

The Search for the first Christ Church

SUMMARY

The outcomes of multiple archaeological investigations into the location and architectural features of the first Christ Church (c. 1670) are interesting and encouraging, but limited and ambiguous. The findings, modest in their number, include floor tiles, window glass and lead and soil stains. The archaeologists (DATA Investigations) infer conclusions from the soil stains about the location of the first church that are premature and at best speculative. It is the position of the Board of Directors of the Foundation:

- that at present the location and architectural features of the first Christ Church building remain unknown;
- that except for future archaeological investigation the churchyard, as well as the areas north and south of the churchyard wall, should remain undisturbed; and,
- that at such time as the Foundation is financially able, or can attract adequate funding from donors or foundations, further archaeological investigation should be undertaken to more fully understand the history of the churchyard and to seek the location and architectural features of the first church, such investigation to include the churchyard, the area under the standing brick church, and Metz sites 6 and 7 outside the churchyard wall. (*See Note A: Location of Metz sites 6 and 7.*)

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REVIEW OF INVESTIGATIONS AND RESULTS

Determining the location of the first Christ Church and discovering evidence of its architectural features is proving elusive and as much a mystery as surrounds the first Christ Church Vestry Book.

Contemporary, documented archaeology around Christ Church dates from the formation of the Foundation in 1958. (*See Note B: Chronology of archaeology around Christ Church.*)

The 1999 archaeological evaluation (Phase I) by John Metz produced material in the east quadrant of the churchyard (site 5) interpreted at the time as possible evidence of the location of the first Christ Church. This building had been constructed by John Carter, father of Robert Carter, acting as undertaker at the contracted cost of 30,000 pounds of tobacco. The loss of the first vestry book and dearth of other written references deprives us of primary information regarding its location and architectural features. However, references in Robert Carter's diary to the brick manufacturing operation in proximity to the church and the location of the sarcophagi of Robert Carter's wives, Judith and Betty, both of which predate construction of the brick church, are construed to mean the 1670 church stood somewhere in the vicinity of its successor.

Motivated by the prevailing interpretation of the Metz churchyard findings, the notion (albeit unproven) that the sarcophagi were a kind of directional sign to locating the 1670 church and the recent success in discovering several additional brick kilns, the Foundation commissioned DATA Investigations to carry out a Phase II and then Phase III investigation of an area, largely but not entirely within the churchyard wall, east of the brick church.

Phase II “The objective of the Phase II archaeological investigation was to evaluate the research potential and subsurface integrity of the remains associated with the first church constructed in Christ Church Parish, Lancaster County, in 1670. The site was first identified and delineated during a shovel test of the Foundation for Historic Christ Church property (Metz 1999). Designated by Metz as Loci 5 of site 44LA55, the site is located within the existing churchyard wall. Details about the appearance and design of the 1670 church are unknown from the limited documentation, thus this investigation sought to identify the presence of subsurface features related to the building and their potential to shed light on the architectural nature of this early church.” (An Investigation of the 1670 Church at Historic Christ Church, Site 44LA55, Lancaster County, Virginia, Thane Harpole, *et al*, p. 3)

Phase II Results “Three units excavated outside the churchyard wall uncovered evidence of a narrow trench or ditch ... oriented north to south ... may represent a drainage/boundary ditch or possibly a sill trench associated with the 1670 church. A block of five units was excavated directly east of the Carter tombs ... there is a linear feature, oriented north to south, that contains charcoal and may be the remains of a burnt ground-laid sill.” (*ibid.*, p. 27) Based on this evidence, the authors assert in the next paragraph, “The primary goal of the test excavations, to identify surviving elements of the 1670 church, was achieved, albeit with less than ideal certainty.”

Phase III “The objective of this limited Phase III archaeological investigation was to identify the location and architectural make-up of the 1670 Christ Church. The Phase II investigation identified intact, stratified deposits contemporary with the 17th-century church along with evidence suggesting the church was situated immediately east of the standing Christ Church building and extended further east, perhaps beyond the churchyard wall.” (*ibid.*, p. 29)

Phase III Results “Phase III excavations uncovered five features that may be related to the architecture of the 1670 church ... The dates attributed to the five features are based on their stratigraphic relationship within the block excavation and the assemblage of artifacts recovered from their surface ... The five features fall into three categories: possible posthole with post mold (Feature 17), possible postholes (Features 19 and 20), and possible burnt sills or framing members (Features 15 and 18) ... The [possible burnt sills or framing members] feature was amorphous in plan, and no clear evidence of a sill timber or other framing was found, besides the charcoal and burnt wood fragments. Given the location and orientation of this feature, it may represent a shallow trench within which a sill or pier was laid, though not necessarily a consistently dug trench running along the entire façade of the church structure. It could also represent sills or other framing lying directly on the ground, or portions of the upper framing of the building that fell to the ground during demolition, and the burning and decay of these elements has resulted in the soil stain visible today ... Architectural evidence for the earlier church, particularly ceramic floor tile, appears in highest concentration immediately west of the projected church location (Figure 39) ... Concentrations of window glass and wrought nails were found across the excavation block (see Figure 39.) (*ibid.*, pp. 39 – 42)

