

New discoveries confirm Spanish presence at Berry Site dig

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MORGANTON — Had Juan Pardo and his army managed to survive and thrive in their colony in 1500s, perhaps all of Burke County today would speak Spanish.

Or so says the Exploring Joara Foundation archaeological team that recently uncovered Fort San Juan, where Juan Pardo and his army lived at what is now known as the Berry Site near Morganton.

“It’s an incredible story of the Spanish appropriating this place that is sacred and powerful and the Indians reasserting themselves,” said David Moore, executive archaeologist for the Exploring Joara Foundation. “The North Carolina colonial period didn’t begin on the coast, it began in the Piedmont.”

The Berry Site is a Native American town, known as Joara, inhabited from 1400 to 1600. Joara was visited by the Hernando de Soto expedition in 1540 and the Pardo expedition in 1567.

For three summers, archaeologists have excavated the Berry Site and, recently, they noticed a pattern in soil colors.

“You’ll notice four parallel colors,” Moore said as he pointed out how the hue of the soil often changes in variations of light brown, black and red.

The soil color also follows a pattern at the site.

“These are large postholes or a ditch of some sort,” Moore said. “It’s showing you the pattern of some kind of meter.”

Over time, Moore said archaeologists had discovered what they believed to be postholes for structures. After, archaeologist Robin A. Beck Jr., of the University of Michigan, examined the postholes and soil, he learned it was Fort San Juan.

“That’s the thing with science,” Moore said. “If you have your blinders on, you can’t learn new things.”

Fort San Juan was built on top of a small Native American mound, Moore said. This summer, Moore and his team of archaeologists and researchers have worked on excavating the site. So far, they have uncovered a moat and palisade.

The archaeologists are unclear on what was in the moat.

“We’re not sure,” Moore said. “We have multiple periods of things being deposited in the moat.”

Time will tell what more can be unearthed at the site.

“We will never excavate the whole thing,” Moore said. “It will all depend on funding and what we want to learn.”

The new discoveries give archaeologists a better idea of the overall scale of the Fort San Juan site.

“It will take a number of years, but we need to know how they organized the settlement,” Moore said.

While learning more about the Native Americans who occupied the Berry Site and their Spanish visitors will take time, knowing about the Spaniards character as explorers is already clear.

“When the Spanish conquered Mexico and South America, it wasn’t by coincidence,” Moore said.

“They were fearless.”