



SPAIN'S APPALACHIAN OUTPOST

Failed ambitions for a North American empire

by MARION P. BLACKBURN

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.

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.

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



Archaeologist Johanna Vasek excavates burned timbers and thatch from Structure One, one of five houses occupied by Spanish soldiers in North Carolina in the 1560s. The houses were destroyed and the soldiers killed by Native Americans from the town of Joara.

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.

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.”

THE SPANISH AND FRENCH had their eyes on the Carolinas long before Raleigh attempted to settle Roanoke in 1587. In 1566, the Spanish settled Fort Santa Elena on today’s Parris Island, South Carolina, the site of a failed French settlement. For a time, it was capital of La Florida and the base from which they attempted to expand their empire. Philip II entrusted the mission to Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, an imposing admiral who a year earlier had wiped out the French Fort Caroline and slaughtered its inhabitants. Menéndez in turn dispatched Pardo to the inte-



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.

rior with 125 men, ordering him to find a route west, “pacify” the natives, spread Christianity, and bring vast regions (from present-day Canada to Mexico) under Spanish rule, cutting off the ambitions of Europe’s other colonial powers.

Pardo must have been a bold man. His usual speech to the Native Americans stated that they were subjects of Spain and the pope. It is doubtful they understood the strange declaration, but the exotic visitors conferred a sense of status to the people of towns such as Joara. Since Pardo’s men were trained to fight, not build houses, Pardo also had to persuade or command the locals to help with construction and food provision. He made two expeditions, across hundreds of miles, through the Carolinas on the first one, and all the way to Tennessee on the second. On the first, he created Fort San Juan and left behind 30 men. After being called back to Santa Elena, he set out again months later, revisited Fort San Juan, and established five smaller forts. It was an aggressive first step in Spanish expansion.

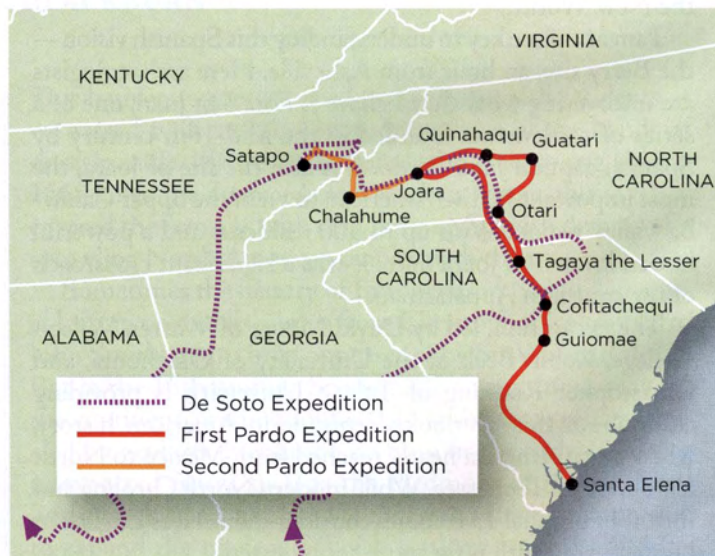
“Had these forts been a success, we’d likely be speaking Spanish in the Southeast,” Beck says. “Jamestown and Charleston would never have gotten off the ground.”

Because of careful accounts kept by Pardo’s scribe, Juan de la Bandera, scholars know that he and his men traveled to six Native American towns that de Soto had visited, including Joara. Bandera chronicled each day’s journey, describing surroundings and documenting land claims, gifts, missionary efforts, and Pardo’s speeches. By January 1567, the outpost near Joara was taking shape. For the Spanish men and residents of Joara, it was a dramatic meeting of cultures.

“The Spanish would hardly have been more alien if they had come from Mars,” wrote Charles Hudson, an anthropologist at the University of Georgia. His book, *The Juan Pardo Expeditions*, examines Pardo’s travels in detail and contains the first published English-language translation of Bandera’s full account.

