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September 2011 Newsletter

More than Memory: Representing an African American Neighborhood at the Ravenscroft Site

By Ywone Edwards Ingram¹

Introduction

Between 2006 and 2009, archaeologists from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and students from College of William and Mary excavated the Ravenscroft site. The site bears the name of one of its eighteenth-century owners, Thomas Ravenscroft, and is located at the northwest corner of Nicholson and Botetourt streets in a section of the Historic Area now designated Block 28.² While excavations at this site concentrated on an eighteenth-century cellar previously uncovered in 1954 and 1998, the site material assemblages also represent a twentieth-century African American neighborhood. Research focused on African Americans at the site during the eighteenth century;³ but with the abundance of artifacts from the twentieth century, scrutiny has turned towards this period of site occupation. This overview presents some of the preliminary findings uncovered in the ongoing historical studies that are integral to the archaeological investigations.

In the twentieth century, mainly in the first half, African Americans and their families lived and operated businesses on, or adjacent to, the archaeological site described above. The block boasted structures such as a large boarding house called the Crump Hotel, a barber shop, a pool room, and the Union Baptist Church. Other structures significant to life on the block included the James City County Training School (1924-1940) situated across from the site on Botetourt Street; and towards the north, the Mount Ararat Baptist Church (organized in 1882), in its same location as today at the corner of Botetourt and Franklin streets.⁴ The church moved from its location on Francis Street into this building in the early 1930s.⁵

By the 1930s, the re-birth of Williamsburg as the colonial capital of Virginia had started to erode the physical structure of the African American neighborhood, evident in changes on the

Ravenscroft block. The Williamsburg Holding Corporation of the restoration acquired and demolished buildings in the area, and the occupants were moved to other parts of Williamsburg. The process of displacing individuals and demolishing structures continued during the 1950s and impacted not only African Americans but whites as well in various sections of the area that became Colonial Williamsburg.



Photo 1. This is an aerial view of the African American neighborhood in the late 1920s, showing areas close to the Nicholson and Botetourt Streets intersection. The James City County Training School is very large building in the foreground; the two-story Crump hotel with its four chimneys is towards the west while the Union Baptist Church is across the street behind the school.

The Historical Evidence

Inquiries into archival and historical data, including oral history accounts at repositories of the Foundation and the College, have resulted in more information to help guide the Ravenscroft study and to better understand the African American community in Williamsburg during a period of upheaval and change caused, more or less, by the Restoration.⁶ Several documents, including land title and deed abstracts, interview transcripts and other recollections of Williamsburg residents, city and county directories, early twentieth-century maps, and photographs of buildings and street scenes are providing information about this section of an African American district that had featured a mixture of homes, social venues, and business

places. The conversion of this block, now known as the Ravenscroft site, into a predominantly African American neighborhood appears to have either started or accelerated in the first quarter of the twentieth century when white land owners sold lots to Williamsburg residents with surnames names like Crump, Epps, Harris, and Braxton.

Members of these African American families had lived or owned property on the nearby main street, “Gloucester Street,” now returned to its eighteenth-century name as Duke of Gloucester Street. *A Directory and Handbook of the City of Williamsburg and the County of James City, Virginia*, published in 1898,⁷ shows residents Thomas Crump as a “barber” and Peter Epps as a “cook at the Inn” on this street. Samuel Harris is listed as a “wholesale merchant” in the *Directory and* was the owner of the prominent Harris’ Cheap Store in the late nineteenth century. Both Samuel Harris and his wife, Joanna B. Harris, owned land on the Ravenscroft block perhaps as early as the late nineteenth century.⁸ Before the Restoration, many African Americans were located on streets within and nearby the now Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg. The *Directory* of 1898 also lists members of this group as barbers, carpenters, cooks, clerks, drivers, farmers, fishermen, green grocers, laborers, merchants, painters, plasterers, porters, restaurant proprietors, shoemakers, teamsters, teachers, waiters, wheelwrights, and merchants.

Preliminary historical research has provided information about both public buildings and private residences related to the twentieth-century century occupation of the Ravenscroft block by African Americans. To date, more is known about four public buildings than about other structures that once stood on the sides of the block delineated by Botetourt Street on the east and Nicholson Street on the south. The findings from historical research on the Crump Hotel, the Braxton property, a barber shop, a pool room, and the Union Baptist Church are presented below.

