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Stratford Hall Honors the Enslaved at Sixth Annual First Africans Day Event

Stratford, Virginia (July 28, 2026) – Stratford Hall Historic Preserve hosted another successful *First Africans Day* event for the public on Saturday, July 25. The annual event serves as a powerful day of reflection, celebration, and remembrance honoring the lives, stories, and contributions of the enslaved Africans and African Americans who shaped the history of Stratford Hall and the broader story of Early America. The free-to-attend event included Great House admission and a variety of performances and historic interpretation activities, including an Opening Ceremony at the African American Cemetery lead by Cheyney McKnight and the Shiloh Baptist Church Choir. This year's keynote lecturer was Adrienne Whaley, the Director of Education & Community Engagement at the Museum of the American Revolution. To a crowd of over 100 attendees, she highlighted several stories from the American Revolution centered around military service and finding freedom in Virginia.

In the afternoon, hundreds of visitors witnessed Stratford Hall's East Garden come to life with a performance by the KanKouran West African Dance Company and participated in a drum circle with SlamOne, LLC. A number of expert historic interpreters could be found around the site: Dontavius Williams giving first-person accounts of the enslaved experience with Colonial foodways in the Historic Kitchen; Harold Caldwell demonstrating tobacco harvesting in the East Garden; and Nastassia Parker instructing on the importance of textiles in the Great House Weaving & Spinning Room. The Payne Cabin was interpreted by Willie and Hope Wright, who bridged the history of the Payne family's legacy at Stratford Hall. More can learned about the family's vital story at www.stratfordhall.org/enslavedcommunity.

The day concluded with an open mic and *Chronicles of Adam* performance by Dontavius Williams in the Great House and the Closing Ceremony on the Stratford Beach. Members of the Stratford Hall African American descendant community and observers alike joined Cheyney McKnight in tying the names of the enslaved at Stratford Hall to a flower-adorned raft before placing it in the Potomac River. In many West and Central African traditions, water represents a passage to the ancestral world. The raft bearing names symbolizes the crossing over from slavery to freedom and embodies the ongoing engagement of the living with their honored ancestors.

“Our stories of freedom are forever entwined with stories of un-freedom” said Stratford Hall’s Vice President of Research of Collections, Dr. Gordon Blaine Steffey, about the new Mary the Belin duPont Laird Gallery experience which was included in the First Africans Day free admission. “This gallery names and recognizes the enslaved Africans and African Americans whose labor is etched into every acre of this land and undergirds every true story of Lee family achievements.”

Visitors can learn more about the generations of Africans and African Americans enslaved at Stratford by visiting the *Stratford at the Crossroads* exhibit in the Visitor Center and taking the Great House audio tour *The Crossroads: African & African American Life at Stratford Hall*. Sponsored by Wells Fargo in 2025 and 2026, *First Africans Day* is a free public event.

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About Stratford Hall Historic Preserve

Stratford Hall Historic Preserve, a National Historic Landmark in Westmoreland County, Virginia, brings together people from around the world to experience 1,800 acres of natural and human history, preserved and presented so that they can all learn from the courageous struggles of their ancestors, taking inspiration both from what they endured and what they accomplished. During the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, now is a significant time to elevate the stories of the people who lived and labored here, including two signers of the Declaration of Independence, revolutionaries, and the Africans and African Americans who shaped the history of Stratford Hall. Learn more at www.StratfordHall.org.

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The Shiloh Baptist Church Choir leads the singing for the Opening Ceremony at Stratford Hall's African American Cemetery.



Adrienne Whaley, Director of Education & Community Engagement at the Museum of the American Revolution, gives the keynote lecture "Finding Freedom: Black Virginia Stories from the Revolutionary Era."



The KanKouran West African Dance Company performing in the East Garden.



Historic interpreter Dontavius Williams discusses nutmeg and other spices in the Historic Kitchen, one of Stratford Hall's 18th-century structures.



Historic interpreter Nastassia Parker teaches visitors of all ages the role that weaving, spinning, and sewing had in the life of enslaved populations in American history.



Members of the Stratford Hall African American descendant community enjoy an afternoon drum circle lead by SlamOne, LLC.



Cheyney McKnight prepares for the Closing Ceremony with Stratford Hall staff.



Members of the Stratford Hall African American Descendant community set the raft afloat in the Potomac River. The names of Stratford's enslaved community are read aloud by ceremony participants and tied to the raft.