COMMUNITY COLLEGE TIMES

Uncovering clues from a

16th-century fort

Students help to unearth a Spanish site in N.C. that predates Jamestown

BY VICTORIA HARTZ, *Published August 1, 2008*

This summer, 22 students from Western Piedmont Community College (WPCC) in North Carolina are helping to excavate a 16th-century Spanish fort that archaeologists say was the earliest European settlement in the interior U.S.

The site predates the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island by 20 years and the permanent Jamestown settlement by 40 years. It was settled only two years after St. Augustine on the Florida coast, according to college officials.

Archaeologists hope the excavation will yield evidence showing how Native Americans and Spanish soldiers interacted during the Spanish conquest of the New World.

“This is going to change history textbooks,” said Mary Charlotte Safford, dean of humanities and social sciences at WPCC. “It’s local history, state history and global history, and our students have the opportunity to dig it up and hold it in their hands.”

The 12-acre site, named the Berry site after the family that has owned the plot since the 1770s, is located 10 miles north of the WPCC campus. Archaeologists have identified it not only as the location of Fort San Juan, but also as the once-occupied native town of Joara.

The excavation project is a partnership that began in 2001 between WPCC and Warren Wilson College (North Carolina), a four-year private college. Every summer, David Moore of Warren Wilson College, Robin Beck of the University of Oklahoma and Chris Rodning of Tulane University (Louisiana) lead a field school at the site.

WPCC helps fund the project.

The two-week field school is a credit course offered through WPCC's humanities department, but it is available to students in any program of study. The course combines lectures on cultural history with hands-on instruction about the basics of archaeology.

"The collaboration has worked out very nicely," Moore said. "It gives us the chance to work with local folks and get them more involved in the project."

The half-acre plot on which students are working this summer comprises five Spanish housing structures arranged around a central plaza and, it is located next to a Native American ceremonial mound. Moore said he expects to eventually find a palisade, or staked fence, that links all five structures.

"Mainly what we're interested in is trying to understand as much as we can about these buildings—how the Spanish were living at this site and how the interactions between the Spanish and the Indians were carried out," Moore said. "We're hoping that the interiors of the buildings will give us some clues."

Sixteenth-century accounts indicate that Juan Pardo, a Spanish military captain, led an expedition through the upper Catawba River Valley in 1567 in an attempt to claim the region for Spain and to find a route to silver mines in Mexico. He built six forts—including Fort San Juan—in what are today the Carolinas and Tennessee.

The soldiers at the fort coexisted peacefully with the Native Americans for 18 months, but then, according to documents, the natives attacked. They killed all but one soldier, burned the fort and buried the debris, the records showed.

Moore said recent archaeological evidence corroborates these Spanish accounts.

"The excavations have confirmed that the buildings were standing for a relatively short period of time, all five were burned at the same time and then were deliberately covered, which seems to suggest a single event," Moore said. "But we don't know if it was an ambush or if it was a situation in which the Indians had already killed the soldiers, and we don't know what motivated the attack. We just don't know the circumstances of the burning, but we're hoping to find out."

Fort San Juan is the only fort from the Pardo expedition that's been found. Moore and Beck, in their 1994 dissertation, were the first to posit the claim of its location in Burke County, citing remarkable similarities between the pottery found at the Berry site and that found at Santa Elena, the Spanish capital of continental America during the 16th century, in South Carolina.

Since 2001, students and archaeologists have been finding lead shot, nails, copper lacing tips for clothing, links of chain mail, glass beads and olive jar shards—all of which indicate a Spanish presence. They've also found numerous Indian artifacts, such as pottery, arrow heads and game pieces.

David Heavner, a retired school teacher, worked at the site for two years through WPCC's continuing education program. He said the low cost is what enticed him to enroll.

"Without the community college, I would have never done it," he said. "It's not very often you get to work with professional archaeologists on a national site and for the cost of a community college course. David (Moore) is making the site accessible to the public, and it's a real service to the community."

Heavner is now working as a paid assistant at the site.

Moore said the field school emphasizes experiential learning, giving students the opportunity not only to observe archaeologists at work but also to perform tasks themselves.

“Students learn how to screen all the soil and learn what to watch for,” Moore said. “They learn how to use the tools, how to do the basic techniques, and they get a good sense of how an archaeological site works.”

Students are involved in most aspects of digging, labeling, washing, sorting and cataloging, but those with specialized training do the more detailed analysis, Moore said.

Professors and administrators from WPCC have also worked at the site. Safford, who participated in 2001, said the experience cultivated in her a deeper appreciation for the crafts and culture of the Catawba Indians.

“I’ve never been so dirty in my life, but it was one of the most wonderful experiences I’ve ever had,” she said. “When you pull a piece of pottery off that screen, you’re holding something that was crafted 450 years ago. It’s magical.”

Because the majority of participants are inexperienced in archaeology, Warren Wilson College has hired a 14-member crew to work and supervise.

“This isn’t like digging a hole in your backyard,” Heavner said. “There’s certain ways you throw dirt and store dirt, and you have to be careful where you step. You get absolutely filthy, but it’s always exciting to see what’s under that next shovelful.”

Moore said he plans to continue his collaboration with WPCC until the entire site is excavated, which he said could take as long as 20 years.

Hartz is a summer intern at the North Carolina Community College System.

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