The Crump Hotel

The Crump Hotel is mainly associated with Harriet Crump and was likely constructed after 1905, when she and her husband Thomas Crump acquired land on the Nicholson Street side of the block and made financial arrangements for its improvement.⁹ The hotel may have functioned as a place where African Americans could stay as long-time boarders rather than as short-term residents. In a 1984 interview conducted as part of an Oral History Project for the

James City County Historical Commission, Preston Crump, the grandson of Harriet Crump, suggested that male relatives, including his grandmother's husband, E. Francis, may have shared the work of running this facility.¹⁰ Preston Crump was born in November 1910 and as a child, had lived on Nicholson Street. Based on Preston Crump's description, the hotel was a large two-story structure with eleven rooms and a front porch.

[It] had two kitchens, kitchen on one side, kitchen, a dining room, and a living room on one side of the house. And on that same side was three bedrooms upstairs, over top of there. Then on the other side was a large dining room and a kitchen, and three bedrooms upstairs on that side. It was five downstairs and six up, so that made eleven rooms.¹¹

Harriet Crump died in April 1923 leaving the property to her relatives.¹² Her will, dated February 16, 1923 and probated on April 21, 1923 states:

I give and bequeath to my dear daughter-in-law Roselia Crump my house and the lot upon which it stands, with all of my personal property, and at her death to be divided between my two grand children, Lillie M. Crump, Price, and George Crum[p] Jr. Again I bequeath to E. Francis my husband \$5.00 an expression of my love and respect I further request that my lodge the Mount Ararat No. 155 of the Independent order of Good Samaritans & daughters of Samaria shall out of the funds allowed me, under the direction of my Executors burry me.¹³

Harriet Crump was probably a member of Mount Ararat Baptist Church, based on similarity of the name of her benevolent society, Mount Ararat No. 155, and the church. At that time, the church was located on Francis Street in a building that may have also served as a school for African American children from 1883 to 1885.¹⁴ Mrs. Crump's connection to the church is further suggested from her will of 1923 in which she named Reverend L. W. Wales as her executor. According to the *Directory* of 1898, L. W. Wales, a "preacher" was living on Francis Street. This reference appears to be for Reverend L. Wales, Sr., who was born in 1860 and died in 1927. His son, L. W. Wales, Jr. was appointed as one of the appraisers of Harriet Crump's personal estate. L. W. Wales, Jr. accepted leadership of Mt. Ararat Church after his father's death, he is also identified as a negotiator for the relocation of the Church to its Franklin Street location.¹⁵ An inscription on a corner stone of the Mount Ararat Baptist Church dates the structure to 1932.

Archival documents indicate that the property was out of the Crump family's ownership for many years before Colonial Williamsburg acquired it on August 28, 1949.¹⁶ The Crump hotel building was demolished by July 1951.¹⁷

The Braxton Property

William Braxton owned property on the Ravenscroft block in the early twentieth century. On April 20, 1907, Eugene Potts conveyed land to him and the property is described as:

Fronted 50 feet on the north side of Nicholson Street, running back between parallel lines and bounded as follows: South by Nicholson Street, west by property of the grantor [Eugene Potts], east by the property of Harriet Crump, and north by the property of Joanna B. Harris.¹⁸

Mr. Braxton and Harriet Crump were neighbors, and the name Braxton is associated with the Crump family in other documents. William H. Braxton is listed as one of the witnesses to Harriet Crump's will of February 1923, and he was also named, along L.W. Wales, Jr., as an appraiser of her estate.¹⁹ In his interview, Preston Crump remembered a Mr. Braxton staying (apparently as a boarder) at the Crump residence before Braxton bought the house next door.²⁰ Mr. Crump's recollections of Mr. Braxton relate to the time when he (Preston Crump) was a "small boy" in the years following 1910. If this Mr. Braxton was the same individual as William Braxton, he may have lived with the Crump family before he moved to a house on his property on the block.

