

# Historic ST. LUKE'S

Virginia's Oldest Church

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## Unearthing Buried History: The Bridger Connection

Historic St. Luke's has embarked upon its first major archaeological research project to unearth the hidden history of its 17th-century founding – and its founder. The project focuses on Colonel Joseph Bridger, the church's principal benefactor, whose partial remains are located under the chancel of Virginia's Oldest Church.

"If you ever have the opportunity, you must find a way to let this land tell its story, because you may never get the opportunity again."

So said Douglas W. Owsley, Ph.D. and Division Head of Physical Anthropology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, on one of his several trips to Isle of Wight County to visit Whitemarsh, a farm originally owned by Colonel Joseph Bridger.

Owsley was there in connection with a major exhibition he was preparing for the Smithsonian entitled *Written in Bone*. In 2006, Owsley's team had exhumed the partial remains of Joseph Bridger from the chancel of Historic St. Luke's Church and was at the farm hoping to find the rest.

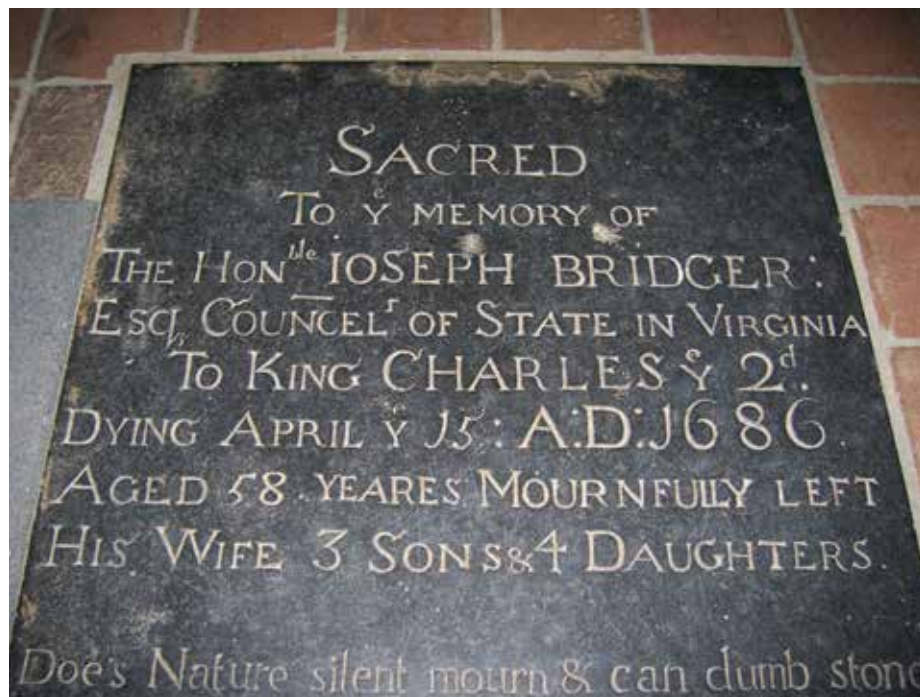
Owsley's experience told him that this farm, where Bridger had built arguably the largest home south of the James River, held answers to what life must have been like for mid-17th century colonists making the transition from high-status Englishmen to agrarian and entrepreneurial colonials.

With generous support from foundation and corporate grants, individual donors, Board Members, and members of the Bridger Family Association, Historic St. Luke Restoration is finding a way to tell this story.

The property has been acquired by descendants of Bridger and has been offered, without charge, to Historic St. Luke's Restoration for a complete archaeological study.

The artifacts recovered from this archaeological survey will become part of Historic St. Luke's collection of historical artifacts. Together they will form the basis for a future public museum, where the history of the church and benefactor may be presented to the public for the first time.

Colonel Joseph Bridger, Chief Patron of the Historic Church  
Joseph Bridger set foot on this land only about 45 years after Jamestown's settlement. Here the young English royalist grew in wealth and stature to become the largest land owner south of the James River, Co-Governor of the Virginia Colony, a member of the Virginia Council to King Charles II, and the principal benefactor for the construction and completion of what is now known as Historic St. Luke's Church, the oldest church in Virginia.