Though the Spanish soldiers appeared peculiar, friendships of mutual need were forged that held for at least a

couple of winters. “To Pardo and his men it was very good country, as good as the best in Spain,” Hudson wrote. After struggling with the impoverished soil at Santa Elena, the area seemed fertile ground for sowing an agricultural empire. Joara in some ways reflected the larger Mississippian world to the west and south, with a central sacred mound and residents cultivating maize. The town’s leader, or *mico*, may have seen the Spanish as a status symbol and a way to acquire desirable gifts, such as beads, wedges, and chisels. “The presence of the Spanish altered the balance of power between rival chiefs and their towns,” Rodning says. “They were competing with each other for status, power, and influence.” A soldier’s account relates that the Spanish engaged in conflicts to help allies against opposing chiefs.



David Moore of Warren Wilson College examines the remains of someone's raccoon dinner from Structure Five, a Spanish-occupied house at the Berry site. Changes in food over time may reflect how Spanish-Native American interaction developed.

But there were downsides. "The Spanish were demanding, and you can imagine there was probably abuse of women," says Chester DePratter of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA), who has worked at Santa Elena for many years. Eventually, the outnumbered Spaniards perhaps went too far, and the Native Americans brought an end to Spain's great ambition.

DAVID MOORE is a friendly, unhurried former North Carolina state archaeologist. He first dug at the Berry site, on 12 acres of farmland near the home of James and Pat Berry, in 1986, as the farm was known to have a Native American mound. At that time, he saw some seemingly European pottery fragments, but presumed they were from a settlement of Moravians, Czech Protestants who came to the area in the mid-18th century. It was not widely believed in the 1980s that de Soto or Pardo had traveled so far north.

Around this time, Hudson and his students DePratter and Marvin Smith of Valdosta State University were constructing a day-by-day account of Pardo's travels from Banderá's writings. DePratter remembers this painstaking work and their excitement at discovering that Pardo likely passed into North Carolina. Their analysis eventually began to gain acceptance, representing a considerable change in the understanding of Spanish exploration efforts in the Southeast. DePratter says the possibility of finding Fort San Juan is "a linchpin for understanding the rest of [Pardo's] route."

In 1994, a fortuitous discovery brought archaeologists a step closer. Beck and his brother were kicking around the Berry site, on the farm owned by their Uncle James. "I had been out walking in the fields for 30 years, since I was eight or nine years old," Beck remembers. "When I realized in junior high that I could walk into a field and pick up pieces of pottery and find pictures in the library to date sites and cultures, it blew me away." It was before he entered graduate school for anthropology that he picked up some strange glazed pottery. Beck showed the finds to Moore, whom he'd known for years. Suspecting they were Spanish, Beck and Moore took them to DePratter and Stanley South, an SCIAA archaeologist who is credited with discovering Santa Elena.

"The potsherds and other items were indistinguishable from what we had at Santa Elena. A perfect match," DePratter says. Moore and Beck, working separately and years apart, had discovered Fort San Juan. They reevaluated other artifacts found at the Berry site since 1986, including nails that matched those from Santa Elena.

"Had we found these artifacts in 1980, we would not have known what to do with them," says Beck. But in light of the work of Hudson, DePratter, and Smith, they began to make sense. "In 1994, a lot of people said it wasn't likely [that we



had found a Pardo fort]," Moore says. "But now, most people think we have Fort San Juan."

EVERY YEAR SINCE 2001, the Berry site has hosted about 50 archaeologists, volunteers, and students for a two-month field season. More evidence supporting the site's identification as Fort San Juan appeared, such as a European weighing scale, a type of ceramic known as Caparra blue majolica made from 1492 to 1600, chain-mail links, brass lacing tips, olive jars, and other signs of Spanish presence. Five structures have been identified as having housed Spaniards, arranged in a semicircle north of the village mound, along a verdant creek that feeds the Catawba River. At least one of the houses shows evidence of two winters of occupation—something that would be seen in Fort San Juan but not in the shorter-lived later settlements. Food remains and architectural features from them are filling in details about how the Spanish and Native Americans interacted, and what might have happened in the time leading up to the settlement's destruction.

I'm drawn to the corner of one of the Spanish houses, Structure One, where several pieces of blackened wood look as if they came from a campfire the night before. While still warm from the swift attack, the remains were covered with dirt, inadvertently protecting them. "One of the most important historical sites in the Southeast also happens to be one of the best preserved," Beck says. I lean in closer, hardly believing these timbers are more than 400 years old. I can still see the weave of grass thatch pressed into the blackened benches, a chilling reminder that the houses went down fast.