On October 6, 1932, William Braxton, "unmarried, conveyed the . . . property" he had purchased from Eugene Potts to Tempy Sparrow. The property passed into the hands of Clyde C. Hall by December 28, 1934. Clyde Hall and his wife, Beulah B. Hall, conveyed the property to Colonial Williamsburg Incorporated by a deed dated, January 23, 1950. At that time, G.T. Brooks and Charlotte S. Brooks, his wife, rescinded their interest in this property.²¹ A building on Block 28 called the Brooks-Hall property was demolished in December 1950.²²

The Barber Shop and Pool Room Buildings

A barber shop and a pool room on the Botetourt Street side of the block are linked to Peter Epps and his wife Mollie Epps. On August 6, 1927, the Eppses purchased land in this vicinity.²³ Recall that the *Directory* of 1898 listed Peter Epps, as a "cook at the Inn," on Gloucester Street. Extant buildings on Block 28 were probably converted to provide the

appropriate settings for the barber shop and pool room. A 1921 fire insurance map of Williamsburg by the Sanborn Map Company depicts two unnamed structures in this location on Botetourt Street. Another Sanborn map in 1929 shows these buildings as a “Pool Room” and a “Barber,” respectively. Supporting evidence for the re-use of one of these structures comes from a letter written in July 1933, on file at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s archive, which described the barber shop that was vacant at the time as a house that was once used for this purpose.²⁴

Both the pool room and the barber shop probably featured enormously in the social life of this African American neighborhood. Traditionally, barber shops and pool rooms were meeting places, primarily for males, where key topics on the public agenda were discussed, private information shared, and where customers relaxed and socialized. The Epps Family is also associated with the Crumps for, in his interview in 1984, Preston Crump related that Molly (Mollie) Epps was his aunt and that she had a restaurant on Gloucester Street. This would indicate that the Epps’ history of providing services to the community predates their businesses on the Ravenscroft block.

By March 1932, the Epps had sold their land. The pool room was considered an “old building” by 1933, and it was demolished in 1934.²⁵ The barber shop may have suffered the same fate during the 1930s. Today, a large headstone in the Cedar Grove Cemetery in the City of Williamsburg commemorates the Epps Family of the Ravenscroft block (Peter Epps 1864–1939 and Mollie Epps 1868–1956).

The Union Baptist Church

The Union Baptist Church was located on the northwest side of Botetourt Street at the intersection with Franklin Street. A deed dated April 21, 1905, mentions a lot within this vicinity as “contracted to be sold to Union Baptist Church.”²⁶ This suggests that the church was established at least on or prior to this date. The building was probably constructed closer to the 1905 date rather than to the time when it was recorded on a 1921 fire insurance map of Williamsburg by the Sanborn Map Company. While various African American structures were being removed from the block, activities continued at the Union Baptist Church. There are photographs of the church in the late 1950s; it was probably destroyed by the early 1960s. A

Union Baptist Church congregation now meets in the community of Highland Park, near Colonial Williamsburg.



Photo 2. The Mount Ararat Baptist Church at the corner of Franklin and Botetourt streets is an African American landmark.

Summary

The life histories of African Americans on the Ravenscroft block in the twentieth century are linked with each other and to structures that were located on the site and nearby areas. With the removal of homes, businesses, and social venues from the area, the remaining churches continued to draw members of the African American community and other groups to this area of the town for regular and special events. Two special events, the *Virginia Gazette* thought worthy to note, were the Union Baptist Church's connection with a census that was being conducted under the auspices of researchers from the College of William and Mary and a conference that was held at Mount Ararat Baptist Church. On March 16, 1948, a training meeting for the canvassers for a religious census of the African American churches of Williamsburg was held at the Union Baptist Church and another meeting was planned for March 22.²⁷

In November of the same year, the *Virginia Gazette* reported on the conference of a notable African American organization that convened at Mount Ararat Baptist Church. This meeting included public officials such as Williamsburg mayor, H.M. Stryker, superintendent of

schools J. Rawls Byrd, and Dr. Joseph E. Barrett, Director of Mental Health and Hygiene for Virginia as participants. This was a three-day meeting of the “Negro Organization Society,” a Virginia organization that was established in 1909 under the leadership of Robert R. Moton of Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) “in response to an earnest popular demand for closer attention to the needs of the race along lines of health and education, especially in the public schools and among the masses.”²⁸ The Negro Organization Society often hosted African American educator and founder of Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington, as a speaker at its annual meetings. With a theme of “Continuous Community Growth through Renewed and Cooperative Effort,” the conference drew “upwards of 2,000 delegates” and had “Historic Tours of Williamsburg and Jamestown” on its agenda.²⁹

The African American neighborhood that included the Ravenscroft site was not just a physical manifestation of structures but an intricate social network of people and social practices that extended beyond place and time. Thus, even when buildings were demolished and occupants relocated, the neighborhood as “part of a wider community” was still viable as more than memory. Archaeological and historical evidence are key elements connecting the African American community with Colonial Williamsburg.

