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Digging history in farm field

By Joe DePriest

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Archeology student Allyson Gardner looks for pieces of pottery and other artifacts as she sifts through soil removed from the at the excavation of a 16th century spanish fort near Morganton. The archeology department of Warren Wilson College has been exploring the site for several years. JEFF WILLHELM - jwillhelm@charlotteobserver.com

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It looks like an ordinary farm field in Western North Carolina.

But the archaeologists who dig there know better. They say the field in northern Burke County is where one of the first European settlement went up in what is now the United States.

In the 16th century, 20 years before England's "Lost Colony," Spanish explorers built a fort at the Catawba Indian town of Joara. Researchers have been working at the Berry site – named for the landowners – since 1986.

On Saturday, the property will be open to the public. Tours will be available, and visitors can watch archaeologists at work and see artifacts that have been dug out of the earth.

"Every day we get new things," said David Moore, assistant professor of anthropology at Warren Wilson College and project co-chair. "There's always something new to see."

The ongoing archaeology project is sponsored by Warren Wilson, Western Piedmont Community College and the Exploring Joara Foundation, a nonprofit group that supports archaeological research in the upper Catawba River and Yadkin River valleys. The project is currently focusing on a 1-acre area where 16th-century Spanish artifacts and the remains of five burned buildings have been located.

Moore said the burned structures may be the remains of the Spanish compound where about 30 soldiers lived.

Artifacts that have turned up include lead balls, glass beads, pieces of pottery, nails, rolled copper – things the Spanish explorers hauled into the upper Catawba River valley all the way from Spain.

The Berry site is the subject of an article in the July issue of Archaeology magazine. It has also been featured in Smithsonian, National Geographic and American Archaeology magazines and in the UNC-TV documentary "The First

Lost Colony.”

Some historians theorize Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto marched up the Catawba River on a 3,500-mile trek that brought him in contact with Native American societies before they were ravaged by diseases the Spanish brought.

In 1567, more than 30 years after De Soto may have come through on his way toward the Mississippi River, Spanish leader Juan Pardo directed the construction of Fort San Juan at Joara. The Spanish were looking for silver and gold and a road to Mexico.

Moore said the Spanish lived at Fort San Juan from January 1567 to May 1568 and that the Indians helped them build the living quarters. Based on Native American designs, the structures included benches along the sides and hearths in the middle.

Relations between the Spanish and the 300 to 400 Indians living at Joara gradually deteriorated. The soldiers were eventually killed and the buildings burned, Moore said.

At Saturday's open house, visitors will see a partially re-created section of a burned building.

Since the open house events began in 2002, public interest in the site has grown. Last year about 1,000 people came out, Moore said.

Each summer, 20 to 30 students from around the country take part in the archaeological work at the Berry site, along with teachers working on renewal credit, retirees and other volunteers.

“It's a great opportunity for everybody,” said Mary Charlotte Safford, dean of humanities and social sciences at Western Piedmont. “We're very fortunate this is so close to us.”

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