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New marker signifies Burke historic site

By Larry Clark



MORGANTON

A new historical marker now signifies the site of the first-known inland settlement by Europeans in the United States.

A road sign in Morganton designates Fort San Juan, a Spanish outpost built in 1566 in the Indian town of Joara off NC 181, but the new marker actually identifies the fort itself.

A dedication ceremony Monday unveiled the plaque that is anchored in native rock, thanks to the Fort San Juan Chapter of the Colonial Dames XVII Century. Preservation of records and historic sites is the primary objective of the Colonial Dames, and many of the members were on hand in a farmland field to celebrate what is called one of the most important archeological finds from pre-colonial America.

When Fort San Juan was built, the colony at Roanoke was still a dream of Sir Walter Raleigh. Jamestown was decades away. But the Spanish already had a dominant presence in the Caribbean and were out to explore and colonize that part of the New World that would become the United States of America.

The hot sun Monday beat down on the canopies raised for the marker dedication and reception, probably as it

did hundreds of years ago when Capt. Juan Pardo met with Catawba leaders in Joara to secure permission to build a fort on property now owned by the Berry family.

A message from Gov. Bev Perdue praised the Dames for supporting the archeological dig. Sam Avery of the Exploring Joara Foundation said the Dames “bring light to this significant effort” that has revealed a compelling snapshot from the distant past.

“This is an historic event ... and it’s a great honor to be here,” said Morganton Mayor Mel Cohen. Cohen, who dressed for a day in a dusty field, was in contrast to the Colonial Dames who came in attire appropriate for a special moment in Southern heritage. But his words were not lost on the crowd that also contained many school children, foundation members and others interested in the site.

“This is a look back into colonial history,” Cohen said. “This is great for Morganton and Burke County.”

Dr. David Moore of Warren Wilson College is one of the lead archeologists on the Fort San Juan project. Warren Wilson has long been a leader in North Carolina historical research and the state’s archeological footprint.

The big field and the area around it were identified many years ago as a former Indian settlement. In fact, Joara is thought to be one of the biggest Indian towns anywhere in the country. There was a huge mound there, but it had been scraped down when the land was contoured for farming. Still, much of the tell-tale signs of Indian presence remained when Moore was drawn to the site in 1986.

When he and fellow archeologists presented their theory about the findings in 1994, they were greeted with skepticism. However, the evidence discovered since then confirms that there was a Fort San Juan at Joara and it is the first-known European settlement in America’s interior. Before the fort, Europeans hugged the coast line.

Pardo set out in 1566 from Santa Elena on what is now Parris Island, SC, to find a route from Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean, Moore explained.

The Spanish wanted an alternative to navigating the pirate-infested waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

When Pardo reached Joara and saw the Blue Ridge Mountains, he thought he was close to fulfilling his mission. It was easy by then for navigators and explorers to determine latitude. But longitude was still a mystery, and even the Spanish had no idea about the vastness of the new land.

Pardo, as did later explorers, thought the Blue Ridge, the Sierras and the Rockies were the same mountain range.

He successfully negotiated with Catawba leaders to build an outpost. He brought gifts of beads, trinkets, axes and other metal work. It was a good relationship at first. Pardo went on to establish more forts in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. He reported to Santa Elena at least twice. It was on his second trip back to the settlement the Spanish had proclaimed their New World capital when disaster struck.

History is murky, but the Spaniards wore out their welcome among the Indians. Two years after the garrison was established in Burke County, San Juan and all the other forts were wiped out and burned. Only one soldier survived to tell the tale.

Pardo never returned to the interior. He simply disappeared from the historical record, Moore said. Pardo did have a notary, an official scribe, who took notes to ensure Pardo and his men followed orders to trace a fortified trail from Mexico to the Atlantic. Pardo thought he was close to achieving his mission when in reality he was hundreds of miles away from the territory in the southwest.

He was not sent to find riches, but to cut a safe route to move riches. Today, the treasure is the archeological record of Joara and Fort San Juan that continues to grow. There were no wagonloads of gold and silver.

The Spanish presence was never the same north of Florida again. Spain left the area to English and Dutch colonization and contended with other European nations only in the Caribbean-Florida-South America regions.

But Joara was never the same, either. Eventually, the native American area became a sparsely populated shadow of its former stature.

“We’ve found remains of fort supplies,” Moore told the crowd Monday. “The artifacts might be considered mundane, but they prove this is the site of Fort San Juan. We’ve identified the remains of five burned buildings.”

There are no descriptions of the fort in historic annals, Moore said, but additional excavation may reveal the nature of the outpost.

Mystery remains, but there is no question the excavation is authentic. That’s why – thanks to the Colonial Dames XVII Century – “Fort San Juan” is set in stone to properly mark a rich historic site.

Want to know more?

http://colonialdames17c.org/State_Pages/Pages_NorthCarolina.html

<http://ncpedia.org/history/colonial/fort-san-juan>

<http://exploringjoara.org>

<http://www.warren-wilson.edu/~arch/berrysite>

Book: “Spanish Attempts to Colonize Southeast North America, 1513-1587” by Larry Richard Clark (of WPCC fame), www.mcfarlandpub.com .

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