Moore is called over to check out a find a few yards away at another Spanish house, Structure Five. It is a small jawbone, probably from someone's raccoon dinner. Deer and bear remains come out of the same pit, and the soil will be screened for more examples of what the soldiers were eating and more evidence of the complex relationships during the



Archaeologists, including Robin Beck (right), look for evidence of posts and burned wood—indications of how Structure One, a house occupied by the Spaniards at Fort San Juan, was constructed and destroyed.

brief marriage of two cultures. The finds suggest soldiers either learned to hunt game and cook New World vegetables such as corn, beans, and squash, or were entirely provisioned by their hosts. “As we do analysis of food remains from these buildings, it will be interesting to see what the Spanish were eating,” Beck says. “We will compare food from these buildings to other Native American sites to see the differences.”

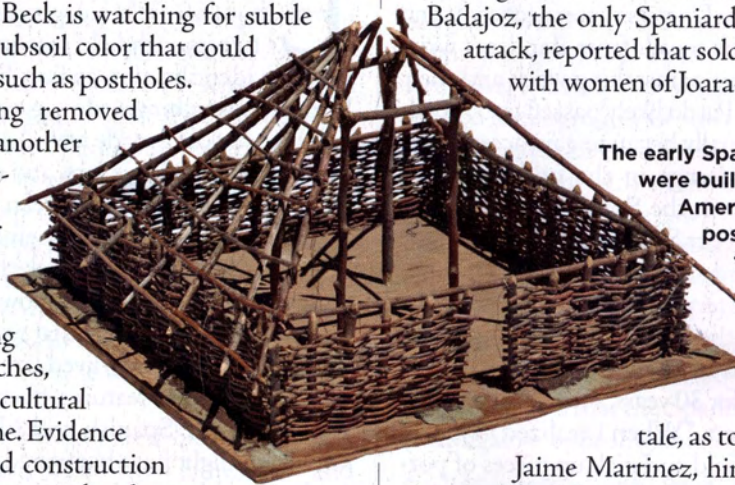
Back at Structure One, Beck is watching for subtle but important changes in subsoil color that could indicate structural features such as postholes. Charred timbers are being removed with remains of a wall. In another part of the house, codirector Rodning is evaluating the depth and spacing of wall posts. These observations will help determine if each house was built using European or native approaches, or both, indicating how cultural interaction changed over time. Evidence suggests the villagers guided construction of the houses the Spanish occupied, at least at first. The front door of this one, for example, required visitors to step down and advance sideways, possibly on hands and knees. The home itself was built over a pit, and designed to prevent surprise attack, but unusual for soldiers accustomed to masonry, stone, and wide doorways.

In return, the Spaniards may have demonstrated the proper use of wedges and other European tools to cut notches in wood. Bandera’s account says the Joara *mico*—a high-ranking leader and thus a man whose allegiance Pardo would have courted—was presented with a prestigious, hafted battle ax that could have been used for such cutting. Further examination of the timbers will give researchers insight into the use of metal tools. Evidence also suggests soldiers gradually took over their own building and cooking duties. Structure One was likely the earliest Spanish-occupied house and built by locals in January 1567 in a formal Native American design.

It has carefully spaced posts in deep, precise holes, with four large posts forming a neat square around a central hearth. The architectural style of the later Structure Five suggests far less participation from the people of Joara. Rodning notes that its posts are not deeply set and it lacks the hearth posts. “That’s a very different feature, which would lead me to suggest that Structure Five was more expediently built,” he says.

The shifts in house design and construction presage graver changes as the people of Joara grew more resentful of their uninvited guests. “This is how archaeology fills in the gaps,” Beck says. “We have a written record of what took place, but it’s spotty. These findings do more than confirm the record. They provide details that you’d never have otherwise.”

