

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.

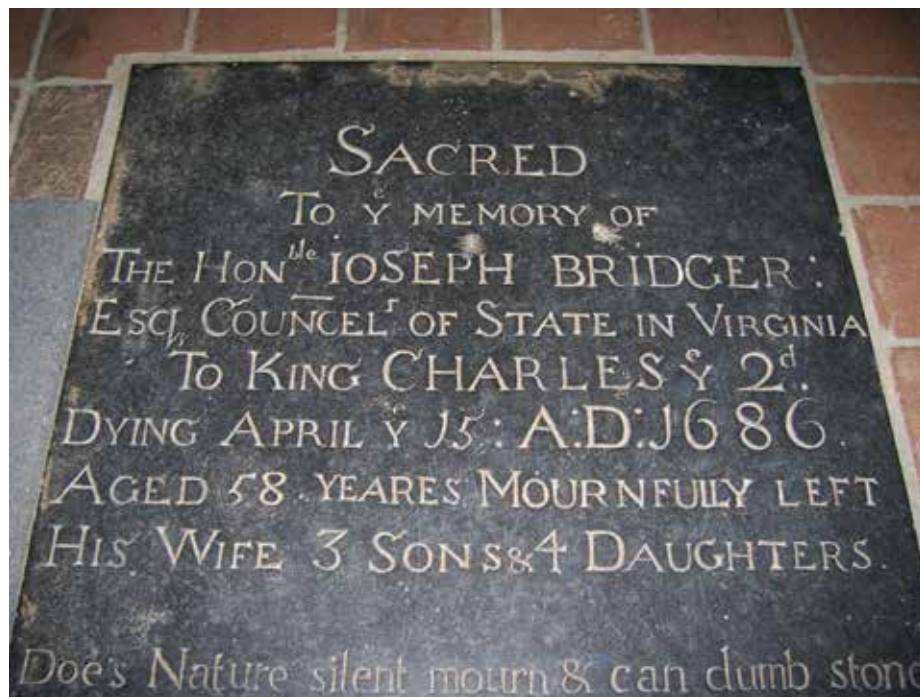
Owsley's experience told him that this farm, where Bridger had built arguably the largest home south of the James River, held answers to what life must have been like for mid-17th century colonists making the transition from high-status Englishmen to agrarian and entrepreneurial colonials.

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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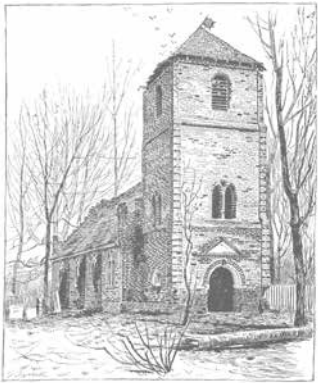
A year after Joseph Bridger's exhumation, the Bridger Family Associates, including Restoration President-Elect William Hodsden, held a memorial service at Historic St. Luke's on the anniversary of their ancestor's 1686 death. The service mirrored the well-documented original funeral and included a reading from a 17th-century Bible that is now part of Historic St. Luke's collection. Over 230 Bridger descendants and guests gathered for the service, said Tomes, both inside and outside the church.

Joseph Bridger's partial remains were reinterred at St. Luke's in 2014. Later that year, 79 Bridger Family Associates made a pilgrimage to Slimbridge, England, where Joseph Bridger was born and where his grandfather was vicar of the village church.

A wine seal noting ownership by Hester Pitt Bridger, wife of Joseph Bridger. In the 17th century, it was extraordinarily rare for a woman to have her own wine seal.



ST. LUKE'S TOWER SOCIETY



ST. LUKE'S CHURCH, SEAR SMITHFIELD, VA.

Historic St. Luke's Restoration has welcomed 30 Tower Society Charter Members, representing more than \$50,000 in leadership gifts to the 2017-2018 Historic St. Luke's Annual Fund.

