Spanish Fort Built by Gold Hunters Discovered

Before there was Jamestown and even before there was Roanoke, there was Spain’s Fort San Juan, in the Appalachian foothills of North Carolina.

Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the fort built by gold-hunting Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century and say it’s the oldest European garrison ever found in the interior of the United States.

The settlement around Fort San Juan was occupied for less than two years and it met a rather bloody end — likely brought on by the Spaniards’ botched foraging for food and their sexual transgressions with Native American women. But the short-lived fort’s traces serve as a reminder of how different U.S. history might have been if Spain had been more successful in its early colonial campaigns. [In Photos: Amazing Ruins of the Ancient World]

The garrison was built by Spanish Captain Juan Pardo and his men in about 1567 near what is today Morganton in western North Carolina, about 300 miles (480 kilometers) inland. It is thought to be the first and the largest of the forts that Pardo established in an attempt to colonize the American South. It’s also the only one to have been discovered so far.

“Fort San Juan and six others that together stretched from coastal South Carolina into eastern Tennessee were occupied for less than 18 months before the Native Americans destroyed them, killing all but one of the Spanish soldiers who manned the garrisons,” University of Michigan archaeologist Robin Beck said in a statement.

The fort was located at the Native American site of Joara, part of the mound-building Mississippian culture. Previous excavations had revealed evidence of a European presence at Joara, including houses occupied by Spanish soldiers.

“We have known for more than a decade where the Spanish soldiers were living,” another excavator, Christopher Rodning of Tulane University, explained in a statement this summer. The team returned to learn more about the Mississippian mound at the site, but last month, their excavations inadvertently exposed part of the fort.

“For all of us, it was an incredible moment,” Rodning said.
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