oldest standing structure in North America that was used for the formal education of Black children in the 18th century.

[\(00:01:34\)](#) So, what has been the consequence of Dr. Meyers discovery? In honor of Juneteenth, we speak with three scholars who are deeply involved with the Bray School Initiative, a dynamic partnership between William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. These scholars, Maureen Elgersman Lee, Nicole Brown, and Ronald Hurst will take us into and through the discovery of the historic Williamsburg Bray School and what this discovery portends for our present future.

[\(00:02:00\)](#) Now, as we explore the history of the Bray School, our guests reveal information about how William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation identified the Bray School building and confirmed its age and authenticity. The history of Bray schools, the establishment of a Bray school in Williamsburg, and its work to educate scholars. And details about the plans William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation have to physically move the Bray School building, and restore it to its 18th century condition.

[\(00:02:30\)](#) But first, I hope you're ready for a meetup because our first meetup in over two years is taking place in New Orleans on Saturday, July 23rd at 4:00 PM. We'll meet up at Pat O'Brien's Courtyard Restaurant. Meetups are such a fun way for me to meet you and get to know you better. And they're fun for you because you'll have a chance to meet other listeners of this podcast. And we'll all get a chance to talk about early American history.



Now, as we'll be meeting at a restaurant, please let me know if you're coming, or you think you'll be coming so I can make a reservation. You don't have to eat if you don't want to, but it would be helpful for us to get a table where everyone can sit. So, please tell me if you're coming, or you'll think you'll be coming at benfranklinsworld.com/meetup. That's benfranklinsworld.com/meetup.

(00:03:16) Okay, are you ready to travel to Williamsburg, Virginia and meet some of my wonderful colleagues? Allow me to introduce you to our guest historians.

(00:03:39) Joining us, we have three guests. Maureen Elgersman Lee, who is the Director of the Bray School Lab at William & Mary. Ronald Hurst, the Vice President of Museums, Preservation, and Historic Resources at The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. And Nicole Brown who is a historic interpreter, American Studies graduate student, and the graduate student assistant at William & Mary's Bray School Lab. Welcome to Ben Franklin's World, Maureen, Ron, and Nicole.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([00:04:05](#)):

Thanks Liz. It's a pleasure.

Ronald Hurst ([00:04:07](#)):

Lovely to be here today.

Nicole Brown ([00:04:08](#)):

Likewise.

Liz Covart ([00:04:09](#)):

I know we don't normally do a lot of multi person interviews on this podcast, but we've come together today to discuss a really exciting and important discovery that both William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation recently made. Ron, I wonder if you could start us off by telling us about that discovery?

Ronald Hurst ([00:04:27](#)):

Well, Liz, what we've discovered is what is almost certainly the oldest standing structure in North America that was used for the formal education of Black children in the 18th century. We know of no other surviving buildings that do this kind of work, and that makes this a particularly important building.

Liz Covart ([00:04:47](#)):

Wow. And how did William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation come together to make this discovery? Is it normal for these two institutions to work together and go on the hunt for historic buildings?

Ronald Hurst ([00:05:01](#)):



Well, we've been neighbors for 96 years. And a surprising number of Colonial Williamsburg professionals are William & Mary graduates. So it's a wonderful partnership. We've never done this on a building since the 1930s, when the two organizations worked to restore the historic buildings on the college campus. So, we are very excited about the work we're doing together now for the first time in about three generations on the restoration of an historic building.

Liz Covart ([00:05:27](#)):

And what prompted this discovery? Was this a case where both William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation were like, "Well, we know we have a Bray school building somewhere here around town and we should find it," or did something else lead to the discovery of the Williamsburg Bray School building?

Ronald Hurst ([00:05:42](#)):

Well, giving due credit to our colleague, Dr. Terry Meyers, retired member of the faculty at William & Mary, he became interested in the Bray School a number of years ago. Written records told us where it was located. And we knew that there was an historic structure on that lot at the corner of Prince George and Boundary Streets in Williamsburg. We knew that structure had been used as a women's dormitory in the 1920s, and that it was moved half a block away in 1930 in order to make room for a new three-story brick dormitory. That was a very exciting discovery. And it began a lot of inquiry from a number of different quarters over a number of years. But the evidence was always inconclusive.

(00:06:25) And, in the end, until about two years ago the general thinking was that the building was probably a little too late to have been the Bray School, but our team at Colonial Williamsburg continued to look at it, and think there's something about this building that feels earlier than everybody says it is. So, we worked with the College of William & Mary to gain permission, to remove siding and plaster so that we could access the original building frame. And Katherine Rowe, the president of the university, was a wonderful partner in this activity.

(00:06:57) Long story short, we took core drillings from a number of places in the original frame, those areas where we had the last growth ring of the timber when it was cut. And through the science of dendrochronology, we were able to demonstrate that the frame in the building was cut in the fall of 1759 and the spring of 1760. We knew that the Bray School had opened on the lot where this building stood in September of 1760. Therefore, we had the Bray School.

(00:07:29) Now, dendrochronology is a science that most people haven't heard about before but, essentially, by taking core samples from multiple ancient living trees in a particular area and doing a statistical analysis of their growth from year to year, because rainfall changes year to year and trees grow more or less, if we can take timber cuts from a building like the Bray School, and get the last growth ring we can usually statistically demonstrate exactly when those timbers were cut. So at reason, it was wonderful that we found this building now instead of a generation ago, because that evidence would've been missed.

Liz Covart ([00:08:06](#)):



Now, we are talking about the oldest extant structure for the education of Black youth in the United States, and possibly in the Atlantic world. And I think it would be helpful and help us get as excited as you guys are about this discovery if we knew a bit more about the Bray schools and their mission educate Black youth.

So Maureen, would you tell us about Thomas Bray, the Bray associates, and their founding of Bray schools?

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([00:08:33](#)):

Certainly. Thomas Bray was born in the mid 1600s. He died in 1730. He was an English clergyman, and he really is important because he helped found the Church of England. And the Bray associates and the Bray schools really emanate from the history of the Church of England, the Anglican church known more informally, or more broadly.

(00:08:56) So, the associates really begin their work really in earnest actually after the death of Thomas Bray. And that is why we know them as the associates of the late Dr. Bray known more commonly as Bray associates. We tend to refer to them as the Bray associates. Their mission was to spread the gospel outside of England. They did work also inside England, but Bray was also one of the co-founders of the Society for the Propagation of the gospel in Foreign Parts. So, their mission was to spread the gospel via the Anglican church, and the tenants of the Anglican church to people in the American colonies in the diaspora.

(00:09:32) And they were really intentional about making possible the education of African descended children, primarily enslaved, but we also find from our records that free children were educated at Bray schools. And we know that race schools were established in Canada, particularly in Nova Scotia. The records also tell us about efforts in Bermuda, in The Bahamas, Barbados. So, this is really a global story. This is a diaspora story. And how religion is used as a vehicle for spreading literacy, and also for spreading the Anglican faith.

Nicole Brown ([00:10:12](#)):

Maureen, that's such a great point, especially when it comes to the Bray associates themselves. And you mentioned the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Initially they almost start off as an offshoot of that organization, which Thomas Bray also founded. But one of the reasons for them branching off of the SPG is because they were focusing exclusively on those of African, or mixed-race descent, Native and Indigenous nations as well early on, although that later disappears as we move into the mid 18th century. So, it is really a specific mission of spreading the Church of England and its gospel, and doctrines in relation to those who are of non-European descent.

(00:10:55) It's also important to note with this organization, even though it later becomes an abolitionist organization, Thomas Bray isn't founded as an abolitionist organization. It's actually a pro-slavery institution until about the early 19th century.

Liz Covart ([00:11:09](#)):

Thank you for that additional information, Nicole.



