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## Dig finds evidence of Spanish fort

Archaeologists say artifacts unearthed near Morganton point to 1567 outpost



Lotta Govaerts, left, and Karla Evans dig the soil and sift it through a quarter-inch mesh screen. They are searching for artifacts that might show that Spaniards built Fort San Juan here. Below is a fragment of a pot found at the site.

Staff Photos by Lisa Lauck

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By CATHERINE CLABBY, Staff Writer

WORRY CROSSROADS -- In a fallow farm field in the Appalachian foothills, archaeologists are rewriting the history of early European settlement in North Carolina.

Very slowly they are unearthing what they believe are remnants of a 16th-century Spanish outpost known as Fort San Juan, which disappeared after Indians burned it to the ground.

Historical records say the fort was built in 1567. That predates England's Lost Colony on Roanoke Island by nearly 20 years and Jamestown, Va. -- North America's first permanent English settlement -- by four decades.

Finding Fort San Juan would provide new clues to how another European superpower tried to seize land in the New World. As important, it might help explain the fate of the native people who vanished after chasing the Spanish away.

"By far, this is the best opportunity we have to pin down where the Spanish went in the 16th century," said Chester B. DePratter of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, who has long searched for the routes Spanish expeditions took through the Southeast.

David Moore, an archaeologist at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, is one of three researchers excavating the site. He started hunting traces of early Spanish settlement in the Catawba River valley 20 years ago.

Right away he was drawn to a patch of farmland in Burke County, near tiny Worry Crossroads, where Native American arrowheads, pipes and pottery shards have turned up for generations. The Spanish liked to build near native towns.

On that land, near the river's headwaters, Moore and his research partners have collected fragments identified over many years as pieces of ceramic olive jars, brass clothing fasteners, even body armor. Spanish soldiers would have carried or worn them as they scouted a northern land route to Mexican gold and silver mines.

This summer, using shovels and sharpened masonry trowels, the archaeologists have exposed the collapsed remains of what is the fifth charred building they've found underground. The researchers are confident that all date to Fort San Juan.

Spanish records say Indians burned several Spanish forts in 1568, probably in what's now South Carolina, North Carolina and Tennessee. Fort San Juan stood the longest, about a year and a half, and sheltered the most men, about 30. Settlers, one day, were intended to join them.

The Spaniards built their fort next to Joara, a sizable American Indian town with several villages in its political orbit. In the 16th century, Native Americans in North Carolina had not yet formed tribes.

Power rested with chiefs in different towns. But Joara had disappeared by the time English and Moravian traders and settlers reached the Catawba Valley in the mid-18th century.

Archaeologists wonder whether the Spanish and their fort had anything to do with that.

"This was a lost colonizing opportunity for the Spanish," Moore said. "It was also the beginning of the end for native people here and their traditional way of life." Moore runs excavation at the site with archaeologists Robin Beck of Southern Illinois University and Chris Rodning of UNC-Chapel Hill.

### **Seeking a route to Mexico**

The belief that Spanish settlement in the Catawba River valley preceded Sir Walter Raleigh's colony on the coast hasn't always been accepted in academic circles. But in the 1980s, studies of a detailed narrative written by a scribe assigned to a Capt. Juan Pardo convinced many scholars that the Spanish built outposts along the river on trips from the South Carolina coast into Tennessee.

After conquering the Aztec people in Mexico in 1521 and the Inca in Peru in 1533, the Spanish turned their attention to La Florida, northern lands they also claimed. Hernando de Soto, for one, passed through North Carolina in 1540 on his overland trek from Florida past the Mississippi River.

Twenty-six years later, Pardo was dispatched from Santa Elena, a Spanish coastal outpost on what is now Parris Island, S.C., to find a land route to Mexican mines. His commanders were eager to avoid pirates crowding the Caribbean Sea. But the mission, taken on foot along existing Indian trails, was doomed.

Miscalculating the vastness of North America, the Spanish assumed that the Appalachians and a range of mountains in eastern Mexico were part of the same chain. Indian attacks prevented Pardo from traveling beyond eastern Tennessee to see how wrong they were.

The captain had his men build Fort San Juan at the eastern base of the Appalachians to establish a permanent outpost. The fort was to be the administrative center for other inland outposts Pardo built.

Moore was not the first to examine the spot he is so focused on today. In 1891, a Smithsonian Institution researcher flagged the same ground near Upper Creek after finding an earthen Indian mound. Southeastern Indians of the 16th century built such mounds for their temples, burial plots and ceremonial grounds.

The mound was plowed down in the 1950s by a Burke County farming family whose deed to the property dated from Colonial times. But descendants Pat and James Berry (who are relatives of Robin Beck, one of the archaeologists working on the dig) now control the land. They intend to preserve what remains for science.

### **A glacial pace**

To anyone but an archaeologist, progress uncovering what looks like Fort San Juan appears painfully slow. Researchers, college students and volunteers dug there this summer, as they have the three previous years, and on land nearby. In late July, a dusty field team bored hole after hole a short drive away, looking for the borders of an Indian villages near Joara.

In 80-plus-degree heat and humidity that kept everyone slimy, the diggers kept an eye on soil color, hauling out shovel after shovel of one shade of dirt at a time. They shook piles of the grayish or dark brown soil through a quarter-inch-mesh metal screen, looking for shards of hand-decorated Catawba pottery or anything else the ground has held for centuries.

Every fragment of burnt wood or possible piece of clay jar was placed in a clear plastic bag with a slip of paper describing when and where it was found. A carefully measured grid the diggers set up days before provided coordinates.

"It's just as important to show where things aren't as it is to show where they are," said Megan Best, a recent Warren Wilson graduate, her bright pink T-shirt and brown canvas pants filthy from the work.

At the ruins of what looks like the fort, the digs have uncovered possible fence posts, maybe pieces of stockades, as well as parts of five structures. The archaeologists have excavated only a small part of one building, turning up remnants of burned benches, cane matting and the two fragments of armor. Some timbers appear to have been worked by metal tools, which native people were unlikely to have used.

"It was a shock to see what we were looking at," said Beck, who believes many more artifacts remain to be uncovered.

Because the buildings were built atop shallow pits, Beck said, whatever was buried inside after the buildings were burned down may survive, even though the land surface has been scraped by plows countless times since 1567.

### Many questions left

Moore and his partners know that some archaeologists won't believe they have found Fort San Juan until they unearth a Spanish soldier's bones. But some experts once skeptical of their claims now think the North Carolina team probably has the fort.

"Rob, Chris and Dave have recovered kinds of Spanish-made artifacts that the Spanish did not normally distribute to Indians as gifts," said Gerald F. Schroedl, a University of Tennessee archaeologist.

Next, the researchers must craft a technically sound plan to excavate the site and find several hundred thousand dollars in grants to pay for it. They don't expect a really big dig until 2006.

Meanwhile, they are consulting with experts in such areas as soil, plants and dendrochronology -- the science of dating past events by comparing growth rings in trees.

Eventually they want to explore the remains of the Indian town they believe is Joara, which may have stood on the same spot for hundreds of years.

So many questions persist. Did the would-be Spanish conquerors carry the European diseases that proved fatal to a people that dwelled in North America 12,000 years before their arrival?

Did their trade and other contacts erode native political and economic ties that were already weakening? Was it something else?

"Why were they all gone 150 years later?" Moore asks.

Unlike the 16th-century Spanish, who kept meticulous records, the Native Americans left no written explanations, only puzzles long ago swallowed by the ground.

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