

# Fort San Juan, oldest European fort in inland USA discovered in Great Smoky Mountains, 450 YEARS after it was destroyed by Native American tribesmen

By [Staff Writer](#) 24/07/2013 08:08:00



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- Fort San Juan was built in 1567, long before the British colony at Roanoke
- The fort was destroyed by local Native Americans less than 18 months later
- Its demise marked the end of Spanish attempts to colonise North America

By Ruth Styles

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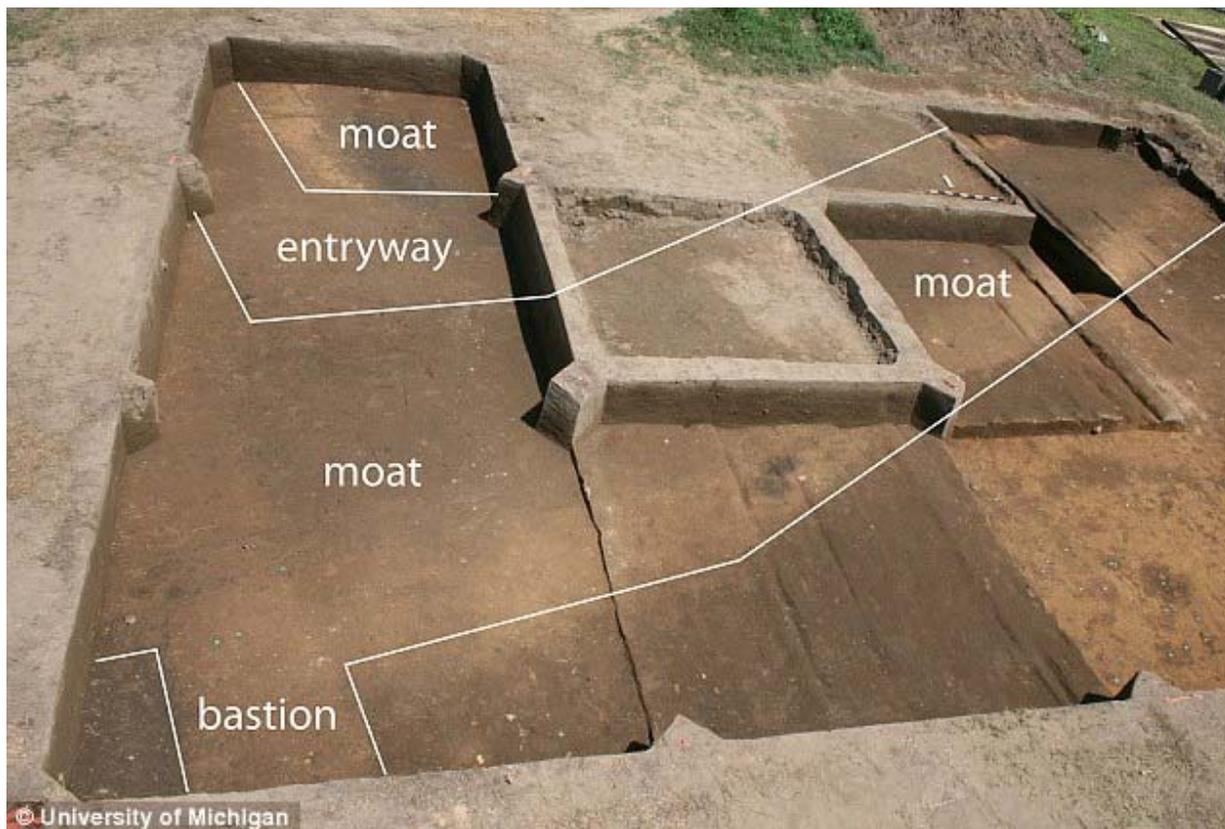
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The remains of the oldest European fort in North America have been unearthed by a team of archaeologists from the University of Michigan.

The remnants of the building, which was constructed by Spanish would-be colonists, were discovered in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains - a sub range of the Appalachians.

Named Fort San Juan, it was destroyed less than 18 months after it was built, but is historically significant because it marks the end of Spanish attempts to colonise North America - clearing the way for the British.



**Buried:** Although the settlement of Cuenca was discovered in 2004, the fort has proved elusive until now





**Protection:** The V-shaped Spanish moat was a key part of the fort's defences but couldn't save it in the end

Built by Spanish Captain Juan Pardo in 1567, the fort pre-dates Sir Walter Raleigh's doomed colony at Roanoke by almost 20 years, while the Jamestown settlement, which marked the start of the British domination of North America, wasn't built for another four decades.

Almost 300 miles from the Atlantic coast, the fort was occupied for just 18 months before it was destroyed by Native American Cherokee tribesmen and all but one of the 120 soldiers in the garrison killed.

The settlement protected by the forts, Cuenca, was also destroyed by the Cherokee - ending Spanish colonial ambitions in North America in the process.

Although remains of some of the Cuenca homes had previously been discovered, the fort itself had proved elusive until now.