Notes

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1. Ywone Edwards Ingram is a staff archaeologist in the Department of Architectural and Archaeological Research.
 2. See <http://research.history.org/Ravenscroft/>; Kathryn Sikes and Meredith Poole, “Ravenscroft Revisited: Considering interpretive strategies in light of architectural features and documentary evidence.” Paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Meeting, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 2008. Original article published in the *Colonial Williamsburg Interpreter*, Vol.30, NO.10 , pp.1-6; Spring 2009 and copyright ,including the images , by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. The Ravenscroft site was excavated between 2006 and 2009.
 3. Ibid.; <http://research.history.org/ravenscroft/historyJenny.cfm>
 4. Linda Rowe, “African Americans in Williamsburg, 1865-1945.” In Robert P. Maccubbin, ed., *Williamsburg, Virginia: A City Before the State 1699-1999*. Williamsburg, Va.: The City of Williamsburg distributed by the University Press of Virginia, 2000, pp. 124, 128; L. W. Wales, *Brief Autobiographical Sketch of the Life and Labors of Rev. L. W. Wales. D.D. . . . Brief*

Historic Outline of Mt. Ararat Baptist Church, Williamsburg, Virginia, Sermons, Addresses, &c. Williamsburg, Va.: n. p., 1910, p. 11.

5. Rex M. Ellis. "The African-American Community in Williamsburg, 1947-1998." In Maccubbin, ed., *Williamsburg, Virginia*, pp. 231-232; Rowe, "African Americans in Williamsburg, 1865-1945," p. 128.

6. These include the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives and Records Department (Colonial Williamsburg Archives); John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; and Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary; and the Clerk's Office, Williamsburg-James City County Courthouse.

7. *A Directory and Handbook of the City of Williamsburg and the County of James City, Virginia*. Williamsburg, Va.: Virginia Gazette, [1898], pp. 28, 30.

8. Abstract of Title by Ashton Dovell for Williamsburg Holding Corporation, March 1932/April 21, 1932, [Block 28, Epps], Colonial Williamsburg Archives; Abstract of Title by C.V. Spratley, Jr., for Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., December 7, 1948 [Block 28. No. 1, Crump Hotel], Colonial Williamsburg Archives.

9. Ibid.

10. Interview of Preston Crump by Robinette Fitzsimmons, October 20, 1984. James City County Oral History Collection, 1983-1986. Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, p. 18.

11. Ibid., pp. 18, 42.

12. Will Book 3, City of Williamsburg, Va., Williamsburg-James City County Courthouse, p.83.

13. Ibid.

14. Wales, *Brief Autobiographical Sketch*; Rowe, "African Americans in Williamsburg, 1865-1945," p. 123.

15. Ellis, "The African-American Community in Williamsburg," pp. 231-232; Ed Belvin, *Growing Up in Williamsburg: From the Depression to Pearl Harbor*. Williamsburg, Va: The Virginia Gazette, Inc., 1981, pp. 94-95; Wales, *Brief Autobiographical Sketch*, p. 2.

16. Abstract of Title, Crump Hotel.

17. Letter, Monier Williams to A. E. Kendrew, July 12, 1951, Colonial Williamsburg Archives.

18. Abstract of Title by C. V. Spratley, Jr., for Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., January 26, 1950 [Block 28, No.2, Brooks-Hall], Colonial Williamsburg Archives.

19. Will Book 3, p. 83.
20. Preston Crump interview, pp. 41-42.
21. Abstract of Title, Brooks-Hall.
22. Letter, H. O. Bebe to A. E. Kendrew, December 13, 1950, Colonial Williamsburg Archives.
23. Abstract of Title, Epps.
24. Letter, Harvey Johnson to Williamsburg Holding Corp., July 6, 1933, Colonial Williamsburg Archives.
25. Letter, R. L. Rice to V. M. Geddy, Williamsburg, Va., September 12, 1933; letter, Holland to Brown, October 30, 1934, Colonial Williamsburg Archives.
26. Abstract of Title, Epps.
27. *The Virginia Gazette*, March 19, 1948, p. 24, cols. 2 and 3.
28. *The Southern Workman*, Vol. XL (August 1911): 455; August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964, p. 123.
29. *The Virginia Gazette*, November 12, 1948, p. 22, col. 4.

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