When we talk about early America, we do talk about how the French and the Spanish would send Catholic missionaries out into the interior parts of North America with the goal of converting Indigenous peoples to Catholicism and Christianity. And from the way you described it, it sounds like the Anglicans had their own movement going through these Bray schools, which seemed to have been established all over the British Atlantic world.

Nicole Brown ([00:11:35](#)):

Yeah, you're absolutely right, Liz.

We think a lot of Catholicism and missionary efforts within sort of the Catholic Christian diaspora, but it's also happening within the Protestant Christian diaspora. And it's one of the ways that the Church of England, in some ways, tries to strengthen its empire. Because the Church of England is a branch of the government, you have this idea of empire identity within the empire being able to be strengthened through religious inculcation.

(00:12:05) Now, the interesting thing both with Catholic and Protestant missionary efforts is that, inevitably, there is exchange between those who are being in the eyes of Anglo-Americans in this case Christianized. And that really comes into play with the Williamsburg Bray School and other Bray schools later on. But you're absolutely right in thinking that, as Maureen said, it's a story of diaspora. But you are seeing that kind of religious international scope amongst the Bray associates, much in the way that the Catholic Church exhibits it through countries like Spain, for example.

Liz Covart ([00:12:43](#)):

Nicole, when we met in the offices of William & Mary's Bray School Lab, you mentioned that Benjamin Franklin, of all people, may have played an important role in the establishment of this building that you found, which is the Williamsburg Bray School. So, could you tell us what the historical records actually have to say about Benjamin Franklin's involvement in the establishment of Williamsburg's school?

Nicole Brown ([00:13:05](#)):

Actually, Benjamin Franklin had quite a prolific relationship with the associates of Dr. Bray. It begins when he is visiting London in the 1750s. And, at that point in time, the Bray associates, as Maureen had mentioned, had really been around in earnest for about 25 years. But there was a great deal of... How do I describe this? Internal turmoil amongst the Bray associates. They had support through the Church of England, they had funding, but the associates couldn't agree on how to spend the money. So, they're sort of arguing back and forth for over 25 years on how to do that. Until, eventually, the secretary currently in the mid 1750s, by the name of Reverend Waring of the Bray associates thinks, "Well, maybe we should try schools for those of African descent in urban environments in colonial America." The major issue being that they had no idea where to place them.

(00:14:00) So they reached out to Benjamin Franklin and, essentially, said, "You are very charitably minded, and you are very savvy. Do you think these schools would work in North America? Where would you put them? And how much would you pay a school master to run them? And he responds in 1757 and says, "Yes,



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I think they would work because in my own experience in Philadelphia, white parents and white instructors will not allow a mixing of Black, or those of African descent students in their white classrooms. So we're gonna want to have segregated spaces." He doesn't use the word segregated, but it is implied within the document. He then, suggests Philadelphia as the first location for a Bray school, unsurprisingly, New York City, Newport, Rhode Island and Williamsburg, Virginia. Williamsburg, because he had actually just received an honorary degree from the College of William & Mary when he had been visiting. And also, was a very close associate of William Hunter, who was the Postmaster General for the Southern colonies at that time, Mr. Franklin being the Postmaster General for the Northern colonies. So it's one of the reasons that the Bray school ends up being established in Williamsburg. And actually, Mr. Franklin does come to visit it in 1763. And we know that because one of the trustees of the Williamsburg Bray School, Robert Carter Nicholas writes about it.

(00:15:22) The only last thing I would bring up is I mentioned that the Bray associates asked Mr. Franklin how much they should pay a school master. And he actually responded. And I think this is important when we're talking about education for young children in early America, he responds and in effect says, if you're going to have two schools, one for children under the age of 10, and one just for boys over the age of 10, then that second school could have a school master. But you really need women, white English women specifically, or Anglo-American women to run Bray schools if what you're thinking is going to be children attending under the age of 10, which is what ended up happening pre-American revolution. So the Williamsburg Bray School, as all other Bray schools in British North America, had white Anglo-American women running them.

Liz Covart ([00:16:12](#)):

One interesting point I heard Maureen make about the Bray schools is that they had this mission to teach apparently very young children, kids under the age of 10. They had this mission to teach these kids the Bible, and the Anglican faith. So, the Bray schools taught these children how to read, and possibly even how to write. And when you think about this, this is a really interesting idea in Colonial Virginia, given that Virginia would pass laws to limit, and outlaw opportunities for enslaved people to learn how to read and write.

So, Maureen, could you tell us a bit more about the Bray school's mission to improve and teach literacy in Black youth, and what that was like in Colonial Virginia?

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([00:16:52](#)):

If we look at how the Bray associates worked, they were very systematic in their approach to education. And one of the hallmarks of their work was using books. So, they would send shipments of books in the efforts to establish and maintain Bray schools. So, that gives us a number of things. It gives us a record of the materials that were used, and it allows us to really delve in and think about how these documents were used, how they might have been used by a school mistress in this case, Ann Wager at the Williamsburg Bray School. It allows us to think about the intentionality of the Bray associates in using different texts. The Book of Common Prayer was perhaps the centerpiece of the Bray school instructional treasure trove, and readers, and things of that nature.



(00:17:48) So, we get an interesting look at the material culture of the Bray associates and therefore, the Bray schools, ways to investigate how teaching may have taken place in these schools. So, looking at educational strategies and educational instructional ways. It also lets us think about how this teaching, and how this instruction expanded the world for these children who were as young as 3, and as old as 10, based on the surviving known lists for the Bray schools.

(00:18:22) It's incredibly important to think about these documents in a number of ways. And one of the central ways is how did these documents serve as tools to expand the children's sense of themselves, their ability to navigate the world as readers? The writing debate is still very much alive and well. But even beyond the issue of writing, just the ability to read, and to understand, and what that did to expand their sense of the world, their sense of themselves. And as we get closer and closer to the American Revolution itself, maybe to expand their sense of where they may be in this new republic that is going to be born. That takes place after the Bray school closes, of course, but the seeds planted during their time at the Bray School, certainly, grew and took root, and would continue to manifest after the Bray school closes.

Nicole Brown ([00:19:15](#)):

Maureen, that's a great point. And I think to that, it speaks so much to what actually happened at the Williamsburg Bray School versus why those who are of Anglo-American descent might have sent a student, and the reality versus expectations.

(00:19:32) So when you're looking at these schools, there are a couple of different ways to look at why an enslaved, or free Black child might attend. And one of those ways is to look at this idea of identity. Certainly, the students are building their own identity within the framework of their education. But from the mind of the Church of England, which is pro-slavery at this point, and they're very explicit about that, the ideas that they can expand their empire, they can expand the identity of people's place within that empire, which is very hierarchical, by inculcating children very early on to the expectations of that hierarchy. And so, in some ways, the Church of England and the Bray associates are promoting instruction for those of non-European descent because they want them to conform to their form of understanding of identity.

(00:20:24) Then, we can also look at it from the sense of value, as Maureen and I have talked about quite extensively. When you look at the Williamsburg Bray School, and also compare it to the four... And I would say, we can even include Fredericksburg, Virginia in this. The five other main Bray schools, all of them are in cities where a certain kind of literacy is expected. You're going to be having enslaved men and women, and enslaved children working in households for the upper echelon elite of early America, who are expected to know how to read, and how to write, and do all kinds of skills in relation to that in an urban environment.

(00:21:06) And so, in the mind of an enslaver, and this is actually mentioned in some of the original documents in the Williamsburg Bray School and beyond the idea, was that you could increase property value. Now, obviously, these children are human beings, but they're being identified as property in early America in the 18th century. So, those are two of the major motivations from the Church of England and from enslavers. But, as Maureen brings up, this school really creates this opportunity for seeds of growth within these students that later leads to a reckoning in the democratic republic, I would argue. Because what you see is the Church of England, the Bray associates, institutions that fund similar schools saying, "Oh, wonderful,



we'll fund these schools for Black children. And they'll repeat what they're told. And it will establish this sense of a British identity."