Tower Society gifts – \$1,000 (Newport Parish), \$2,500 (Chancel Circle), and \$5,000 or more (Old Brick Church Council) – support the site's annual operating budget, including tours, lectures, research, and educational programs.

"We are building a core of generous supporters for St. Luke's programs, and we're having a lot of fun in the process," said Tower Society Chair Dana Dickens. "Our goal is to engage generous support for St. Luke's annual operations so that this great American icon remains a vibrant learning center and community asset."

CAPITAL CHALLENGE: THE CABELL FOUNDATION

Historic St. Luke's Restoration has received a \$100,000 challenge grant from the Robert G. Cabell III and Maude Morgan Cabell Foundation to support the site's capital improvements initiatives.

"The Cabell Foundation has challenged us to raise an additional \$100,000 in matching funds to secure their gift," said William T. "Bill" Hodsden, president-elect. "We have made excellent progress, and we are eager to engage new capital support to secure the Cabell match by May."

Major initiatives include restoring the ancient "Indian Trail" and repairing its adjacent ponds and dams, creating access to new burial sites in St. Luke's cemeteries, acquiring property along St. Luke's borders to provide a buffer against encroaching development, and making major capital improvements to the 1950s Welcome Center.

For more information on the Cabell Challenge or Tower Society, contact Todd Ballance at 757-357-3367 tballance@historicstlukes.org. To make a gift online, <http://historicstlukes.org/donate>.

Tower Society Charter Members, as of 3/6/18

Old Brick Church

(\$5,000 or more)

Hon. and Mrs. Robert Edwards
Howard W. and Katherine L. Gwaltney Foundation
Ms. Barbara Lindley
Mr. Ray Smith

Chancel Circle

(\$2,500 or more)

Mr. and Mrs. Cecil W. Gwaltney, Jr.
Mr. and Mrs. William T. Hodsden
Mr. and Mrs. Dwight Schaubach
Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Willis

Newport Parish

(\$1,000 or more)

Anonymous
Mr. Michael Bakwin
Carolyn and Richard Barry
Mr. and Mrs. Todd J. Ballance
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Broadwater
Andrea and Bobby Clontz
Hon. and Mrs. Rodham T. Delk
Mr. and Mrs. E. Dana Dickens III
Episcopal Diocese of Southern Virginia
Mr. and Mrs. James Everett III
Ms. Priscilla Guthrie
Mr. and Mrs. W. Atwill Gwaltney
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Holland
Ms. Mary Jo Jordan and Dr. William Bandy
Mr. and Mrs. Gerald E. LaBoone
Mr. Joseph Luter IV
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Modlin
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Norwood
Mr. and Mrs. Charles B. Pond III
Charles H. and Lynn K. Rose
Mr. Gary and Dr. Gayle Terwilliger
TowneBank



VIRGINIA'S OLDEST OPEN CEMETERY

Nestled on the edge of beautiful Isle of Wight County, Historic St. Luke's is Virginia's oldest open cemetery.

Historic St. Luke's Cemetery, Memorial Park, and Columbarium capture the peace and calm of colonial gardens rich with nostalgia. The legacies of centuries of Virginians lie in a place of historic significance, protecting and honoring their memories.

Historic St. Luke's Restoration will host its first-ever Cemetery Open House on April 29, 2018, between 2 and 5 pm, for the general public to learn about the different options available for eternal resting places.



Historic
ST. LUKE'S CHURCH
14477 Benn's Church Blvd. Smithfield, VA 23430 757-357-3367 www.historicstlukes.org

CEMETERY OPEN HOUSE
Become Part of History

*Sunday, April 29th
2 p.m. - 5 p.m.*

Free and open to the public. Enjoy light refreshments as we tell you more about the different options available for eternal resting places here at Historic St. Luke's. Tour our Ancient Cemetery, Columbarium, St. Luke's Memorial Park, and historic church building. Become part of our history by joining the Historic St. Luke's Family.