*Bridger ledger stone in the chancel of St. Luke's Church.*

Just as Jamestown has yielded vast numbers of artifacts helping archaeologists and anthropologists piece together the earliest history of communal life in the colony, so the first complete dig at Bridger's farm promises to reveal what life was like at a unique location where both farming and commerce were conducted in the shadow of a 21-room English manor house.

Parts of the foundation of the Bridger mansion still exist, along with a cemetery; they and the surrounding grounds promise to yield a treasure trove of artifacts and insight into how one of the most powerful families of 17th-century Virginia lived, prospered, and died.



*Archaeologists attribute this wine seal of the Bridger Coat of Arms to Colonel Joseph Bridger. Originally discovered at Whitemarsh, this 17th-century wine seal would have been located on the shoulder of a wine bottle to identify the owner.*

This three-year archaeological survey is being conducted by Alain Outlaw, principal archaeologist of Archaeological & Cultural Solutions, Inc. of Williamsburg. The artifacts from this historic survey will be joined with Historic St. Luke's permanent collection, to be viewed and interpreted for the general public and to present Historic St. Luke's as an ancient edifice with a national narrative and contemporary relevance.

To add to this anticipated trove will be a sizable collection of genealogical information from the Bridger Family Association.

The Bridger Family Association was formed by descendants of

Joseph Bridger to honor their "many-great-grandfather," said Jean Tomes, who has led the group since its formation in 2006.

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# A Note From The Past

In 1954, members of the restoration committee appeared on the television show “Strike It Rich” to appeal to a wide audience for donations. In response, Historic St. Luke’s received letters like this one from Mary Hunter, with 10 cents taped to her letter.

**“I’m sending 10 cents to help repair the church. My name is Mary Brinn Hunter. I am 9 years old. I live at 325 Charles St., Henderson, N.C. I go to The Church of The Holy Innocents, Henderson, N.C. I heard about the church on the T.V.”**



## *Historic* ST LUKE’S CHURCH

14477 Benn’s Church Boulevard  
Smithfield, VA 23430

*Virginia’s Oldest Church*

*Built sometime between 1632 and 1682 and once known as “Old Brick Church,” Historic St. Luke’s in is characterized as representative of Artisan Mannerism, blending many influences into a builder-focused rather than an architect-focused structure.*



Visit us between 9:30 am and 5 pm every day between February 1 and December 31.  
Learn more at [www.historicstlukes.org](http://www.historicstlukes.org), email us at [contact@historicstlukes.org](mailto:contact@historicstlukes.org) or call 757-357-3367.

## “It Takes a Village...”

We are happy to shine a spotlight on four volunteers whose gifts of time and energy contribute generously to the work of the Restoration.

**Ray Blaum** is undertaking an inventory of all gravesites in the memorial park cemetery. He is verifying ownership and computerizing information on approximately 6,000 lots and burial sites, including headstone information. It will take at least another year of concentrated effort to complete the project, he said. “It’s a labor of love.”



**Betty Delk** is exploring Historic St. Luke’s wedding records to document the history of marriages at Virginia’s Oldest Church. Her husband’s parents, Rodham and Evelyn Campbell Delk, were married at the church in 1943 and renewed their vows there in 1983. “Because of its history and spirit, I can’t imagine a more special setting for a wedding.”



**Priscilla Guthrie** is St. Luke’s volunteer researcher. Before the days of computerized records, 20th-century life was documented on onion-skin carbon copies. It’s something of a treasure hunt, she says. “Sometimes there are big rewards and sometimes no rewards,” but the discovery of a heart-warming note enclosing \$2 for the church’s restoration “truly makes the hours of reading and documenting well worthwhile and sends me home with a smile.”



**Barbara Lindley** became involved with Historic St. Luke’s when her daughter was married there in 2000. She soon became a volunteer at events, helping to decorate the church on holidays and supporting projects for which she saw a need, like new doors to the Gift Shop and new signage. “I volunteer to make a difference,” she said. “I do it from the heart.”