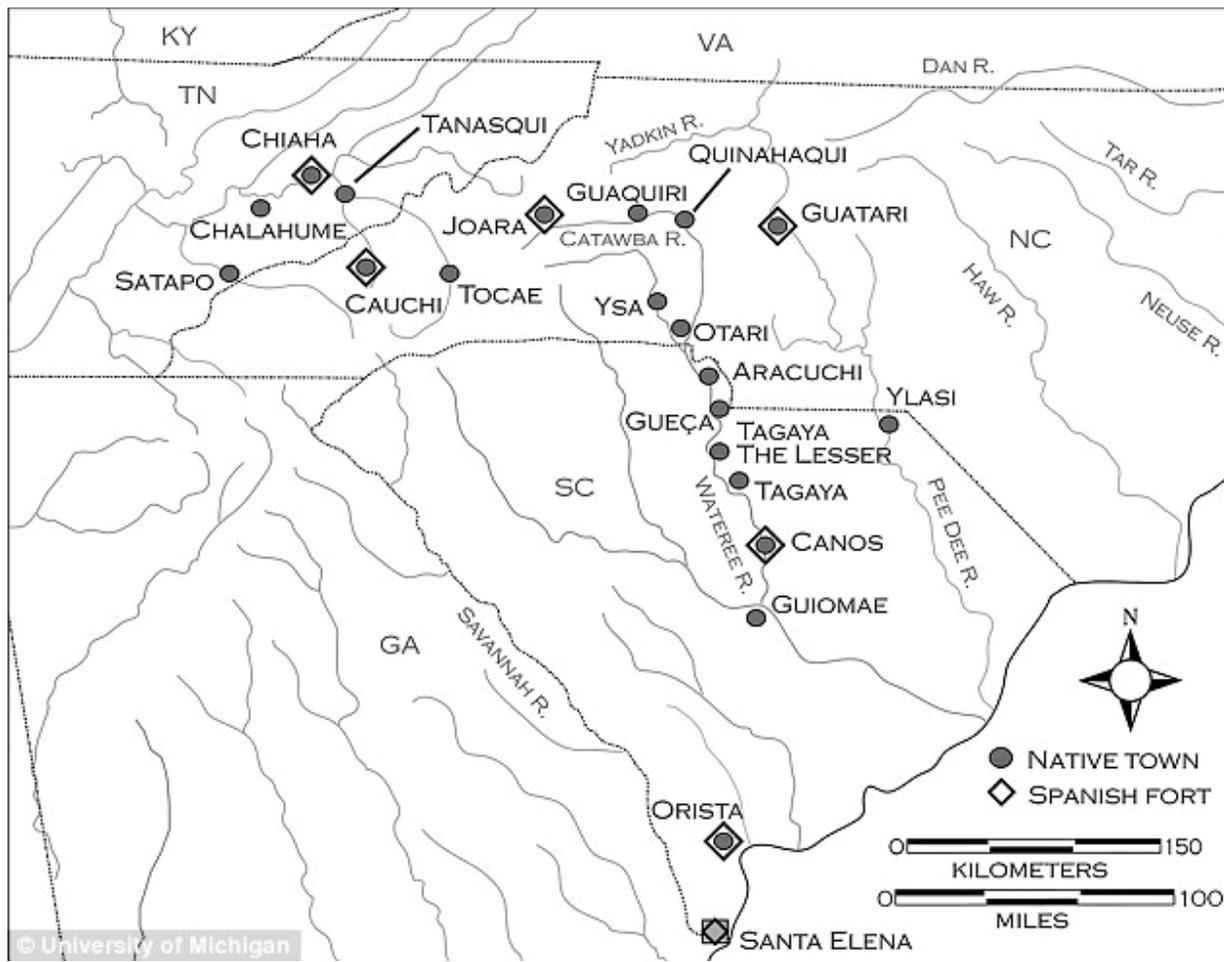
'We have known for more than a decade where the Spanish soldiers were living,' revealed Christopher Rodning, an archaeologist from Tulane University.



Reimagining: William Henry Powell's 1853 *Discovery of the Mississippi* depicts the early Spanish colonists



Remains: Artifacts left behind by Spanish settlers include this clothing hook, used to fasten doublets



**Settlements:** This map shows where the seven doomed forts once stood, including Fort San Juan (Joara)

'This summer we were trying to learn more about the Mississippian mound at Berry, one that was built by the people of Joara [a Native American settlement], and instead we discovered part of the fort. For all of us, it was an incredible moment.'

Using a combination of large-scale excavations and magnetometry, which produces X-ray like images of the site, scientists were able to pinpoint sections of the fort, including the moat and a gravelled surface that is likely to have been the entrance to the fort.

The searchers also discovered Spanish majolica pottery and other artifacts including iron nails and a hook thought to have been used to button doublets.

The Spanish garrison are thought to have been searching for gold in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains with - they thought - the blessing of local tribespeople.

'The soldiers believed that when their gifts were accepted, it meant that the native people were their subjects,' said Robin Beck of the University of Michigan.



Intact: The corner bastion, moat and entryway are visible in this shot, taken from the south side of the fort



Success: Robin Beck (right), Dave Moore (centre) and Chris Rodning (right) led the team of archaeologists

'But to the natives, it was simply an exchange. When the soldiers ran out of gifts, they expected the natives to keep on feeding them.

'The same thing nearly happened to [British] colonists at Jamestown,' he revealed. 'The colonists nearly starved to death during the winter of 1609 but Jamestown was in a very different situation to that of Fort San Juan and Cuenca.

'English settlers kept coming but when Fort San Juan fell, it was gone for good.'

Archaeologist David Moore, of Warren Wilson College, added: 'The events at Fort San Juan represent a microcosm of the colonial experience across the continent.

'Spain's failure created an opening that England exploited at Jamestown, when America's familiar frontier narrative begins.

'For Native Americans, though, this was the beginning of a long-term and often tragic reshaping of their precolonial world.'

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