THE PERFECT HISTORIC WEDDING

Historic St. Luke's Church has been the perfect intimate wedding venue since the 17th century. No longer an active parish, St. Luke's is open to all denominations and ceremonies and is available for rentals seven days a week.

For information about weddings and special events at Historic St. Luke's, contact Sales Manager Fred Hodges at 757-357-3367.

fhodges@historicstlukes.org



TODD TALK



In our last newsletter, I wrote that “Historic St. Luke’s Church is an ancient edifice with contemporary relevance.” Is that true? Our staff, volunteers, and Board certainly believe so. But how?

Its relevance resides in the stories of our shared past that bring us together and enrich our lives. Our stage for these stories

happens to be Virginia’s Oldest Brick Church.

Our story began with America’s origins. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries in Anglo-America there were episodes of discontent with the established church. These “dissenters” set the stage for what would become part of our national identity. To rebel and question authority

is to be American. The evolution to become modern Americans (which continues) is a fascinating and vital part of American discourse. This country is great. Our history is complicated. We enjoy celebrating the lives of Americans who preserved this national symbol of religious freedom and why it remains important to scores of folks.

In the upcoming months, stay tuned for more stories of why this place matters so much to so many people. We are exploring and gathering these stories. If you have photos and stories to share with us, please contact us. We would love to feature your stories on our tours, exhibits, or perhaps even film your story for our YouTube Channel. We have a lot in store for 2018, and we look forward to welcoming your return visit.

Todd Ballance, Historic St. Luke’s Restoration’s Executive Director, welcomes conversations about Historic St. Luke’s past, present, and future. He can be reached at 757-357-3367. tballance@historicstlukes.org

EMBRACING ST. LUKE’S CORPORATE HISTORY

Haylee Lewis, an intern at Historic St. Luke’s, is a senior at Christopher Newport University where she is a Classical Studies major with a double minor in History and Leadership Studies.

Haylee’s primary focus at Historic St. Luke’s is archiving the organization’s corporate records from the 1950s through 1970s that were saved from a 2005 fire. Her enthusiasm has inspired her to conduct further research into the church’s 1950s renovation and restoration.

