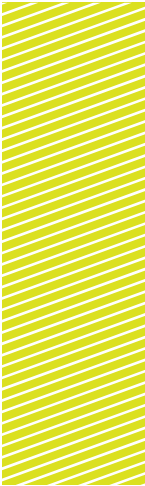


MOVE OVER JAMESTOWN:

# Is WNC Home to First European Colony in U.S.?

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A SPANISH FORT IN THE BLUE RIDGE  
FOOTHILLS, BUILT IN 1567, WAS LIKELY THE  
FIRST EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT IN THE  
INLAND U.S. AND IF THE SPANIARDS –  
SEEKING SAFE TRANSPORT OF GOLD –  
HAD KNOWN OF GOLD LURKING IN THE  
RIVERS NEARBY, WOULD THE COURSE OF  
WORLD HISTORY HAVE BEEN CHANGED?

**IN A 15-ACRE FIELD** outside of Morganton, North Carolina, the story of our nation's history is being rewritten. Every shovel of dirt that is painstakingly removed and sifted from the site reveals surprising insights into how the Southeast was explored and founded. If you think you know the facts of our country's early exploration, come to Burke County and be prepared to change your mind.

Evidence of early Spanish colonization in western North Carolina is being unearthed in an archaeological dig that began in 1986. After decades of research and testing, proof exists that a Spanish fort in the area, known as Fort San Juan, is now considered to be the earliest known European settlement in the interior of the United States (that is, aside from coastal areas such as St. Augustine, Florida.).

Pre-dating North Carolina's "Lost Colony" by 20 years and Jamestown, Va., by 40 years, Fort San Juan was built in 1567 by Spaniard Juan Pardo and an army of 125 men. The Spanish were seeking to expand their empire of land and wealth throughout the Southeast, starting in present-day Florida and marching north. Hernando de Soto had first journeyed from Florida through North Carolina on the way to the Mississippi River in 1540.

"We know with the kind of certainty that is rare for archaeology of Native American sites that this was the Native American town of Joara where Juan Pardo arrived in December 1566," says Tulane University archaeolo-



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**Left:** The Berry Site is painstakingly measured and plotted for excavation.

**Right:** Dr. Robin Beck discusses a recent find with a student in a makeshift field office.

gist Dr. Chris Rodning. “It is recorded in the written accounts of the Pardo expedition that he established a town named Cuenca and Fort San Juan adjacent to the town of Joara.”

Pardo was on a mission to secure a safe route to transport gold and silver from Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean where it could be shipped back to Spain, without the danger of pirates encountered by sailing through the Caribbean. He devised a road supported by six forts between eastern Tennessee and modern-day Parris Island, S.C.

An early co-existence between the Catawba tribe and the Spaniards seems to be evident, but conditions quickly turned sour, as a Native American tribe burned all six of the forts by the spring of 1568 and killed all but one of the soldiers. Fort San Juan was the first fort to have been built, lasting 18 months, and the only fort that has been excavated.

Fort San Juan is located on a private piece of property now known as the Berry Site, named after landowners Pat and James Berry. The Smithsonian documented a large earthen mound on the property in the late 1800s,

well before it was bulldozed in the 1960s, signaling the likely existence of Native American artifacts. According to Rodning, “the Berry Site represents one of the largest Native American towns from the greater Southern Appalachians between 1400-1600.”

When archaeologist Dr. David Moore first came to the site in 1986, he quickly found plenty of remains, with one puzzling European artifact. Nearly a decade later, archaeologist Dr. Robin Beck, the Berrys’ nephew, also found European relics on the site, encouraging Moore and Beck to believe that this could be the site of the long-lost Fort San Juan.

Among the distinctly European remains found at the site are olive jars, used for storing food in the Mediterranean, and military items.

“We have found chain mail that represents the armor that 16th century conquistadors wore, which is phenomenal,” Rodning says. “Those are incredibly exciting finds.”

Today, excavation of the fort, surrounding moat, and five Spanish houses takes place each summer, with the help of students and volunteers under the direction





Due to the sensitive nature of the excavation, the public is generally not allowed to visit, but there are a few rare opportunities to feel like a modern-day Indiana Jones.



Through EJF and university partnerships, students of all ages and teachers are able to volunteer at the site during the summer – a unique opportunity to gain archaeological skills and to unearth nearly 500-year old artifacts.

Due to the sensitive nature of the excavation, the public is generally not allowed to visit, but there are a few rare opportunities to feel like a modern-day Indiana Jones. The EJF hosts an annual Field Day at the Berry Site for one day each June (June 20, 2015). The Catawba Meadows Archaeological Interpretive Center near downtown Morganton, developed by the EJF, is a living history complex with reconstructed models of the Joara village along with displays and exhibits of the discoveries made at the Berry Site.

While finding the oldest inland European settlement in the U.S. is shocking, the real surprise is how close the Blue Ridge Mountains were to becoming Spanish territory. While the Spaniards were busy trying to find gold in Mexico and transport it back to their country, they unknowingly were building on a site that had gold in local rivers. The gold rush actually started in this section of North Carolina, long before the California version. If the Spanish had found the existing gold, everything from the Carolinas south would surely have been claimed by Spain, dramatically changing the course of world history.

Abra Johgardt, who works in the Warren Wilson College archaeology lab during the school year and at the Berry Site during the summer, sums up what most volunteers feel during each year's field school: "Every time you think you understand what's going on, you realize that you're completely wrong and it's actually something way more interesting than you thought." ❧

**Top:** Students sift every bucket of dirt that is removed from the site.

**Lower:** Dr. Chris Rodning shows off a recently discovered artifact.

of the archaeologists from three universities – Moore of Warren Wilson College near Asheville, North Carolina; Beck of the University of Michigan, and Rodning of Tulane University. Financial support has come from major grants through the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation.

Public support of the archaeological site is important to help protect and defend these historically sensitive areas from development. The non-profit Exploring Joara Foundation (EJF) was formed in 2008 to promote public archaeology, blending university research with community outreach about the need to protect and preserve land beyond the Berry Site which is projected to be lost to development in the next 15 years.