(00:22:00) And then, the American Revolution happens, which is a revolution, not only of politics, but also religion. And all of a sudden these students that were taught in the 1760s and 1770s, with the crumbling of the established church, can become Baptist, or Methodist, or Lutheran openly, at least more excessively than in Colonial Virginia. And this creates a reckoning in the antebellum south where, when you look at the legislation especially in Virginia, reading and writing are not officially banned until June of 1831, which is just two months before Nat Turner's rebellion in which a man named Nat Turner in South Hampton, Virginia saw through his reading and his writing him called by God to rise up against the enslavers of that community. And so it's interesting, as Maureen brings up, these seeds that are brought forward with these students, the expectation for how those seeds will grow versus how they grow, and move and shape into our early American world are very, very different, and creates quite a bit of conflict.

Liz Covart (00:23:07):

I'd like for us to explore how the Bray schools expanded the worlds of the scholars who attended, and what a typical school day was like for the scholars.

(00:23:17) But before we dive into these aspects of the school's history, Ron, would you tell us about the physical schoolhouse of the Williamsburg Bray School? If we had the opportunity to see and tour this building, what would we see inside of this building? And how was this building laid out for a typical school day?

Ronald Hurst (00:23:37):

Well, Liz, it was almost certainly built as a rental domestic building, not intended to be a school. It's a typical Eastern Virginia plan with a center hallway, and a room on either side, a story and a half tall. So, entering the Bray school in the 18th century, you would've been forgiven for mistaking it as an average household for a person of modest income.

(00:24:00) Now, when we look at the building today, it's dramatically larger than it was originally. But the modest scale of the building is in stark contrast to the numbers of students that we know were in the building, and on the property on a daily basis. And when you combine that with the fact that the school mistress, Ann Wager, was also living in the building, it's a very interesting picture. And one we're still trying to understand by studying the structure, and the archeological remains on the site.

Liz Covart (00:24:27):

Okay, let's explore a typical day at the Williamsburg Bray School. So, I think it makes sense to take this in two parts. A typical day for the students and a typical day for the school mistress, Ann Wager.

Maureen, would you start by telling us what we know about the students, and their experiences at the Williamsburg Bray School?



Maureen Elgersman Lee ([00:24:47](#)):

Well, we know a few things and the research is ongoing, but we can certainly talk about things that we know. One is the issue of space. So, the building itself measured 17 by 33 feet. And we know that the first class of students entering on September 29th, 1760 numbered 24. So, we had Ann Wager as well as teacher. So, we have this space, so we're thinking about how children are moving about in the space, the guidelines, and the information that we know from documents tell us that school began at 6:00 AM in the summer, and 7:00 AM in the winter. The students were drawn from Colonial Williamsburg, as we understand the footprint of it to be. So, they came from Duke of Gloucester Street, for example, and adjacent streets, kind of running off of Duke of Gloucester. There were free children who also attended from further away. So, students had to travel to get to the school on foot.

(00:25:49) We have questions about how they maneuvered. Did they maneuver as a group? We have a school list for 1762, which is the only list that provides the ages of the students. And that's where we get the 3 to 10 year old range. But if we can generalize that list to 1760, and then beyond through the rest of the time period, we know that some of these children were quite young, and on their own would not be able to navigate their way from their domicile to the school. So, who was walking them to school? Who was carrying them to school? Were they transported somehow? So questions, even among the information that we have.

(00:26:28) One thing I want to talk about, and I know Nicole's going to supplement this extensively, but I wanted to just bring up the fact that when the students crossed the threshold, we know that their experience changed in some dynamic because of fact that the documents tell us that the students, and the children that they were became scholars. When they crossed that threshold and they moved into that school space and that time allotted to work in that space and in the yard, because we know that there was movement and use of the outside space as well as the interior space, they became scholars. So, their identity took on a new layer.

(00:27:09) So, if we are looking at these documents and reading them, and the trustees, and the Bray associates are referring to these children as scholars, then how did that identity manifest in that space? How did that inform how they were instructed, how they were referred to? So, this is where we also kind of stir the historical imagination to think about that space based on the evidence, and the documents that we have.

Nicole's a tour de force. And she has been dedicating so much intellectual energy, and historical imagination to the Bray school. So, I really want to hand this off to her and give it its justice in that respect.

Nicole Brown ([00:27:49](#)):

Thank you, Maureen.

It's really a great pleasure and honor to work at the lab, and also work at Colonial Williamsburg. They're very different roles. So I actually portray Ann Wager, who was the teacher of the Williamsburg Bray School for The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. And then, pairing that with my research I've done before and now working at the lab, I think when we're talking about a day in the life of the students and the teacher the first thing that should really come to mind is organized chaos.

(00:28:20) So, you have this tiny space, you've got two rooms above stairs for Mrs. Wager. Probably used privately. Children may have had access to them, we don't know. But mostly used for her living space and



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then two rooms below stairs with a hallway. And when I say hallway, I should be very clear. That's utilized as a living space in the 18th century. It's not just how we think of a hallway today. But you have 17 by 33 feet.

(00:28:50) Imagine you're in Williamsburg, if you haven't been here before in August. And the real feel is 104 degrees with 95% humidity. And it's hot and it's sticky. It's still hot and sticky come September when the students actually start attending the Bray School, mostly students start in September near Michaelmas, which it falls on September 29th. It's a religious holiday in the Church of England. So, you have in the first year, 24 children, but by the end of the tenure of the Bray school, you have about 30 children in this kind of space with the teacher. It's hot, it's sticky. You have three year olds who interact how three year olds interact with the world. They put their hands on everything. They have questions and they question the world differently than a 10 year old who still questions as well.

(00:29:41) So, you have this mix of students in this hot, sticky, small room that you may need to go outside, and then teach in. That is a form of organized chaos. And sure, Ann Wager, the teacher is likely getting up at half past four in the morning to get ready for classes to start at six. Certainly, she has enslaved labor on the property. To my knowledge, she didn't own any enslaved individuals, which means she likely was renting enslaved individuals, which was very common in Colonial Virginia and Colonial Williamsburg at this point in time.

(00:30:14) So, you have this teacher who's in this active space at 4:30 in the morning. It becomes even more active by 6. How is she teaching in this space that's hot, and sticky? Or, in the case of the winter, cold and frigid? We still don't have all the answers to that. But what I will say is it seems very likely, from the research I've done on early colonial education and Black education, that she's dividing those children up into different groups to do different things.

(00:30:42) We know from the rules of the school that she's expected to teach sewing and marking. It's a form of detailed, very detailed, handy work, needlework to the girls. She's expected to teach lessons in etiquette to all of the children. And according to the rules for Mrs. Wager, because they have a very explicit set of rules that she is to follow that were published in 1762, she is to, "discourage idleness" and "suppress the beginnings of vice, putting them often in mind and obliging them to get by heart such parts of the Holy Scripture, where servants are commanded to be faithful and obedient to their masters." So, she's supposed to be teaching from The Book of Common Prayer, from a spelling book she used is called Dixon's English Instructor from Thomas Bacon's sermons to slaves and slave owners. These are texts that are very common for the Bray associates to send.

(00:31:40) But, again, when you have a classroom of 3 to 10 year olds, and it's hot or very cold, and you're starting at 6:00 AM with the energy of... I'm sure you can all visualize the energy that a six year old has at 6:00 AM, it's organized chaos I would imagine. And I think the reason it's important to identify that is it really shows how much different ideas, different stages of development and learning, different types of questions based on background and identity would be coming into conflict on a regular basis in this building. It's a very active space that you see almost a fermentation of ideologies, religious ideologies that have to be bubbling up. So, that's how I would describe a typical day.