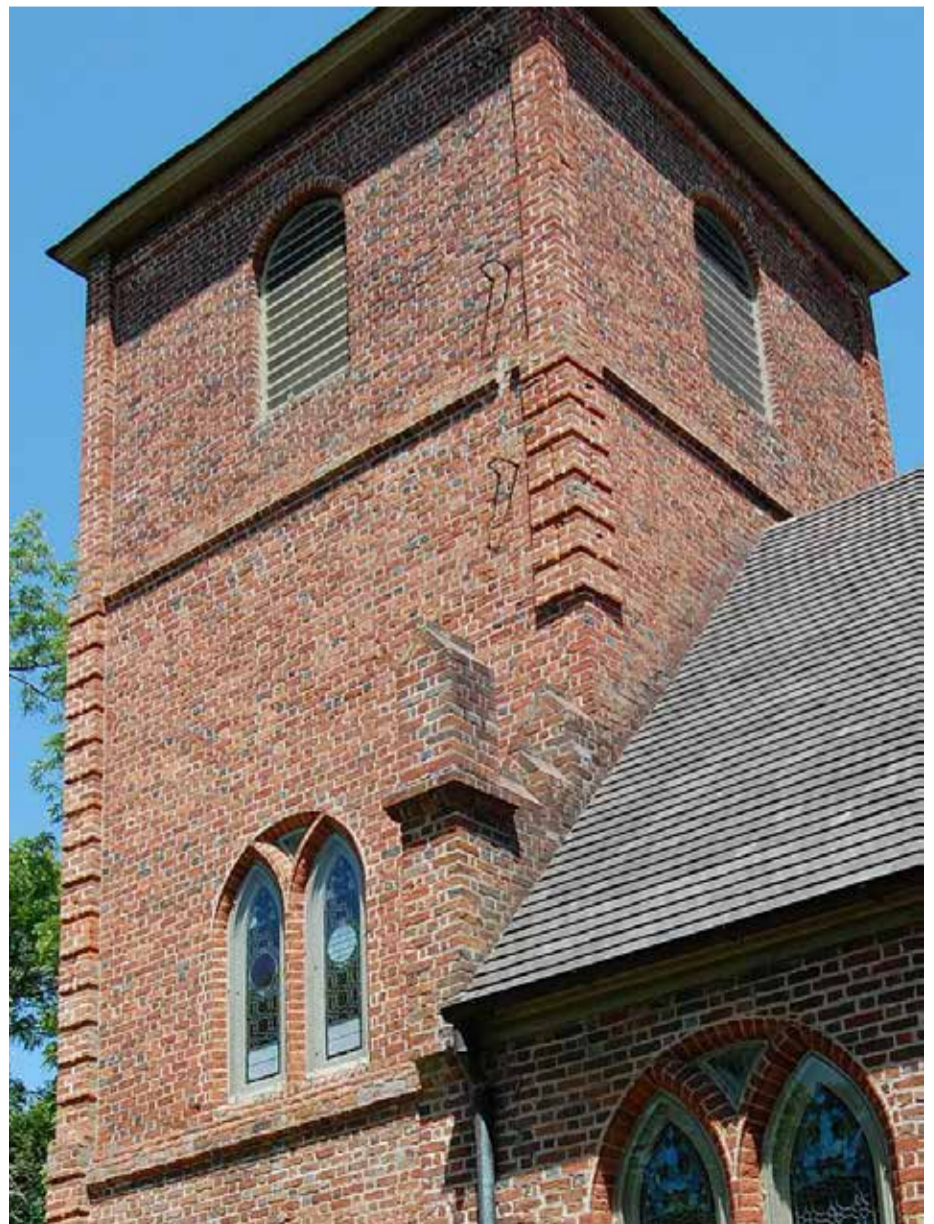
Haylee also serves as Assistant Events and Conferences Coordinator at CNU and is a dedicated brother of Alpha Phi Omega.



Historic St. Luke’s is pleased to welcome Fred Hodges as the site’s new sales manager. Fred is a native of Virginia with a passion for history. A former Historic St. Luke’s museum interpreter, he is happy to have been part of the team that solidified much of the evidence in Historic St. Luke’s current tour.

Fred will oversee three revenue areas -- cemetery sales, private event rentals, and gift shop sales.

For information on weddings, event rentals, and cemetery sales, Fred can be reached at 757-357-3367. fhodges@historicstlukes.org



CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

The Civil War in Smithfield: A Living History Weekend

Saturday, March 24, 9:30 am-5 pm and Sunday, March 25, 1 pm-5 pm.

Period vendors, living historians, modern food vendors, demonstrations, and more can be found at this living history weekend at Historic St. Luke's. Learn about the Civil War's effect on the town of Smithfield at this annual history event.

Attendance is included in the cost of general admission (\$8).

Build That Wall: A Deist President, Connecticut Baptists, and Religious Freedom.

Saturday, April 7, 1 pm-2 pm.

Join Dr. Craig Wansick as he explores the correspondence between the Danbury Baptist Association and President Thomas Jefferson that led America to see a "wall of separation" between religion and government, and how it reflects on the unique religious identity of the American experiment as it plays out today.

Tickets are \$15 per person. Seating is limited, so advance purchase is recommended.

Light refreshments will be provided.

Book Launch and Signing: Hamilton: An American Biography

Saturday, April 21, 1 pm-2 pm.

Biographer Tony Williams traces the events and values that enabled Alexander Hamilton, dispossessed orphan, to rise to Revolutionary War hero and Founding Father. Williams documents a life uniquely shaped by America and who, in turn, contributed to the creation of the American regime of liberty and self-government.

Tickets are \$15 per person. Seating is limited, so advance purchase is recommended.

