

16th century Spanish fort uncovered near Morganton

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MORGANTON, N.C. -- Before the Lost Colony at Roanoke Island, before the Jamestown settlement in Virginia, there was Fort San Juan in the North Carolina foothills.

Archaeologists studying a ceremonial mound from a Native American town called Joara last month discovered the first inland fort built by Europeans in the New World, near present-day Morganton.

For nearly three decades, researchers worked at what's known as the Berry archaeological site, certain it could reveal clues about the presence of one of six Spanish forts from the 16th century. But they lacked the evidence for any of the fortifications until now.

The discovery "solidifies our interpretation that we have found Joara and Fort San Juan," said David Moore, an archaeologist at Warren Wilson College near Asheville and a co-director of the 27-year excavation project.

The find illuminates new details of the Spanish occupation of the Southeast and represents a "microcosm of the early colonial situation," Moore said.

Moore and fellow researchers Robin Beck, of the University of Michigan, and Christopher Rodning, of Tulane University, had previously uncovered the remains of five Spanish settlement houses at the Berry site. They were aware of a fort in the area from Spanish documents.

By studying soil configurations, archaeologists at the site determined they had discovered a defensive moat surrounding a fort structure that could have been as large as 100 feet to 200 feet wide.

"We were quite certain that we had located the town, but we had found no conclusive evidence of fortification," Moore said.

Fort San Juan represents Europeans' first venture into the interior of the United States, Moore said.

In 1566, Spanish Captain Juan Pardo and his men embarked on an inland journey from the Spanish settlement Santa Elena on the coast of South Carolina. Some 300 miles inland in the foothills of North Carolina, Pardo established the settlement Cuenca, named for his hometown in Spain, and built Fort San Juan in 1567.

Pardo preceded England's Sir Walter Raleigh and the Lost Colony by nearly 20 years, and the English Jamestown fort and settlement by 40 years.

Spanish records from the time indicate Fort San Juan was the first and largest of six garrisons built by Pardo in what would become the Carolinas and Tennessee. It's the only one to have been discovered by archaeologists.

The Cuenco settlement and Fort San Juan were part of Spain's efforts to colonize the American South and discover gold.

Pardo's mission was to establish a road to Mexico, and researchers believe he and his men were also actively prospecting for gold, Moore said.

"The story of Fort San Juan and Joara is one little event, but it is an incredibly vivid event," Moore said. "It epitomizes these colonial events that happened daily over the next 200 years, where there are two cultures coming together, and there's going to be one that prevailed."

In the case of Pardo's settlements and forts, it was the Native Americans who overcame the European invaders.

The Spaniards relied on local Native Americans to supply them with food, but did not have the trade materials to continue the reciprocal relationship the natives expected.

Twenty-five Spanish soldiers were stationed at Fort San Juan for about 18 months in the 1560s before Native Americans destroyed the fort and settlement and killed all but one of the settlers. Researchers believe it's probable that all six of Pardo's forts were destroyed at the same time in coordinated ambushes, Moore said.

But had Pardo's forts succeeded – or had the Spanish discovered the gold that eventually sparked the United States' first gold rush – the American Southeast could have developed differently, Moore said.

"If the whole rebellion had failed on the part of the Indians, the Spanish would have held these forts, and there's no way they would've allowed the English colonies to take hold," Moore said.

The discovery of Fort San Juan changes the focus of researchers' present work at the site, about 75 miles northwest of Charlotte. But the goal, Moore said, is to continue learning about the local Native American settlement and their Spanish occupiers.

Morganton Mayor Mel Cohen said the public is "not aware of the gem" that is the Berry site.

He hopes a local cable TV station will do a documentary on the history of the site and the Joara excavation project. He also would like to have the history of the site taught in Burke County schools.

"I think it's a great asset to the history of Morganton and Burke County," Cohen said.