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Joara and Fort San Juan: Colonialism and Household Practice at the Berry Site, North Carolina

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Investigator(s):Robin Beck robin-jr@northwestern.edu(Principal Investigator)

Christopher Rodning (Co-Principal Investigator)

David Moore (Co-Principal Investigator)

Sponsor:University of Oklahoma Norman Campus

731 ELM AVENUE, ROOM 134

NORMAN, OK 73019 405/325-4757

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ABSTRACT

With National Science Foundation support, Dr. Robin Beck and his colleagues Dr. David Moore and Dr. Christopher Rodning will conduct two seasons of archaeological fieldwork at the Berry site in North Carolina. Archaeologists have discovered few sites that preserve the earliest, tentative footprints of European expansion through the interior of native North America. During the mid-16th century, Spanish explorers in particular began to look beyond the continent's coasts, seeking riches at first, but later to forge links across the interior to established colonies in Mexico and the Caribbean. Hernando De Soto, Hernando Coronado, Tristan de Luna, and Juan Pardo all launched expeditions into the interior from 1530-1570; to date, archaeologists have excavated but a handful of sites associated with these early exploitative ventures. The Berry site in what is now western North Carolina is one of these sites. Historical and archaeological evidence indicate that Berry is the location of Joara, a native town where in 1567 Pardo constructed a garrison, Fort San Juan, and manned it with thirty soldiers. Although the garrison was destroyed after only eighteen months, it witnessed one of the longest periods of sustained exchange between Europeans and the native peoples of North America's interior until the seventeenth century.

The intellectual merits of the proposed project--excavation of Spanish households at Fort San Juan--derive from its expected contributions to the comparative study of colonial encounters, especially with respect to the construction of Hispanic-American cultural traditions and identities. Research at Spanish colonial sites in the southeastern United States and the Caribbean suggests a pattern in which male colonists incorporated particular Native American practices in frontier life. Specifically, in female-oriented realms of household activity, native traditions usually supplanted their Spanish counterparts. Fort San Juan offers a unique opportunity to address this issue, given the limited time span of its occupation, its extraordinary degree of preservation, and its location at the outermost edge of Spain's colonial enterprise.

The broader impacts of the proposed project will advance understanding of this important colonial encounter while also integrating teaching, training, and learning across a broad range of educational contexts. Since 2001, the project has offered field schools at Berry through Warren Wilson College of Asheville, North Carolina, in conjunction with Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton, North Carolina. These field schools, which will be continued through the next phase of the research, have included local high school students, community college students, and undergraduates from four-year colleges and universities. Public school teachers (from grades K-12: history, science, social studies, art, and math) have taken the field school at Berry, through Western Piedmont Community College, as a part of their professional development. The project has also emphasized the participation of underrepresented groups, having worked closely with the Catawba Nation, for example--the likely descendents of Joara--each year offering a scholarship to the Nation for one of its members to attend the field school. Finally, near the end of each season, the project has offered a public field day at the Berry site. This event has drawn 500-800 visitors each year from across the Carolinas and neighboring states, and has provided the project a unique and highly visible opportunity for promoting public education in archaeology.