By 1568 the soldiers at Joara had overstayed their welcome. With too much time on their hands, they offended in countless ways—neglecting to supply appropriate gifts, demanding too much food, and picking fights with surrounding tribes. Teresa Martín, wife of Juan Martín de Badajoz, the only Spaniard known to have survived the attack, reported that soldiers committed improprieties with women of Joara—perhaps a final, unforgivable



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.

transgression. Juan Martín’s tale, as told to colonial treasury official Jaime Martinez, hints that native warriors lured the men—exhausted from months of scarce, unfamiliar food and forays into the mountains to look for precious metals and stones—out of their houses and overwhelmed them. Though no Spanish remains have yet been found, the natives killed all but one soldier “with great cruelty” according to Martín, who escaped to Santa Elena across hundreds of miles of forest. Timbers from the Berry site support the idea that Fort San Juan’s buildings were burned and buried without a struggle.

By carefully evaluating historical accounts from Martín and Bandera, other records, and finds at the Berry site, the archaeologists theorize that the attack on Fort San Juan was part of a combined assault on all six inland forts on a single day sometime in or before May 1568. (Bandera’s account of the second expedition indicates Pardo believed the natives had been planning some kind of ambush.) This attack could have been a coordinated assault to prevent the possibility of

Much of the excavation of the Berry site is carried out by volunteers, many of whom are supported and housed by the Exploring Joara Foundation, a local organization dedicated to the study and conservation of the site and its artifacts.

Spanish retaliation at other settlements. If so, it was a masterful campaign that reached from western North Carolina to the valleys of Tennessee and ended Spain's expansionist dreams in North America at a stroke.

"Once the inhabitants got the measure of the Spanish, they saw that they could wipe them out—and they did," says Charles Ewen, professor of anthropology at East Carolina University. "It is a day that changes everything, since Spain ceases to be the main player in North America. After that, they don't even try to settle the interior."

Pardo returned to Santa Elena shortly before the fall of the inland forts, and probably went home to Spain. Though the Spanish continued to support Santa Elena, they were overextended and could not support their hoped-for colonies. By 1584 the English had arrived at Roanoke, and two years later attacked the Spanish outpost St. Augustine. Santa Elena was abandoned by 1587, and the next year Spain suffered the disastrous defeat of its armada at the hands of the English. The tide had turned.

"Spain's plan was to subdue the New World, eventually filling in the spaces between the forts with new colonies," adds Ewen. "It's just that they didn't put enough effort into doing it. They couldn't administer such an empire."

Though the Spanish failed, their presence may have contributed to the disintegration of Native American towns that allowed other Europeans to colonize more successfully a century later. It was a great period of upheaval and decline for Native Americans. By the time my English ancestors arrived in 1740, their populations, once thriving in places like Joara,

The arrangement of the postholes and supports in Structure One will help archaeologists, including Chris Rodning (left), pin down the style and construction date of the houses occupied by the Spaniards.



had disappeared. The reasons for the abandonment—shifting power bases, new rulers, or European diseases such as typhus and smallpox—are unclear. "One of the outstanding questions for us is, what led to the near complete abandonment of this region during the 1500s and 1600s? These were great spots to live in," says Rodning.

I try to imagine it as it was—a busy Indian town, with out-of-place European soldiers hoping to conquer, convert, and get rich. I stare at what's left of the ceremonial mound at the site's center, now barely rising above the ground. Personal ambition and large historical currents met here, and excavations may uncover intimate details of the soldiers' lives—and deaths—that no account has ever described. They will likely reveal more not only about Spain's broken dreams, but also about the complex interplay between European and Native American cultures, giving us a fuller understanding of this epochal century and its historical implications.

"A lot of North Carolinians are proud of their European ancestry," says Jeanne Marie Warzeski, a curator at the North Carolina Museum of History. "But scholars nowadays are also looking at our history from a different view, not from that of the English or the Spanish, but from the perspective of the Native Americans who were here. If you reverse the gaze of history from the Anglo-Americans, it gives you another view altogether." Indeed, the Berry site is considered sacred and has been blessed by the Catawba people, who are believed to be descendants of the eastern Appalachian native groups, including the people of Joara. And as cities across the Southeast see climbing Latino populations, these Spanish speakers may have closer ties to the state's first colonists than anyone thought.

"North Carolina's history has always been multicultural, even before the Europeans arrived," Beck says. "This is a chance to get the Spanish and Native American contributions back in the books. We're helping bring to light lost stories. They are all a vital part of the American experience." ■

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