Liz Covart ([00:32:29](#)):



You mentioned, Nicole, that these scholars, if they were female, they would've learned some sort of needlework, marking, and perhaps even how to mend clothing, as they'd likely be spending their adult lives working as domestic ladies maids, or something in that line of work. And you also noted that all of the students would've been taught proper etiquette, which if you think about it is really crucial for any enslaved person who will work inside their enslavers homes. So, I think we can really see the point that both you and Maureen were making earlier that this Bray school is providing a very pro-slavery type of education.

(00:33:03) And just so we can better understand that, I wonder if you could tell us how this educational experience of Bray school scholars, what have differed from the educational experience of Williamsburg's white students?

Nicole Brown (00:33:16):

That's a great question. And we know that there are several different forms of either schools, or schooling that white children can achieve in Colonial Virginia. And, certainly, in Williamsburg. You have apprenticeship to trades. You do see those who are Black and white participating in these apprenticeships. But, make no mistake, they are usually legally binding contracts in a county court where you are expected to learn very detailed work in addition to the trade. And very often, for many apprenticeship contracts, they require that the tradesman, who is teaching the apprentice child, teach them the 10 commandments, the Lord's prayer, and the Apostles' Creed.

(00:33:58) But in addition to that, when it comes to formal schools, you have the Matthew Whaley School in which the vestry, it's a group of 12 gentlemen who help preside and run a local Church of England parish alongside their rector. The vestry are actually managing this Matthew Whaley School, which was meant for middling sort. When I say middling sorts, an 18th century term for what we would define maybe as middle class, white children. And then you have the grammar school at the College of William & Mary, which is meant for very elite white children, and also specifically boys exclusively at William & Mary.

(00:34:32) So, there are lots of different ways in which a white child can have similar instruction to a Black child. But because of the hierarchical nature of the Church of England, many of the texts at either one of these schools, great example actually is Dixon's English Instructor, that spelling book, I just mentioned, it was funded by the SPG to be published and the SPCK, which is the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, for white charity schools in England. So, why are they sending it to a school for Black children? Because the ideology behind religious instruction within the Church of England is, we can give you the same books, but it's up to the teacher and to the community at large to then curate how that texts fit into the racialized, and class-based nature of the society that you live in.

(00:35:26) So, what I often talk about with guests, or within my own scholarship is you can send the same book to different groups of children, but how the society is structured. And, in this case in Virginia, it's a slave society. How that manifests in that child's life can be very, very different, and is very, very different. But I also think this speaks to how children interpret texts versus how the adults who curate the texts for them interpret those documents. And there are several examples, wonderful examples of Bray school students who make meaning because of, and despite of the instruction they receive, and find various ways to implement their agency, or to resist the instruction outright themselves.



Liz Covart ([00:36:14](#)):

We've discussed what it would be like for a scholar to attend the Williamsburg Bray School. And we've discussed the building, its small size and the challenges that would've posed in the heat of summer, and in the cold of winter. We've also discussed how the Bray school was part of an international or interim imperial phenomenon in that the Bray associates were really placing schools like the Williamsburg Bray School all over the British Atlantic world.

(00:36:37) And now, I'd love for us to investigate another aspect of the Williamsburg Bray School, which is how we know what we know about this school and perhaps even about Bray schools in general.

So, Maureen, you mentioned earlier that we have a 1762 school list for the Williamsburg Bray School, and that this list contains the names of students and their ages. And I wonder if you could tell us more about William & Mary's Bray School Lab, and all the work that it does to uncover and the history of the Williamsburg Bray School?

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([00:37:09](#)):

Absolutely. Thank you.

The Bray School Lab is part of the broader Williamsburg Bray School Initiative. So, it is part of the partnership that we have with Colonial Williamsburg. We've come to talk about our relationship as stories and structure. So, if we think about the William & Mary side with the William & Mary Bray School Lab, we are really working on understanding the history of the Bray school as deeply and as broadly as we can. And much of that comes through, of course as you imagine, surviving documents. Central to that research, and central in those surviving documents are the student lists. The student list is really the heart and soul of the research for a number of reasons, because they are so critical in helping us understand who attended the Bray school. That is just tantamount to the work that we're doing. And that we'll continue do for a long time to come. So, let's start there.

(00:38:07) So, if we look at the lists, we have the 1762 list, we have the 1765 list, and the 1769 list. Collectively very important, and then distinctive in and of themselves for different reasons. The 1762 list is the only of the three lists to identify the students by name, but also to give their ages. And, again, that spectrum of ages from 3 to 10 years old. The 1765 and the 1769 lists do not list the students' ages. So, everything that we are saying, we say with understanding that we're generalizing from the 1762 list to 1760 and 1761, and then forward through 1774, the final year of the Bray School in Williamsburg. It lets us examine the breakdown by age, by gender. We know which enslavers are sending children, and how many from within their household at a given time. We look for continuity of which there is some, but not extensive continuity between lists. And even in that... So when I'm talking about continuity, I mean, particularly the 1765 and 1769 lists, we see some students on the 1765 list, and we see those names recurring on the 1769 list.

(00:39:34) One of the problems is we don't know exactly what we're looking at in the sense that because we don't have lists for the intervening years, we can't say with 100% certainty that this represented uninterrupted attendance. We know through the correspondence of the trustees, particularly Robert Carter Nicholas, that students were urged, or really enslavers were urged to send students for extended period of time. This was



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not to be a drop in, dropout type of arrangement. That the attendance by the students was to be consistent, and sustained over time. He encouraged, and this was part of the larger rubric of the Bray associates, that students should attend the school for at least three years. And we see these names in '65 and then '69 again. So, that's meeting and exceeding that three year minimum. But we don't know what's happening in those intervening years. So, is this truly uninterrupted attendance. Or if, and perhaps when, and we're hoping, we find other information about those intervening years, we can fill in those gaps more.

(00:40:40) The student lists also tell us that free children attended. So, we know that children from the Ashby families and the Jones families attended. And that also helps us with descendant research, which we'll talk about as well. So, there's a lot to learn from the student lists. They are the heart and soul of really the research. They are the heart and soul, very much of the lab research.

(00:41:03) If I can back up a little bit and contextualize those lists a bit, we have a number of ongoing projects. One is the Bray School Records Project. And that is to examine the known records of the Bray school and to search very diligently for evidence and knowledge, pursue that knowledge about the Bray school and other collections that are not labeled Bray explicitly. So, the papers of other individuals who sent children to the Bray school. But also to look at records and understanding and knowledge that exists outside the traditional archive in family histories. What has been the oral history of the Bray school in those descendant community families and tapping those as well. And then ultimately, in some way, we will have to tap into those historical imaginings as well to do the best that we can with those gaps with all the information that we have.

(00:42:02) The Student History Project is really focusing on those student lists, and really mining them to ultimately have a number of things. A complete understanding of the students as scholars and as children, as people first and foremost. To understand what that education meant to them in their lifetimes. And also, to understand what has been the ancestral history and heritage perhaps of the Bray school. How can we trace Bray school students to present communities both here in Williamsburg but also, as we know people move, really around the country, and perhaps even around the world?

(00:42:39) We have some other projects around an annotated bibliography. We have partnerships that are growing almost on a weekly basis. We are partnering with students in the School of Business around marketing and thinking about how to brand and be strategic about presenting the message of the Bray school. We are actively working with students in the lab. And, again, all credit to Nicole for just being just an incredible professional, who is both passionate, and absolutely rigorous in the work. So, she's leading students on a weekly basis working on these projects. And, again, the partnerships are growing both inside the lab, and outside the lab as well. And I know that Nicole's gonna want to add to that.