DATA Investigations concludes “ ... there are strong indications that the 1670 church is located directly to the east of the standing circa 1735 church ...” (*ibid.*, pp. 56, 57)

What can be said with certainty. The evidence offered to support the DATA Investigations assertion is interesting, but modest at best and inconclusive. The tentative and ambiguous nature

of the cited features and evidence is demonstrated when contrasted with the representations published by Preservation Virginia concerning discovery of the second church at Jamestowne. (*See Note C: Discovery of evidence of the second Jamestowne church, c. 1608.*)

There is nothing about the Christ Church soil stains that is definitive. To characterize them as associated with the first church is speculative. Therefore, pending further investigation, the location of the first church remains unknown. The floor tile pieces, glass and lead are likely artifacts of the original church. However, they are too few and fragmentary to support conclusions regarding its architectural features.

Additional archaeological investigation should be pursued when financial resources are available. The scope of such work should be broadened to create a comprehensive understanding of the history of the churchyard, the location of the first church – should it be discovered – being subordinate to the larger context. Work done to date exposing promising features should be expanded. The pattern and chronology of burials ought to receive particular attention. An effort should be made to determine if the Carter sarcophagi are in their original location. Unexplored areas of the churchyard should be addressed. The area under the existing brick church should be investigated. Sites 6 and 7 identified in the Metz Phase I report should be investigated. These initiatives should be incorporated in the Strategic Plan.

In the meanwhile every effort must be made to assure the churchyard and Metz sites 6 and 7 remain undisturbed until architectural investigation is completed.

Note A: Location of Metz sites 6 and 7

In 1999 a Phase I archaeological evaluation of the property surrounding Christ Church was conducted by John Metz. Several sites of interest were identified. Site 6 is immediately north of the churchyard wall. Site 7 is immediately north of the cedar allée in Section II of the contemporary cemetery.

Note B: Chronology of archaeology around Christ Church.

- 1959 Excavation of the original footings of the churchyard wall (J. C. Harrington, National Park Service.)
- 1979 Chance discovery of brick kiln site during expansion of Carter Center confirmed by archaeology. (Carter Hudgins, Virginia Research Center,)
- 1999 Phase I archaeological evaluation of the property surrounding Christ Church. (John Metz)*
- 2002 Phase II investigation of brick kilns at Christ Church. (Thane Harpole, *et al*, DATA Investigations.)*
- 2005 Phase II investigation of possible location of the first Christ Church, c. 1670, Thane Harpole, *et al*, DATA Investigations.)*
- 2006 Phase III investigation of possible location of the first Christ Church, c. 1670, Thane Harpole, *et al*, DATA Investigations.)*

*Detailed reports are on file in the office of the Foundation for Historic Christ Church and can be reviewed by appointment.

Note C: Discovery of evidence of the second Jamestowne church, c. 1608.

In August 2010 Preservation Virginia announced discovery of what is believed to be evidence of the second church at Jamestowne.

“It is in length three-score foot, in breadth twenty-four, and shall have a chancel in it of cedar and a communion table of the black walnut, and all the pews of cedar, with fair broad windows to shut and open, as the weather shall occasion, of the same wood, a pulpit of the same, with a front hewn hollow, like a canoe, with two bells at the west end.” (William Strachey, secretary of the Virginia colony, described Jamestown's church as such in a letter to an acquaintance in England in 1610.)

“The postholes found this month that are possibly part of the second church struck the archaeologists as strikingly deep and unusually wide. This suggested that the posts supported a very substantial building. After the first was found, two more were found 12 feet apart in a straight line to the southwest (for a total of 24 feet, matching Strachey's width observation), similarly deep and wide. A fourth hole, found twelve feet to the northwest of the first, makes a right angle with the line formed by the first three, forming one of the building's corners. The length of the church was described as "three-score foot" or sixty feet. Did the colonists put a posthole at five regular twelve-foot intervals for a total of sixty feet? That is the hope of the *Jamestown Rediscovery* team. They have measured and placed markers where the other postholes should be if their theory were to hold true.”

Historic Jamestowne, August 2010 (http://historicjamestowne.org/the_dig/dig_2010_10_21.php)

Another posthole from James Fort's 1608 church has surfaced at the northernmost extent of the church excavation area. This new posthole is 12 feet from the previous one, continuing a spatial pattern established by the other postholes. A total of eight postholes have now been found ... So far, postholes have been turning up at neat twelve-foot intervals. The southeast of the two shorter ends consists of three postholes twelve feet apart, matching Strachey's twenty-four feet description. Neither of the two longer walls nor the shorter northwest wall has been fully discovered yet, but several postholes from the longer walls have been excavated and they are turning up at twelve-foot intervals as was the case with the latest one.

Historic Jamestowne, October 2010 (http://historicjamestowne.org/the_dig/dig_2010_08_24.php)

Elsewhere on the website are descriptions, still pictures and motion pictures of clearly discernable soil stains, cited as evidence of the suspected church and post holes and posts related to other structures in early Jamestowne.

