

# Bruton Parish center brings more history to Colonial Williamsburg

By  
**Alexa Doiron**  
April 1, 2018



The Bruton Parish shop in Williamsburg has been revamped to include the new Heritage Center, which displays a history of the church for visitors from all over the country, according to Bryant Cureton, project manager for the center's development.

Bruton Parish has long been a presence in Colonial Williamsburg. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry worshipped there. Now, parishioners are showing off their history in a new way.

"If you visit Williamsburg and don't understand the role of the church in the colonial period, then you have missed a big part of the picture," said Bryant L.

Cureton, a member of the parish and the project manager for the new Heritage Center.

The Heritage Center, located inside the Bruton Parish Shop, was a three-year project designed to create a small museum for educating visitors about the 300-year history of the church, according to Cureton. The idea for the project began in 2015, during the 20th anniversary of the Bruton Parish Shop, which was developed in the 1980s to raise money for outreach programs for the church.

Parishioners realized there was an opportunity to create a space that adds historical context to one of the oldest parishes in the country, according to Al Louer, a member of the parish and the task force that developed the center.

From the church's beginning to present day, displays feature famous visitors, such as Winston Churchill and Queen Elizabeth II. There are also artifacts, such as the church bell.



The Heritage Center is designed to be accessible to any type of learner, according to Al Louer, a member of the church.

“It’s the original bell they would’ve heard,” Cureton said. “It is probably the only sound in Williamsburg that is actually what George Washington heard and it still rings today.”

The church is one of the original 88 historic buildings in the Colonial Williamsburg area, according to Louer. It dates back to 1674 and holds records such as slave baptisms and official census documents from the colonial era.

In the new center, the information is displayed through a variety of pictures, videos and text on the walls. Deciding which parts of the church’s history to feature was one of the biggest challenges of the project and took up a large part of the three-year planning process, according to Cureton.

“The exhibit is designed so that if you walk in and you only look at one thing, then you’ll at least get a piece of the history,” Cureton said.



The Heritage Center outlines the history of the Bruton Parish from 1674 to present day. Condensing the history was difficult for the team, which was encouraged to tell the story using as many photos as possible. (Alexa Doiron/WYDaily) Part of what to include was thinking about what would most interest a broad range of people, Louer said. The church has more than 2,000 members and many regular visitors, according to Louer.

To keep visitors connected to the church after they leave Williamsburg, the parish developed “Friends of Bruton,” an online mailing system that sends regular newsletters and updates, Cureton said.

“The church is one of the most visited in the country,” Louer said. “We want to give them the chance to stay involved as much as possible.”



In the middle of the Heritage Center is a glass display that preserves the original weathervane that sat atop the steeple from 1769 to 2011, according to Bryant L. Cureton, project manager for the center. (Alexa Doiron/WYDaily)

Also featured in the Heritage Center is the Historic Parish Records Project, which takes original colonial documents from the church and transcribes them into an online format. That step makes it easy for users to search names or dates.

Parishioners hope to expand on this in the future, so visitors can get an in-depth look into the lives of colonial residents.

“When people built this church, they were building their home,” Cureton said. “And that’s what we want to show.”