Nicole Brown ([00:43:24](#)):

Yeah. When you look at the records of the Bray associates, we have a real wealth of documents to start with, which is interesting when you consider the fact that not a lot of scholarship, at least published academic scholarship, has been done on the Bray associates. Some of it has been done and it's wonderful, but there isn't as much out there as I would like. So, part of that stems from getting access to where the documents come from so all the documents for the Bray associates are housed at the University of Oxford. And that includes minute meetings, book catalogs, the student lists, Maureen mentioned, much, much, much more. In fact,



really in post-World War II, when the British empire starts to lose some of its potency internationally, the Bray associates push much harder their second Branch, which is sending libraries to Welsh schools.

(00:44:20) So, the Bray associates, their documents exist between 1699 and 1974. It's quite extensive. So, that is one place where the documents live. But, as Maureen said, reaching out, and working with descendant communities is another really, really important way, moving forward, that we're going to learn more about the Bray school, its students.

(00:44:41) And then Ron, obviously, I would love to pass it off to you in talking about preservation, building preservation. This is an interdisciplinary approach. We know a lot from the records, from how you might traditionally think of an archive, letters, minute meetings, et cetera. But there's so much more than that when it comes to understanding truly the full complex picture of the Williamsburg Bray School within the archive.

Ronald Hurst ([00:45:05](#)):

Well, that's a good point, Nicole. It's not readily recognized by people in the 21st century, but buildings from the past have forensic evidence embedded in them. We see patterns of wear. We see how things were attached to structures. We can tell what's going on by how work is done on the structure over time. And it's really a good thing, in some ways, that this building wasn't discovered until two years ago because I think if this examination and restoration had happened a generation back, we would've missed an awful lot of the evidence that's there today.

(00:45:37) Science really allows us to dive deeply into these buildings. So, we're in the process now of peeling back layer additions to the Bray school building. And we still don't know what we're going to find out when we're done. But day by day, more and more evidence comes forward. It's quite possible that we'll find wear patterns on floors, on woodwork, and other elements that will tell us a little about how the students we're interacting with each other, what kinds of activities were going on in the building from day-to-day. And even how Mrs. Wager lived in the building, and how she interacted on a domestic basis with her scholars. There's much more to be learned. And archeology plays a big role as well.

(00:46:18) We know that people's activities in the past leave things in the ground. And by just understanding what's there, recording the contexts in which they're deposited we can often figure out what's happening around a building. We are hoping to go back to this original site of the Bray school for more archeology this spring because, as Nicole suggested earlier, there is certainly teaching going on outside the building when it's hot. No one in their right mind would've stayed inside when there was outdoor air to be gained. And so, we already know, from archeology done earlier, that there are more slate pencil fragments recovered at this one site than there have been in the rest of the historic town together over the last 90 years. So, certainly, there's much more to be learned. And we're really excited about what's coming forward. It's really a day by day discovery process.

Liz Covart ([00:47:09](#)):

Speaking of forensic evidence, could you tell us a bit more about this type of historical evidence, Ron? We know we know about the Bray school and its students because there are documents in the archives and, perhaps, silences in the archives are in the information not mentioned in our written documents. But all this



information relates to written records. But in the case of the Williamsburg Bray School, we also have the largest extant piece of evidence about this school, which is in the physical school building itself.

So, Ron, how do you go about researching, and reading the history of a building, especially a building that has been used for many purposes, over the last 200 plus years?

Ronald Hurst ([00:47:49](#)):

Well, that's a great question. As a colleague Mark Wenger, an architectural historian, once said "old buildings give up their secrets slowly." So, we're going slowly because we don't want to miss anything. But, over a period of decades here at Colonial Williamsburg, we've learned how to approach these kinds of situations. We know, for example, that in the past, there was no landfill. So, when a building was altered over time, there was no place to haul the debris away. So, what do you do with it instead? Oh, you repurpose it in some other place.

(00:48:20) The building that is now understood to be the Bray school has been extensively added to in the early 20th century. And as we are peeling those 20th century wings back, we're finding multiple, I mean, dozens of pieces of the 1760 school's fabric having been reused in the new wings. And those are giving us evidence of wear patterns, paint colors, levels of ornamentation in rooms, all kinds of things that we're gradually putting together in a massive database. And we still don't have a clear picture of how much we're going to be able to find in the end.

(00:48:55) And one of my particular favorites, especially when I'm talking to school groups, is the whole subject of rats' nests. Rats were gatherers of bits and pieces. They rarely went more than about 100 feet from their nest, and they took everything that they could find. We're not exactly sure why. But we've already found two rats' nests in the Bray School building. And they contain scores of bits and pieces of cloth, paper, metal work. And so, we're working our way through those right now.

(00:49:25) And to your point, Liz, many people used this building over two centuries. We're finding evidence of all those occupations right up until the building's use as a women's dormitory in the 1970s. My favorite 20th century artifact so far is a 1937 William & Mary football game ticket that came from under the floorboards. So, the critically important part of the history of this building is its use as the Bray school. But, as we go forward, we want to record everything that we can about how it was used for two and a half centuries, because we don't know what questions future scholars will want to ask of the building. And we want to be sure we're saving every bit of information there is so that archive will be there.

Liz Covart ([00:50:08](#)):

Now, as part of their joint effort to preserve research and interpret the Williamsburg Bray School and its scholars, William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation are moving the Bray school from its location on William & Mary's campus to Colonial Williamsburg's Living History Museum, or what is known in town as the historic area of Colonial Williamsburg. Why is this building moving? And what goes into moving a historic building? We'll dive into this story just after we take a moment to appreciate our episode sponsor.



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(00:52:24) So William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation are moving the Bray school from its location on William & Mary's campus to Colonial Williamsburg's Living History Museum.

Ron, would you tell us about this move, and why William & Mary, and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation are moving this historic structure?

Ronald Hurst ([00:52:42](#)):

It's just a wonderful happenstance that the building has survived. And now we, as a community of scholars, have the opportunity to use it as a tool for educating the public about what happened in the past, and what that means today. Where the building is currently located the public would not find it. It is surrounded by sorority houses, and restaurants, and it's well off the beaten path for the visiting public. So, because we can't put the building back where it originally sat, there is an inconveniently located dormitory on that spot, we looked at the historic area and determined that it would be best to find a lot that was similar in nature to the original location. Just like cities today, Williamsburg in the 18th century had a variety of neighborhoods, commercial, gentry, hospitality driven, and so forth.

(00:53:34) In the 18th century, the building where the Bray school operated sat across the street from a lumber yard. It was not a posh neighborhood. So, we have found another spot on Francis Street that was a similar back street environment in the 18th century. It also has the great advantage of being very prominently



located for today's visitors. And so, as visitors arrive to Colonial Williamsburg, in years to come, it will be one of the first things they see. And we're very happy about that. And, in fact, I can tell you that while many of the experiences at Colonial Williamsburg are ticketed, this one will be open free to the public. And that will allow us to make the maximum use of its educational potential going forward.

(00:54:18) The business of moving the structure is a whole nother science, and we're so happy that the building survives with one of its original 1760 brick chimneys. But that makes the move all the more complicated. We are presently dismantling all the 20th century additions. And we'll begin this summer to stabilize the original 18th century frame and the chimney. We are in fact, at this moment, determining whether we will reconstruct the roof as it was in the 18th century where it sits now, or whether we'll wait 'til we get to the new spot.

(00:54:52) But in any case, once everything has been stabilized, the building will be slowly, carefully elevated on a series of jacks until it's high enough for us to slip steel beams underneath the frame. And then, it will be further elevated so that it will slide onto a flatbed truck, and will make its three block journey to its new location, where we will already have constructed an 18th century style cellar and foundation on which to place it. At that point, we will complete the restoration of the building's exterior and interior, and work closely with our partners, both at William & Mary and at the foundation, to develop an interpreter program for the public.

