



tar heel history

Shards of an Olive Jar: Archaeological Excavations in the Catawba River Valley

A recently discovered fort in Burke County confirms that Spanish explorers were a presence in North Carolina decades before the establishment of the Lost Colony.

BY JOE GOODPASTURE

As a child, Rob Beck loved to stroll along a Burke County creek bank, searching for arrowheads and other artifacts from an ancient Native American settlement. The farm land he explored, owned by his aunt and uncle, Pat and James Berry, yielded a young boy's treasure of animal bones, gaming devices, pottery shards, tools, and arrowheads.

Inspired by this evidence of a lost civilization, young Beck vowed to

become an archaeologist. That dream came true, and years later, on the same site he explored as a boy, Beck made a discovery that sheds new light on the European settlement of North America.

Experts now believe the Berry site, off I-40 near Morganton, was the location of a 16th-century Spanish fort that existed 20 years before the establishment of the Lost Colony on Roanoke Island.

"This is considered a major find in

archaeological circles," says Dr. David Moore, a teacher at Warren Wilson College and director of the Upper Catawba Archaeological Project. "This gives us a window into that incredible time when Europeans were discovering this new land for their purposes and also impacting the native peoples already here."

A neglected time

The ongoing archaeological research in Burke County promises to provide fresh insight into a neglected time in American history when Native Americans first encountered European explorers. Investigators believe the 12-acre Berry site is an ancestral Catawba Indian town, one of several that existed along the headwaters of the Catawba River during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Situated in the fertile floodplain of the Upper Catawba River, the town was populated by several hundred Native Americans who grew corn, squash, and tobacco and hunted game in the nearby foothills. Earthen mounds and public plazas marked the symbolic center of the town and were surrounded by dwellings and workspaces. A 15-foot platform mound once existed on the Berry site but was bulldozed in the 1960s.

The Native American community was located on a major trading path, and the community would likely have maintained social relationships and exchanged goods with other villages in the region.

To understand how this thriving Native American town became the site of a 16th-century Spanish fort, some background about the early Spanish explorations in the new world is helpful.

According to Moore, Spain looked to Florida for more land and riches following the conquest of the Aztecs in Mexico and Incas in South America. Hernando de Soto and his army traveled from Florida through what is



The discovery of 16th-century olive jar fragments and wrought iron nails from the Berry site helped prove the existence of a Spanish fort.

Courtesy of David Moore

now North Carolina in 1540 on their way to the Mississippi River. In 1566, Juan Pardo left the Spanish town of Santa Elena on what is now the South Carolina coast (near present-day Parris Island) and traveled into North Carolina in search of an overland route to Mexico. Archaeological investigations provide evidence that both de Soto and Pardo passed through the upper Catawba River valley and visited the Berry site. De Soto referred to the town as "Xualla," while Pardo called it "Joara."

In 1567, Captain Pardo and a group of 125 men set out from Santa Elena to establish a safe route for the transport of gold and silver from Mexico. During his march, Pardo built a string of five forts between what is now Beaufort, South Carolina, and eastern Tennessee.

Fort San Juan, built at the Indian village of Joara, was the first fort constructed and the only one thus far to be unearthed. Archaeologists at the Berry site have now identified four burned structures thought to have housed some of the Spanish soldiers stationed at Fort San Juan between December 1566 and June 1568.

Fittingly, it was Rob Beck, who roamed the area as a boy hunting for artifacts, who made the discovery that linked the Native American town with the Spanish fort.

Spanish artifacts

Moore and his associates began excavations at the Berry site in 1986. They knew both de Soto and Pardo passed through the Catawba valley and were consequently watchful for Spanish artifacts. But it was not until 1994 that Beck found the shards of an olive jar that were positively identified as Spanish.

"At the time, I didn't realize the significance of the olive jar fragments," Beck recalls. "But when I first picked them up, I suspected they were Spanish. We started doing research, and that's when I knew it was true." Several other Spanish artifacts have since been found at the site, including wrought iron nails, pieces of majolica, lead balls for a matchlock gun, and a brass aglet, which is a lacing tip for the end of a boot.

The definitive discovery, however, came after archaeologists used a special instrument that reveals

magnetic features and burned areas underground. "We surveyed a two-acre site and generated a map that included several very large anomalies," explains Moore. "Then we did cell cores and found burned soil that, given the patterns and sizes, had to be a burned village." Further excavations early in 2002 confirmed that the burned timbers came from the Spanish fort of San Juan.

Research has revealed at least four burned buildings that form a distinct enclosure and surround a large central pit that is currently being excavated. All four of the buildings are rectangular, measuring about 25 feet on a side, and were built in a style typical of Native American structures.

Cultures clash and burn

Archaeologists surmise that the fort was burned during an uprising by the Native Americans. The Spaniards lived with the natives and depended on them for their food, but there is clear evidence from Spanish documents that the natives were very unhappy about the presence of the Europeans.

In March 1567, Pardo, who had returned to Santa Elena, received a letter from Hernando Moyano at Fort San Juan. The sergeant reported a battle with a chief named Chisca and said he would press on beyond Joara if ordered to do so. Before Pardo's orders could arrive, Moyano was threatened by another mountain chief who vowed to eat the Spaniards, as well as the sergeant's dog.

Departing at once from the fort, 20 Spaniards, accompanied by a contingent of warriors from Joara, traveled for four days over the mountains where they were surprised to find the chief's town enclosed by a very high, wooden wall. Sergeant Moyano claimed to have burned the town, killing 1,500 Indians in battle, although this figure is probably an exaggeration.

By May 1568, according to Moore, news reached Santa Elena that natives had attacked all of the interior forts, and all had fallen. Only one Spanish soldier was believed to have escaped the destruction. Although it is not known whether all the forts were attacked at the same time, it is clear

that none remained by June 1568.

Several factors may have had a role in the natives' decision to attack the forts, but two stand out: Spaniards' demands for food and improprieties with Native American women. With regard to the latter, Pardo had specifically instructed soldiers at one settlement not to bring any women into the fort at night.

Compelling evidence

"This is a phenomenal site," exclaims Chris Rodning, another archaeologist working on the project. "The Berry site provides a window on what Native American life was like when Europeans first arrived. The village continued to flourish after the Spanish passed through, and future studies will demonstrate the European impact on the native culture."

Moore surmises that it would be difficult to overstate the importance of the Berry site. "There is compelling archaeological and documentary evidence that the Berry site is indeed the native town of Joara," he says. "Our investigations over the past two years make it clear that burned buildings and other remnants of this fascinating native town are well preserved."

"The site offers us the opportunity to study the direct interaction between 16th-century native peoples and soldiers of the occupying Spanish armies. Although archaeologists and historians previously have been able to study such interaction at the coastal sites of Santa Elena and St. Augustine, Florida, the Berry location is the only site in the interior Southeast where such a study can take place," Moore adds.

Archaeologists say it will easily take at least 10 years or longer to excavate the Berry site and anticipate their work will provide a deeper understanding of the obscure period of American history between 1500 and 1700.

Moore explains, "We have the opportunity to look at the ... period of change when sophisticated Native American chieftains were severely impacted by Europeans. This is the focus of our investigation. This could be a lifetime work. 🐾"

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