



December 9, 2009

Warren Wilson archaeologist unearths clues to past

By Mark Vanderhoff
Staff Writer

David Moore is helping to change the way we look at early American history.

The Warren Wilson archaeology professor and two of his colleagues have unearthed a Spanish fort believed to be the earliest European settlement in the interior of the United States, an accomplishment that recently won them a rare History Award Medal from the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Marcia Copper, a state DAR official who nominated Moore, said the fort could have changed the course of history – if it had not been destroyed by Indians.

“If that settlement would have been successful, it’s highly likely we’d be speaking Spanish right now,” she said. “As it was, because of the Catawba Indian uprising, the Spanish decided not to push it, and that opened the door for the English.”

The fort was built near present-day Morganton in 1567 - 40 years before Jamestown. Its captain, Juan Pardo, likely passed through the Swannanoa Valley that year - two centuries before the Valley’s first settler arrived.

Although Pardo’s foray was short-lived, it may have been more helpful in opening the New World than previously imagined.

New theories about the early interactions between colonists and American Indians suggest early Spanish explorers like Pardo were the first to introduce smallpox.

This disease, the theory goes, wiped out untold numbers of Indians and destroyed the fabric of their society, making settlement far easier than it otherwise would have been when the real colonial boom began nearly two centuries later.

“Until recently, most people have not understood the magnitude of the demographic change that occurred in the two centuries following the first arrival... of the Europeans,” Moore said.

Now, new evidence from archaeologists such as Moore suggests American Indian civilizations were once much larger and more advanced than previously thought.

“The cultural landscape, and indeed the landscape itself, changed dramatically from the 16th century, prior to European contact, to the 18th century, which is when we start to visualize the American frontier.”

Life before Pardo

So, what would the cultural and natural landscape in North Carolina have looked like in the 16th century, when Pardo arrived?

Moore painted a picture of a “vibrant and sophisticated society.”

When Pardo set out from Santa Elena, on modern-day Parris Island, he encountered a vast network of roads, created by centuries of trade between large villages.

“We tend to think of Indian trails as these narrow little paths through the woods,” Moore said. “These were like early wagon trails. They were plenty big for numbers of people to use because they were used, and they had been used for thousands of years.”

Most of the big towns were situated in the flood plains of the big rivers and larger tributaries.

As Pardo and his men approached a town, they might have noticed thinning forests and old cleared fields. As they got closer, they would see larger patches of fields that were being cultivated – the Indians already had agriculture.

The towns likely had some kind of stockade around them, with fewer than 20 houses and up to 200 residents.

The wooden structures would have been like others throughout the southeast at the time – walls covered with wattle-and-daub or earthen embankments, and roofs thatched with grasses, river cane, or bark. Some roofs may have been earthen covered.

“These are real stable buildings,” Moore said. “These are definitely not teepees or little wigwams or temporary structures.”

These villages might be in the same location for a couple years, or multiple generations. They did move, and new ones were created, either because of population growth, infighting, or pressure on natural resources.

Sometimes, for example, when a village exhausted the soils from intensive corn farming, they might have moved to find better soil.

“These are real dynamic societies,” Moore said. “They deal with a lot of the same problems we do today, and their solutions are analogous to ours as well.”

Buried clues

Archaeologists believe one of the biggest villages Pardo encountered was named Joara, and was inhabited by Catawba Indians.

Moore began excavating the site of this village in 1986, as a graduate student working on his dissertation.

He was trying to prove the presence of Indians in the Catawba Valley in the 16th century by excavating three sites in Catawba, McDowell, and Burke counties, and checking his findings against the expedition letters of Pardo and other Spanish explorers, such as Hernando de Soto.

Little did he know he would uncover Fort San Juan at one of those sites.

“I looked at thousands of site records to select which ones to work at, and I picked three – three of the biggest in the region – and just happened to get really lucky,” Moore said. “We hit the spot where the Spanish stuff was found by accident.”

Every summer since, Moore and his colleagues, along with dozens of students and volunteers, have returned to excavate the area.

They dig through soil that has been tilled over the past two centuries and undisturbed mounds once used as trash pits.

Human burial sites have also been identified, but not excavated, following the wishes of the remaining

Catawba Indians, who themselves visit the site every summer.

Students at Warren Wilson have poured through tons of debris and picked out Indian artifacts such as pipes, pieces of pottery, and beads, as well as Spanish artifacts.

Some of the most important pieces include pieces of Spanish uniforms and Spanish nails, which helped Moore and his colleagues confirm the site wasn't just a run-of-the-mill Indian village.

"Just because you have the presence of Spanish artifacts doesn't necessarily mean the Spanish were there," Moore said. "But here at this site, we have a handful of items that were traded – a few glass beads, a knife – but most of what we have are Spanish ceramics, nails, copper items, lead, things that were never traded."

The silver highway

It also helps that Moore has a copy of the original supply list Pardo wrote for Fort San Juan.

Pardo, like other Spanish explorers, kept very detailed reports, which archaeologists use to this day.

In his letters, for example, he describes how he renamed Joara after his hometown in Spain, "Cuenca."

"That was a tradition of the explorers, when they built a fort, to rename the nearby Indian villages after their villages in Spain," Moore said.

Things were cordial with the neighbors - for the time – and Pardo continued through the mountains to East Tennessee.

He established six forts in all over two expeditions, hoping to create a route to Spanish silver mines in Mexico that would bypass Caribbean pirates.

The first expedition might have passed through the present-day Linville or Little Switzerland area, and emerged by the Toe or Cane rivers.

The second would have followed the headwaters of the Catawba River and crossed into the Swannanoa Valley.

Unfortunately for Pardo, Indians destroyed his all six of his forts and killed all but one of his men.

It's uncertain why the Indians did this, although it could have been in retaliation for attacks on their villages.

As Moore and his colleagues learn more about Fort San Juan and the village of Joara, they are learning more about how two cultures came together and tried to interact with each other.

"We have a snapshot of that," Moore said. "It has a profound impact on the course of native American history, which has an impact on the frontier history."

And thus, the history of the United States.