Nicole Brown ([00:55:32](#)):

I will add to that Ron, 'cause it is such an exciting opportunity to have this building moved to a more prominent location. And especially when we're talking about it being a community space, a space that is free to the public. The descendant community is certainly part of that. And as Travis House and the Bray School Lab, our offices are housed at Travis House, which will actually be very close to the new location for the Bray school building. But as we are continuing either to identify members of the descendant community, or they are self-identifying, having that building in a prominent space that they can visit, where they feel welcomed, where they feel that not only they know it's part of their story, but that they have access to part of their story is so, so important. And so, the moving of the building really helps with that in a very profoundly exciting way.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([00:56:24](#)):

I don't know about you, but this gives me goosebumps. Ron, when you talk about that moving day, and I'm not one who likes to move, so I'm glad you guys are doing the heavy lifting on this, but I just get shivers of anticipation. And just how monumental a day that will be. And when we get to the point where, in 2024, we are marking the 250th anniversary of the closing of the Bray school as an entree point to talking about the history of the Bray School in Williamsburg and other Bray schools, the closing is precipitated by the passing of Ann Wager. So, there's another marker within that history, I can't wait. I can't wait for that. I'm just sitting here like, can we get to it already?

(00:57:06) But if we think about what that will mean, just the opportunity Colonial Williamsburg, world class, world renowned Living History Museum inviting the world to see, and experience, and know the Bray school in a material way. We at the lab are dealing with documents, so the correspondence of the trustees, the



minute meetings, the student lists and the way they speak to each other. And the way also that they're silent, and the engagement with the descendant community, all those different things. But to have that material building that tells the story as buildings do in ways that are different than we interpret documents is just phenomenal. So, that is going to be just an incredible moment for Williamsburg, for Colonial Williamsburg, for William & Mary, for anybody who loves, or is in any way interested in history, it's going to be phenomenal.

Ronald Hurst ([00:57:57](#)):

I agree, Maureen, it's going to be a time of celebration. And we want the world to participate with us. We want to see people lining the streets as the building moves to its new site.

And I have to say that in a career of 40 years in the museum world, this is one of the most exciting things I've been privileged to work on. Every day when we go into the building, there's something new. And it's talking to us, it's telling us its story. And we're really excited about working together with the College of William & Mary to make that story accessible to the world. There's so much important information here.

Liz Covart ([00:58:33](#)):

You know, Maureen, I didn't get goosebumps, but butterflies in my stomach as Ron is talking about moving this really important building, this Williamsburg Bray School from its original foundation to a new foundation on Francis Street.

And Ron, I don't mean these butterflies to indicate any lack of confidence in you. I know this move is in good hands. And you told us the different steps. There'll be a number of jacks that slowly and carefully lift the Bray school off its current foundations. There'll be steel beams placed under the foundation, so it can sit on the truck properly. You'll stabilize things like the chimney before the building even moves. And even as I'm recounting all of these carefully planned and, hopefully, carefully executed steps, I can't help but think that this move is going to cost a lot of money. So, Ron, can we talk numbers? How much does it cost to move an historic building?

Ronald Hurst ([00:59:25](#)):

It is not inexpensive. The costs are still being developed as we go along because the project is like an onion that you continue to peel. And as you get to new layers, you find things you didn't know about and weren't prepared for. But it is a very, very expensive undertaking. And that's why we have been so delighted to work with the university to approach the Mellon Foundation for funding this project. And the Mellon Foundation has been enormously generous through its Monuments Project to grant the two institutions jointly \$5 million, \$1 million for the Bray School Lab, and all the research around that. And \$4 million for the completion of archeology, architectural investigation and moving this giant, but incredibly fragile artifact three blocks away on a truck. We're just more grateful than I can say for that support.

Liz Covart ([01:00:22](#)):



Colonial Williamsburg is well known within professional history and outside of the profession for its trades people. Even as tourists, we know that when we visit Colonial Williamsburg, we can go into the Living History Museum and see people grading bricks, tinsmithing, blacksmithing, making furniture, making books, and all these other skills that people of the 18th century used to make the objects they needed for everyday life. And I know we mentioned this in another episode, but there are also museums, like Mount Vernon, who will send out their historic objects, like a harpsichord to Colonial Williamsburg because its artisans know how to repair, and work with these fragile and historic objects.

So, as we consider the move of the Williamsburg Bray School building to its new home on Francis Street, can we also talk about the capabilities that Colonial Williamsburg has on staff to restore this building using 18th century style production techniques?

Ronald Hurst ([01:01:18](#)):

I'd be happy to, there's an enormous behind the scenes contingent of the foundation staff that includes curators, conservators, architectural historians, archeologists, a whole array of specialists that have skill sets that are really not very commonly found together in one place anywhere else in the country. And so, they're there to do the forensic research to help us figure out exactly what is supposed to be before the public.

(01:01:47) And then, we have another team that's in front of the public. And these are historic tradesmen and women who can do anything from weave a very intricate textile to build a house in the 18th century manner. And so together, these two teams with the historians at the College of William & Mary will be able to basically bring the Bray school back to life much as it was experienced by its scholars, and its school mistress in the 1760s and '70s. I'm not sure there's anywhere else in the country where this could happen.

Liz Covart ([01:02:19](#)):

And my understanding is that the Bray school will be open while Colonial Williamsburg undertakes this restoration work. So, we could theoretically come to visit Colonial Williamsburg and see tradespeople sawing shingles, and floorboards making bricks and doing some of the work necessary to rebuild this schoolhouse.

Ronald Hurst ([01:02:36](#)):

That's exactly right. And it will be a different experience from one day to another, as we deal with things like floors, and roofs, and chimneys. And our colleagues in historic trades will be making building materials at a variety of sites around the historic area. So, you could come and spend an entire day learning about the Bray school while it's being restored.

Nicole Brown ([01:02:58](#)):

It's such a great point, Ron. And to add to that, especially when we're talking about programming, and different types of interpreters in the historic area itself, in addition to our incredible interpreters, the tradesmen and women who specialize in those 18th century crafts, we also have museum professionals, and a museum theater department. When we're talking about bringing things to life that are either developing, or have developed programming around the Bray school, and interpreting its history and its legacy through the



eyes of, in my case, the teacher but in the case of some of my colleagues, they're developing a program right now that should be available this year that focuses on a couple of students in particular who attended the Williamsburg Bray School. And that will be actually at the art museum. So you can go and see them rebuilding the building, people making bricks, sawing lumber. And then, also get a very different experience but, hopefully, one that adds to that story on the Williamsburg Bray School.

Ronald Hurst ([01:03:54](#)):

I should have said too, in following up on both Maureen and Nicole, that our intention here is to recreate the entire environment for the school. We want to have the plantings, the outbuildings, the fences, perhaps the shade structures, everything that the students experienced on a day-to-day basis because there's something very powerful in the way of learning when you can step into a space, and experience it in much the same way that people of the past did. So, all of this is coming together for this remarkable experience.

Liz Covart ([01:04:24](#)):

We've now discussed the rediscovery of the Bray school, moving this historic building so that Colonial Williamsburg can restore it to its condition 250 years ago, interpreting the physical building, its history, and the history and stories of the scholars and school teacher who made the Bray school a true schoolhouse. Plus all of the work that the researchers at William & Mary's Bray School Lab are doing to uncover this history. If we add all of these distinct elements up in our head, this is a really expensive project. So for those of us who may be thinking, "This is a wonderful discovery and story, but all it really does is tell us more about the history of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia." How do you respond to this idea, this idea that this is a really expensive project to restore a piece of local history?

Ronald Hurst ([01:05:10](#)):

I'll be glad to take a first stab at this. From my own perspective, I think the fact that these young men and women were taught to read and probably to write gave them a gift for dealing with their world that was not available to their predecessors. And literacy is such a powerful tool. You just have to know in your heart of hearts, that they shared that information with others in their family, and their community going forward. And even though teaching a person of color to read, or write became illegal in Virginia in 1831, you can't put that genie back in the bottle.

