

Rewriting history with remains of Spanish fort

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Warren Wilson archaeologist David Moore stands in front of the Berry Archaeological Site in Burke County. After years of excavating Moore and his colleagues have recently uncovered physical evidence of Fort San Juan near Morganton. / Dillon Deaton/ddeaton1@citizen-times.com

MORGANTON — Manteo might have to move over in the history books when it comes to the first European settlement in North Carolina.

Burke County boasts evidence of a Spanish fort built and then abandoned 20 years before Sir Walter Raleigh's ill-fated Lost

Colony on Roanoke Island.

Warren Wilson College archaeologist David Moore has been digging for clues in the Catawba River valley for 30 years. This summer, he and his colleagues struck pay dirt on a farm off Highway 181, locating the moat and palisade wall surrounding Fort San Juan — believed to be the oldest European garrison in the interior of the continental United States.

"I've dreamed of finding evidence of this fort," Moore said.

The Spanish fort was built atop an Indian mound at a powerful Native American town known as Joara, home to perhaps 200-400 people, ancestors of the Catawba Indian tribe. Hernando De Soto had stopped here in 1540 on his excursion through the Southeast.

In 1567, Captain Juan Pardo brought an army of 125 men to Joara, but the Spanish intended to stay this time, interested in mining the gold they heard rumors of.

They built Fort San Juan, the largest garrison in a trail of six that stretched from the South Carolina coast over the Appalachians to the French Broad River and as far west as modern-day Knoxville. But the Spanish only stayed about a year and a half before the Indians violently forced them off their lands.

Both the fort and the the Indian village have been buried for four centuries. The Indian mound itself was plowed down in the 1950s for farmland until the land passed into ownership of James Berry and the late Pat Berry. The Berry family wanted to see the history underlying their land finally revealed.

Moore has been exploring the Berrys' fields for years, certain that this was the likely site of the Spanish fort alluded to in historical records.

In 2004, with funding from the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation, Moore

and his colleagues, Robin Beck of the University of Michigan and Christopher Rodning of Tulane University, began excavating several houses the Spanish had built beside Upper Creek, a tributary of the Catawba River.