Light refreshments will be provided.

Cemetery Preservation Workshops

Saturday, 11 am-2 pm and Saturday, June 9, 11 am-2 pm.

Join us for these hands-on workshops where volunteers will learn techniques for cleaning historic gravestones based on industry best practices, Lunch and the necessary tools for the workshop will be provided.

Jews in Colonial Virginia and Beyond

Saturday, May 5, 1 pm-2 pm.

Historian Allison Gunn will discuss the earliest known Jewish presence in the Hampton Roads area and highlight Southern Jews in the American Colonial Period. Gunn will focus on Jewish migration to the New World and the economic and cultural factors that influenced their movements and shaped their experience.

Tickets are \$15 per person. Seating is limited, so advance purchase is recommended.

Light refreshments will be provided.

Religion and the American Revolution

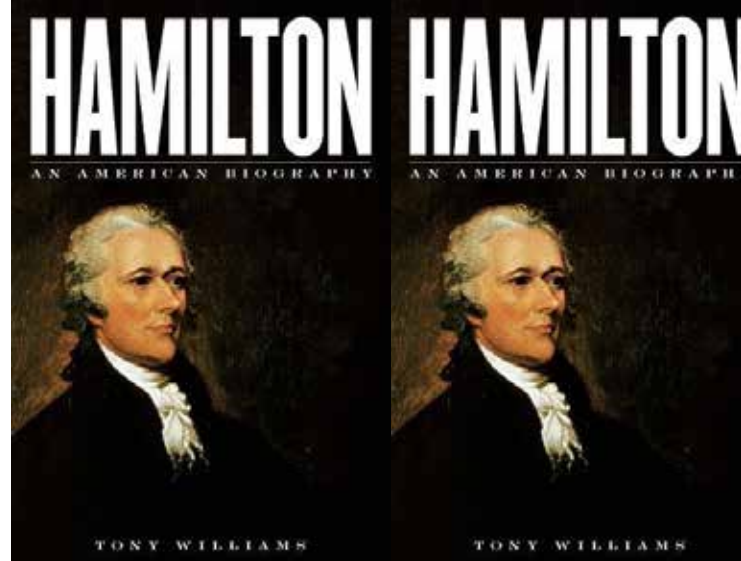
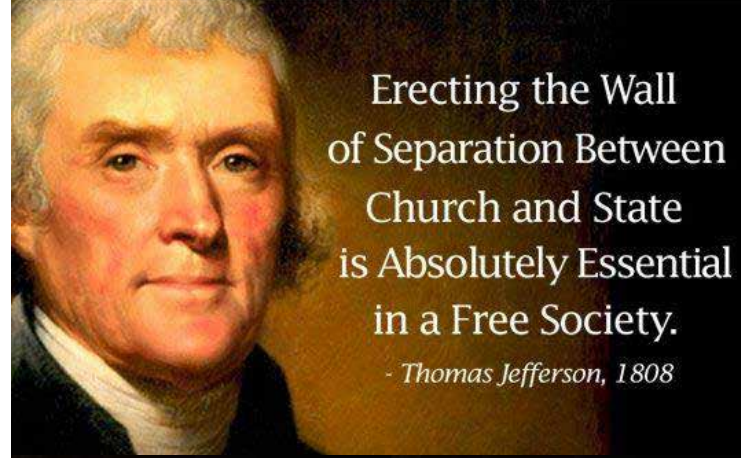
Saturday, June 30, 1 pm - 2 pm

Public Historian John Ericson's presentation deals with the role of religion in the Revolution with a focus on how clergy entered into the political sphere, and how many patriots and loyalists interpreted the conflict through the lens of their religious faith.

Tickets are \$15 per person. Seating is limited, so advance purchase is recommended.

Light refreshments will be provided.

Contact Education Coordinator Rachel Popp at rpopp@historicstlukes.org to register for an event.



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, email us at 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.”

