

Evidence of 16th-Century Spanish Fort in Appalachia?

Willie Drye in Plymouth, North Carolina
for [National Geographic News](#)

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A long-standing theory says that more than four centuries ago Spanish explorers ventured into the foothills of what is now North Carolina. They stayed long enough to possibly change the course of European settlement in the New World, then vanished into the fog of time, the story says.

Until recently historians regarded a 16th-century Spanish presence this far north in North America as more theory than fact. But archaeologists working in a farm field near the tiny community of Worry Crossroads might change that perception.

Combining detective work with old-fashioned digging, the team may have unearthed ruins and artifacts—evidence that Spanish soldiers did, indeed, roam the Appalachian Mountains. The researchers think they've found the site of Fort San Juan, where Spanish explorers reportedly stayed from 1566 to 1568. The outpost was near the American Indian village of Joara, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) east of present-day Asheville.

While the Spaniards' stay in western North Carolina would have been brief—about 18 months—it would have been long enough to perhaps have had a profound impact. Scholars think the Spanish may have brought diseases such as smallpox to the area, which decimated the Native Americans, who lacked immunity to the contagions.

"We don't have lots of data," said David Moore, an archaeologist at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa. "But what we do have suggests that it may have been a region where early European diseases contributed to a loss of the native populations."

The dramatic decline of Indian populations, plus the Spaniards' decision to abandon Fort San Juan and several other settlements, may have helped England's later colonization efforts.

English settlers tried and failed to establish a colony in 1587 on Roanoke Island on the coast of North Carolina. They established their first permanent settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607.

"Had these forts been established [and lasted] in the interior of North Carolina, the Spaniards would have fought harder to hold the East Coast against the English," Moore said.

And when English settlers ventured farther inland, the Indian tribes that might have opposed them were either gone or too weak to fight, he said.

Moore and several colleagues spent decades looking for clues about 16th-century

Spanish incursions into North America and how those expeditions may have affected Native Americans. Among Moore's colleagues are Chester DePratter and Marvin Smith at the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology and Charles Hudson, now an emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of Georgia.

The researchers knew that the Spanish liked to build forts near Indian villages, where they could obtain food. The team thought there were several Indian villages that might have attracted the explorers.

But the best known expedition, that of Hernando de Soto in 1539, left behind very little documentation about where the Spaniards went. The researchers had little to work with to determine where the Indian villages may have been.

About 20 years ago, however, DePratter came across a detailed account of a later expedition commanded by Captain Juan Pardo. The account was written by Juan de la Vandra, a scribe on the expedition who told the story of Pardo's attempt in 1566 to find a route from the Spanish port of Santa Elena (now Parris Island, South Carolina) to the Spanish gold mines in Mexico.

The scholars compared de la Vandra's account with what they already knew about 16th-century Native Americans in the area and pieced together a theory about where the Spaniards went and where Indian villages may have been. Still it was only a theory.

Then in the early 1980s the scholars got a break in their search for clues. Robin Beck, a student, showed some artifacts he'd found near Worry Crossroads to Hudson and others. Hudson, who wrote a book about Pardo's expedition, wondered if Beck had found the location of the Indian village of Joara. And if that was true, a Spanish fort might have been nearby.

The theory began to take on substance when archaeologists discovered the remains of four buildings in the nearby field that likely were part of Fort San Juan. They also found artifacts that, Moore said, the Spaniards "never would have traded to the Indians." These included lead shot used in the Spaniards' primitive firearms, nails, fragments from an olive jar, and small brass clothing items.

Hudson said the evidence of the Spanish presence is "not very spectacular stuff," but he doesn't think there's any other way these artifacts could have been found in the North Carolina foothills. Hudson said he and his colleagues have "advanced the first sustained argument" for the existence of Fort San Juan.

"Who could have made sense of finding that number of pieces of Spanish material in that location, apart from what we have done?" he said.

This past summer was the fourth season for the excavation at Worry Crossroads. The National Geographic Society funded the latest dig, during which evidence of a fifth building from the old fort was apparently discovered.

The archaeologists will resume their work next summer.