So, what I want to know is how did this generation of scholars take this gift of literacy and reshape their world, and that of their descendants to make life better? And I know Maureen, and Nicole, and others are still doing the research on that. But, to me, that's probably the most exciting thing about the whole project.

Nicole Brown ([01:06:07](#)):

I think for me, if we're talking about it being a community story, one of the areas, at least in my graduate research, that I've been specializing in is archival silence. And there are lots of different ways archival silence can manifest intentionally or unintentionally in archives. But historically, if you look at Williamsburg as a



community, the Black voices in Williamsburg have not always been highlighted in our early American history. Or, indeed, have been outright ignored. How many other communities across the country is that the case?

(01:06:36) We have the opportunity to lift up, and acknowledge that reality in Williamsburg, and share a story that is very much part still of our local Black community. There are still descendants of this Bray school who live in this area. To ask them, how do you want your story told, then, let us share that with the world. That goes from beyond community to setting an example for the rest of the country on how to handle sites like this.

The way I like to think about the Bray school is, it is a discovery, but it's also a re-discovery. It's been sitting here waiting for us in this moment in time. And we now have the resources to take something that is so, so important to the local Black communities of Williamsburg, and to make sure it's seen on a national level while respecting that legacy.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([01:07:29](#)):

And what continues to entice me about the Bray school story is the world in which the Bray school existed. The local story, the microcosm of Colonial Williamsburg when we talk about individuals living on certain streets and tied to different households. But when we think, and we broaden the scope that we're looking at, if we pull back, and stand back further, and see what's going on, if we just think about 1760, when the Bray school opens, we're still in the Seven Years' War, we've had the capitulation of Montreal in that year. So the French empire, New France is falling. And that will be essentially complete, if you would, in 1763, just the year after we have the first student list available to us, or representing that year.

(01:08:19) We carry through the history of the Bray school to 1774. We are just a few years from the Declaration of Independence. The fracturing of empire is about to take place. The world is being made, and remade over and over again. The Atlantic slave trade, the domestic trade, fall of New France, the fracturing of empire, the world is being made over and over again around the students in ways that, certainly, they would not be aware of. But in other ways that I have to believe that information trickled down to them through the households because these were wealthy, well placed, influential, powerful people who held many of the children who attended the Bray school as chattel. And then, again, opening a world of education to them through the Bray school.

(01:09:10) So, that continues to just fascinate me on a daily basis when we think about the Bray school's history. And that, ultimately, is one of the ways it is truly an American story. It is not just Williamsburg, it's not just Virginia. It's an American story. And really, again, a diaspora story. I'm really anxious to delve into the other Bray schools, and learn what we can learn about those schools in and of themselves, but also what they can reflect back about Williamsburg for us as those who love history.

Nicole Brown ([01:09:40](#)):

I will also say, Maureen just wrote a phenomenal article for Columbia Williamsburg's *Trend in Tradition*. It's Colonial Williamsburg's magazine for the spring season that talks a little bit about this. It's a great article.

Liz Covart ([01:09:52](#)):



So, what I'm hearing from all of you is that while the Williamsburg Bray School is certainly a local Williamsburg story, it's also very much a story of early America.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([01:10:01](#)):

Absolutely.

Nicole Brown ([01:10:01](#)):

Yeah.

Ronald Hurst ([01:10:02](#)):

I think it speaks to resilience in the face of inhuman oppression.

I love one of the letters that Robert Carter Nicholas writes, where he clearly is quite surprised at how well the scholars are doing. His expectations were not high. And, as human beings will do, they surpassed what was expected of them. And this is a long story with many, many chapters, but this is one chapter in the story of resilience.

Liz Covart ([01:10:27](#)):

Now, Ron, you mentioned earlier that you'd love to see people turn out in droves to watch and cheer on as the Bray school has moved from William & Mary's campus to Colonial Williamsburg's Living History Museum. What is the timeline on this? When should we arrange to be in Williamsburg so that we can stand on Williamsburg streets, and watch this historic building move its location?

Ronald Hurst ([01:10:48](#)):

We are expecting to make this momentous move in February 2023. And it will probably be a multi-day experience because getting the building onto the truck will probably take a week. And then, the actual move itself will be dependent upon the weather. But once everything is a go, it will be a very slow, probably two to three miles an hour drive around corners under tree limbs, past buildings, and right-hand turns. So, I fully anticipate and hope that we'll have people standing all along the route, cheering as this building goes by.

And then, once we get it to its new site, the business of settling it onto its new foundation will take several days too. So, there'll be a lot to see for over a week.

Liz Covart ([01:11:35](#)):

If we can't get to Williamsburg in February 2023, Maureen, I believe you mentioned that there'll be another event for us to attend in 2024.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([01:11:43](#)):



2024 is going to be opportunity to mark the existence, the history, the legacies of the Bray school in a way that we have not been able to do before. Much of that tied to the discovery of the building. But, as historians, we love anniversaries, we love dates that we can talk about. So many years ago this day, or this year, this happened. So, 2024 has been on our radar screen at the lab since the inception of the lab. Programming is still to be determined, but we plan to celebrate to mark the history, and the legacies of the Bray school in various ways. Certainly this is, at the lab, an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the school. So our celebrations, our commemorations will be interdisciplinary as well. I've even thought about having a Bray school 5K to mark the pathways that students would've taken from their residence to get to the Bray school. So we're thinking really broadly, creatively, collaboratively about 2024, but 2024 is going to be huge.

(01:12:59) Let me also invite listeners to engage with the Bray School Lab through our blog called “A Reasonable Progress”, which we launched in February of this year. So, that's going to be a great vehicle that will lead us up to and through 2024, as we really think about the Bray school's history. And just taking different moments, taking different individuals, and really drilling down deep in these stories.

(01:13:27) And I know Ron, thank you, that the move is going to give us also topics to think about. But I'm confident that this building, which has stood this long, and has withstood so many changes in the history of this country that this building's going to be just fine. And it, as I think Nicole said, is in great hands. So 2024, mark it on your calendar. We look forward to developing a really robust year of programming. One of which will also be our Slate Seminar, which is our annual conference, celebrating, marking, questioning, imagining, and collaborating over the history of the Bray school.

(01:14:03) So, much to be determined, much to come. If listeners want to find our blog, we welcome to come to the William & Mary website, www.wm.edu, and simply put Bray school or Bray Lab, anything Bray is going to give you a list of returns on that search, and definitely reach out to us at our Bray Lab, email braylab@wm.edu.

Liz Covart ([01:14:28](#)):

I'll make it even easier, I'll place a link to both the Bray School Lab and its blog in the show notes.

The Bray School is such a wonderful project. How can we get involved with it? It sounds like we can plan a visit to Williamsburg in February 2023 and watch and cheer as the Bray school is moved to Colonial Williamsburg and that we can attend anniversary festivities in 2024. But are there other ways for us to get involved and to support this project? Ron, can we come out to Colonial Williamsburg, and help make the bricks, or saw some floorboards to help restore this building?

Nicole Brown ([01:15:00](#)):

For me, I'll speak on it if I can, on both my experience at Colonial Williamsburg, and at the lab. First thing is that we currently do have a slate of programming that either relates to Ann Wager or the Bray school, or students that is happening at the foundation. If you were to look up the Bray School Initiative on Colonial Williamsburg's webpage, not only can you learn about CW's side of the initiative, but also look at what programs I'm doing with my colleagues, mostly my African-American colleagues on the Bray school



currently. So come and engage with those programs, ask me questions. Really. I love questions, come and ask them.

(01:15:38) The other thing I will say is, on the lab side, our offices are located at Travis House which again, as I mentioned before, is going to be pretty much half a block away from where the Bray school building is going to be relocated. It's an office space, but our front door is always open. If we're there, you can come in, ask us a question, set up a meeting with us if you want. We're there to talk. And then at least, as Maureen said on the lab side, if you want to volunteer, or you have an interest in a project, or you think you might have photographs of the building, anything you can reach out to braylab@wm.edu.

