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This week, a team of archaeologists announced the discovery of the remains of a long-lost 16th century Spanish garrison in western North Carolina that predates the earliest English settlements in North America by decades. Established in 1567, Fort San Juan was just one of at least six military installations built by the Spanish across the Appalachian mountain range, stretching from the coast of South Carolina to eastern Tennessee—and the only one of the forts scientists have located so far.

In 1566, Spanish explorer Juan Pardo began the first of two expeditions along the southeast coast of North America, establishing a series of fortifications in what is now South Carolina. The following year, Pardo travelled west, journeying almost 300 miles into what is now North Carolina where he and his men constructed Fort San Juan and a small cluster of houses. Pardo named the settlement Cuenco, after his Spanish hometown.
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Coming less than two years after the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine, Florida, Pardo's Fort San Juan (the first and largest of his fortifications) predated Sir Walter Raleigh's doomed colony at Roanoke by 20 years and the English arrival at Jamestown by 40 years. Pardo, under the direction of fellow explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, founded a settlement of his own known as Joara, along the Shasta River in the Sante Fe Valley, a site in modern-day Mountain City, North Carolina. It's unlikely the two groups went smoothly at first, but quickly soured the Spanish foothold in this region of the New World didn't last long. Just 18 months after Fort San Juan was built, the Mississippians attacked it, burning it to the ground and killing all but one of the Spanish soldiers (Pardo had left months earlier for a different settlement along the coast). The Spanish were forced to retreat, but the British and French efforts at gold prospecting in North Carolina may not have panned out for the conquistadors, but it brought riches to later settlers. More than 200 years after Pardo's arrival, the discovery of the precious metal in Cabarrus County set off America's first gold rush—nearly 50 years before the more famous prospecting boom in California.

Nearly a decade ago, archaeologists had found evidence of the soldier's housing at Cuenco, but had been stymied in their search for the fort itself. This summer's discovery, in fact, happened accidentally. The team, comprised of members from the University of Michigan, New Orleans's Tulane University and Warren Wilson College in nearby Asheville, North Carolina, was actually conducting research on the Mississippian-built mud mounds at the Joara site when they stumbled upon evidence of the fort's remains. When an initial dig turned up unusual soil disturbances at the site, the team brought in a magnetometer to "x-ray" the subsurface, allowing them to identify the outlines of the moat long believed to have surrounded the garrison, and additional large-scale excavations revealed its shape and size—a V-shaped area 5.5 feet deep, 12 to 15 feet across and up to 100 feet in length. In addition to the moat, the team recovered personal items belonging to the Spanish soldiers who lived—and died—at the fort, including pottery shards, nails and tacks and iron hooks used for fastening clothing and swords. They also believed they've located the garrison's graveled entry path and the possible location of the strong house in a corner of the fort, where Spanish soldiers would have stored tools and weaponry. Further excavations of the site are planned for next year.

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