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abstracts

Spain's Appalachian Outpost

by Marion P. Blackburn

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Failed ambitions for a North American empire

It's early in the hills of western North Carolina and the mist is just starting to burn away. I follow a winding dirt road surrounded by Christmas trees--raised here for shipment all over the country--and then veer off to the site of a 16th-century European outpost far from the coast, only miles from where my English ancestors settled hundreds of years later. Not much larger than a baseball diamond, it is the earliest inland European settlement discovered in the southeastern United States. But it's not English. It's Spanish, and in a place that, until recently, few thought they had reached.



The Berry site, where archaeologists have been excavating since 2001, is the only known outpost from the expeditions of Spanish captain Juan Pardo, who followed the route established decades earlier by explorer Hernando de Soto. (Greg Eans)

A crew is quietly excavating as I walk to a tent over what was once one of five modest houses. In the dense mountain clay there are the outlines of walls, stairs, and benches, but it's unsettling. The posts and thatch are blackened and crushed. This hamlet--considered a fort by its Spanish residents--witnessed swift and thorough destruction at the hands of once-friendly Native Americans, who one spring day in 1568 killed the Spaniards and set their homes ablaze. They covered the remains with dirt, burying Spanish dreams of a sprawling North American empire with them.



The early Spanish houses at Fort San Juan were built using this general Native American style, with four structural posts around a hearth, indicating the locals may have helped the Spanish get settled. Later buildings were much more haphazard in design. (Model: Mark Butler; photo by Greg Eans)

Sometimes the history of Europeans in North America, at least in textbooks, jumps from Christopher Columbus to John Smith, with a brief appearance by Sir Walter Raleigh. But in the 16th century, Spain made an ambitious play for the continent, sending soldiers along the same routes traveled by explorer Hernando de Soto in the early 1540s, to unexpected places such as the Piedmont of North Carolina and the mountains of Tennessee. Their mission was to expand the nascent Spanish settlements of La Florida and find an overland route to the silver mines of Zacatecas in Mexico. It was a towering ambition that, if successful, would have consolidated the crown's power and reach in the New World.

I am at a place key to understanding this Spanish vision--the Berry site, an hour from Asheville. Here archaeologists are uncovering what they believe is Fort San Juan, one of a series of settlements founded in the mid-16th century by Spanish captain Juan Pardo. It is also the site of Joara, the most important Native American town of the upper Catawba Valley region. With up to 500 residents and a powerful leader, known as Joara mico, it was a significant crossroads of the southern Appalachians.

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The excavation, led by David Moore of Warren Wilson College, Robin Beck of the University of Oklahoma, and Christopher Rodning of Tulane University, is providing clues about this overlooked episode in American history, when Latin America nearly reached from Mexico to North Carolina and Tennessee. While modern North Carolina and the other original 13 colonies consider themselves English in heritage, the truth is far more complicated.

"When you start with North Carolina history, you start with the Lost Colony at Roanoke," says Beck, who's been visiting the site, which belongs to his uncle's family, since he was a boy in the 1970s. "We believe it starts well before that."

Marion P. Blackburn is a writer based in Greenville, North Carolina.

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