Ronald Hurst ([01:16:18](#)):

And from a Colonial Williamsburg operations side, we have lots of hands-on activities, especially for families. And so, visiting our trade sites in the historic area is a good way to come and get involved. The brick making is a particularly messy undertaking, but we invite children and their parents to take off their shoes and socks, and help us to stomp the mud, and form it into bricks to be dried in the sun. So, keep your eyes open for that.

Liz Covart ([01:16:46](#)):

Wow. So, we can really come to Colonial Williamsburg and help make bricks for the Bray school. How cool is that? I was just kidding when I mentioned it, but there we go.

Now, is there anything else that we should know about the Williamsburg Bray School and the special collaboration between William & Mary and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation?

Nicole Brown ([01:17:05](#)):

I know we've mentioned it before today, but if you know yourself to be a Bray school descendant, you think you might be descended from a Bray school student, or you have questions about that process, the Bray School Lab is here to support you. We want to make sure that our resources are supporting your needs, and you can always reach out to us again at braylab@wm.edu.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([01:17:29](#)):

And I would just say that there's no way that we could do what we're doing, there's no way that we could imagine doing what we're doing, there's no way that we could begin and be in the early stages of what we're doing, imagining where we'll be in the few short years without this incredible collaboration. So, for me, it's a win-win on so many different levels, but really professional, collegial collaboration making this possible. And, of course, the support of funders, there are funders who are well known: the Andrew Mellon Foundation. There are funders who have chosen to be private, and to be anonymous, and collectively want to acknowledge them in their anonymity. We know who you are, we could not do this work without you as well.

(01:18:10) For the lab, this is a collaboration, and this is a story that we want to be known across the campus. So, all segments of the William & Mary community, students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, partners in



various ways we want you to know about the Bray school, about the lab and see yourself in some way as a partner, whether that's a donor, whether that's a student who is interested in doing research, a faculty member wanting to partner, a member of the community who's heard in family lore that there was a connection to the Bray school and you want to find out what that connection is. It's all about the partnership.

(01:18:50) I count myself so privileged to be part of this story. At this time, Ron, you talk about the timeliness of this. I count myself so incredibly fortunate to be here at this time, to be part of this story, and to be a part of this incredible effort.

Ronald Hurst ([01:19:06](#)):

I agree, Maureen. It almost feels as though the planets have aligned and it's the age of Aquarius.

And I want to echo what you said about our generous donors. They come from across the United States, not only wonderful public foundations like Mellon, but many private individuals, families, and family foundations. It is expensive to do this work, but it's so terribly important. And we could not do it without the support of those remarkable people who have given of their time, and talent to make this happen.

Liz Covart ([01:19:36](#)):

And it sounds like we can become part of this, if we're so inclined, that we can become one of these donors.

Ronald Hurst ([01:19:39](#)):

Absolutely the case, because we are still raising funds to ensure the success of the project and its perpetuation.

Liz Covart ([01:19:47](#)):

Is there a place where we can go, or visit to learn more about the Bray school and the different ways that we can get involved with this project?

Nicole Brown ([01:19:54](#)):

If you go to Colonial Williamsburg, their website, that's colonialwilliamsburg.org and you type in the Williamsburg Bray School Initiative that will not only link you, if you scroll all the way down to William & Mary's Bray School Lab, but also at the very, very bottom, there is a button you can click on to provide donations specifically for this initiative.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([01:20:19](#)):

And for the William & Mary's side, in addition, if you want to learn more about the William & Mary Bray School Lab, who's working in the lab, again, read the blog posts, see photos of what we're doing I invite you to come to the William & Mary website so www.wm.edu, if you type in Bray School Lab, or Bray Lab that will take you to that. The Bray School Lab operates within the Office of Strategic Cultural Partnership. So, you learn more about that. And that is really the bridge that connects William & Mary and Colonial



Williamsburg in the Williamsburg Bray School Initiative. And we've got a great team. We really invite people to explore, get to know us on both sides of the partnership.

Liz Covart ([01:21:03](#)):

And you'll find links to both of those pages in the show notes. Maureen Elgersman Lee, Nicole Brown, and Ronald Hurst thank you for telling us about the Williamsburg Bray School and for sharing this exciting project, and all the different ways we can get involved with it.

Maureen Elgersman Lee ([01:21:17](#)):

Thank you Liz, for having us. It's been great.

Nicole Brown ([01:21:19](#)):

Such a great opportunity, thank you.

Liz Covart ([01:21:22](#)):

The Williamsburg Bray School is the oldest standing structure in North America that was used for the formal education of Black children in the 18th century. Its re-discovery on William & Mary's campus is exciting. It is already yielding wonderful new information about Bray schools, the scholars who attended them, and what a typical school day might have been like for students and their teacher.

(01:21:41) Thanks to the research and work of the scholars in William & Mary's Bray School Lab, we now know a fair bit about Bray schools and why the Bray associates establish them. Bray schools had a religious mission. They were meant to educate Black youth in the ways of the Anglican faith. And to help them emerge from their schooling as good Anglican Protestants. This meant that Bray school educations included lessons in reading, and possibly even writing. So, as good Protestants, Black children and, later when they were adults, could read the Bible for themselves.

(01:22:12) A Bray school education also meant an education in how to be an obedient, well-behaved domestic servant, or enslaved person. As Nicole and Maureen mentioned, just like their founder of the Anglican church, Bray schools founded in the 18th century were decidedly pro-slavery institutions.

(01:22:28) Now, our investigation also brought us a closer look at how buildings serve as historical objects and sources. As Ron related, one can learn a lot about history by peeling back the layers of wallpaper, paint, and plaster of an old building. Now, admittedly, I got to see all of this firsthand. I had the very good fortune to tour the Bray school with Ron. He brought me into the building and pointed out where joists of the building frame were original to the 1760s, and where they were more modern. He also pointed out where carpet, and linoleum flooring had been removed to reveal floorboards that showed significant wear. And he highlighted where he and his Colonial Williamsburg Foundation team found the two rats' nests he so gleefully told us about. All of these finds tell Ron and the Colonial Williamsburg team of architectural historians and archeologists, how the building was used, how rooms would've been oriented. And it provides us with leads on the different types of activities that may have occurred in the building.



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(01:23:25) Honestly, it was really amazing and fun to experience all of this in person. And you can see and experience this building too after William & Mary in The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation move the Bray school from William & Mary's university campus to Colonial Williamsburg's Living History Museum. As Ron and Nicole noted, the Bray school will be open for viewing as The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation restores the building. You can also join The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation team for interpretive programs designed to discuss the restoration of the building, and convey the history and story of the Bray school, and its scholars. You can also keep tabs on the William & Mary Bray School Lab, as it conducts its research into the Bray school scholars and their descendants.

(01:24:05) I think it'll be really exciting to learn what the lab finds out, especially about the long and short-term impact of the Bray school's literacy education. Virginia passed laws against teaching Black women and men how to read and write in the early 1830s. So, figuring out how this earlier education extended beyond the 1830s is going to be really interesting. And if you think you're a Bray school scholar descendant, or you just want to get involved with this exciting project of learning and restoration, you can visit the websites of William & Mary's Bray School Lab and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Bray School Initiative to get in touch. Or, as Ron related, you can make a trip to Colonial Williamsburg and possibly help make some bricks or other materials the restoration team needs to restore the Bray school to its 18th century condition.

(01:24:51) You'll find more information about William & Mary's Bray School Lab and The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Bray School Initiative on the show notes page. I've included links to all the places that Ron, Maureen, and Nicole mentioned at benfranklinworld.com/331.

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Finally, do you know of other exciting historical discoveries that we should be exploring? Please tell me, liz@benfranklinworld.com. *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of the Omohundro Institute, and is sponsored by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.