

500-year-old Indian village unearthed in Morganton

By Joe DePriest

PUBLISHED IN: LOCAL NEWS

MORGANTON Five hundred years ago, a Native American village hugged the banks of the Catawba River in present-day Morganton.

Archaeologist Emma Richardson, who has dug many artifacts from the ground in Burke County, can almost see the ancient settlement in her mind's eye.

Circled by a wooden palisade, buildings would have stood in a meadow where gardens flourished in the rich river-bottom soil.

Richardson also imagines a day in the 16th-century when villagers may have looked up from their toil and seen Spanish explorers arrive. After that, life would never have been the same.

The story of this clash of cultures will be told in a major living history project going up on the actual site of the village, now occupied by Morganton's Catawba Meadows Park.

It's the first phase of what will eventually become the Catawba Meadows Archaeology Interpretive Center. The focus will be on early Native Americans and Spanish explorers living in the Catawba Valley decades before the English settled Roanoke Island on the N.C. coast.

Also, the center's exhibit hall will showcase artifacts found about ten miles away in the remains of a Native American village called Joara, and a fort built by Spanish explorer Juan Pardo in 1567. Experts believe the fort was the first European settlement in the interior of the United States.

Since 1986, state archaeologists have worked there on private land, turning up thousands of artifacts such as spike-like nails, a metal scale, and lead balls for a harquebus – a portable matchlock gun.

- Want to go?

Groundbreaking for the Catawba Meadows Archaeological Interpretive Center's Living History area is May 26 at 1 p.m. at Catawba Meadows park in Morganton.

From 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., the Exploring Joara Foundation will hold a palisade-building workshop. Participants will learn how to use stone axes to prepare and erect posts.

The charge is \$15 for members and \$20 for nonmembers.

Details: 828-439-2463 or www.exploringjoara.org.

Related Stories

Related Images

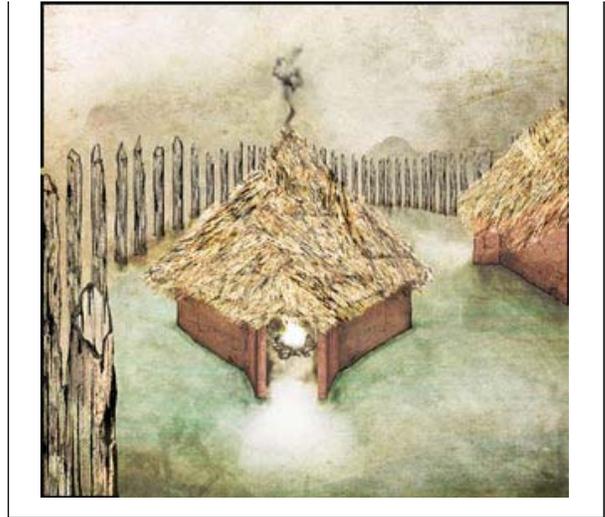


The effort has brought national attention in National Geographic, Smithsonian and Archaeology magazines and a PBS documentary, “The First Lost Colony.”

Public viewings of the artifacts have been limited to the annual field day held in June at Joara, also known as the “Berry Site” after the current landowners.

Now, the wheels are in motion to have a permanent home for the artifacts – in a public park along the Catawba River.

“This not just North Carolina history; this is United States history,” said Richardson, staff archaeologist for the Exploring Joara Foundation. “The new center will give people an idea of what it was like in this area 500 years ago. It will make history a little more real.”



Replica village

Groundbreaking for phase one – a replica village – is May 26. Construction will cost \$150,000 and take about two years. Meanwhile, the nonprofit foundation is launching a fundraising drive.

While there’s no timetable for the exhibit hall or an estimate of how much the building will cost, foundation members feel next Saturday’s ceremony marks major progress.

The living history area will have replicas of two Native American buildings that will be accessible to the public. The wooden palisade and garden will be reproduced, and kiosks will include interpretive information.

The exhibit will be used for public workshops about archaeology and Native American culture, as well as for school field trips. Visitors can also see the area where ongoing archaeological research is being conducted.

“This will be great for our community,” said foundation president Sam Avery. “We’re learning how to capitalize on these heritage assets and it’s something we need to get better at. Heritage tourism is a force. People really enjoy it.”

The village and interpretive center will go on two acres preserved within Morganton’s popular Catawba Meadows Park.

“It’s a perfect match for us,” said Avery, a former high school history teacher. “We think this project will help our economy. We’ve lost so much in the last ten years, jobs and population. This won’t float all boats, but it’s a nice addition.”

The idea for the history complex evolved slowly.

About 15 years ago, a UNC-Chapel Hill graduate student found artifacts on his family’s property about 8 miles from the Catawba River in Burke County. Experts determined the items were brought to the Catawba Valley by the Spanish. Radio carbon dating of jar fragments helped fix the time frame.

State archeologists had examined the “Berry Site” in 1986 but hadn’t found anything that pointed conclusively to Spanish explorers. After the jar fragments were dated, experts began to take a second look, and excavations have been ongoing ever since.

Lost towns

Experts hope the Burke discoveries can shed light on European settlement of North America, including the travels of Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto, who discovered the Mississippi River.

Some scholars have disagreed with the standard research that placed De Soto's three-year journey from Tampa Bay in 1539 as veering into only the westernmost part of North Carolina.

Using the journals of a member of a later Spanish expedition, Juan Pardo, scholars replotted the journey and brought it into the Catawba-Wateree river valley.

The documents mention lost Indian towns such as Joara and also mention this is where Pardo built Fort San Juan.

In 1997, using a device that shows magnetic features in the ground, experts found four burned buildings buried two to three feet in the earth at the Berry Site. As more artifacts turned up, they were convinced they'd found the remains of Fort San Juan.

'Powerful story'

David Moore, assistant professor of anthropology at Warren Wilson College and co-director of the Berry Site project, began investigating Catawba Meadows in 2004. Since the 1960s, it had been the known location of a Native American village, but no excavations had been done.

When Moore began digging, he found the remains of a burned building – the same type that had been discovered at the Berry Site. He also found other indications “this was an important village.”

A significant archaeological site like Catawba Meadows is the “perfect venue” for the interpretive center, he feels.

The center will be a work in progress for years, but Moore thinks it'll be worth the effort. Visitors can learn about the arrival of Europeans, the beginning of colonial expansion, and how a way of life Native Americans had followed for centuries was changed forever.

“It's a way of literally getting a hand on history,” Moore said. “It's one thing to see artifacts and try to visualize a village. But it's something else to see an actual palisade or building. It makes the experience that (much) more tangible.”

DePriest: 704-868-7745



[Subscribe to The Charlotte Observer.](#)