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Marker unveiled at Berry site

By Cheryl m. Shuffler



A group dedicated to preserving historic sites unveiled a marker at what is believed to be the “first lost colony” on Monday.

The Fort San Juan Chapter of the Colonial Dames XVII Century hosted a ceremony at the site of the 16th century Spanish settlement of the Native American town of Joara.

At what is commonly referred to today as the Berry site — after the Berry family that owns the land off Henderson Mill Road — Dr. David Moore, an archeologist from Warren Wilson College, and a team of archeologists, students and volunteers have been excavating pieces of the past since 1987.

Moore presented a history lesson of Fort San Juan to the crowd gathered under a tent for Monday’s ceremony.

“You are sitting right in the middle of a 16th century Native American site that we believe was inhabited by ancestors of the Catawba Indians,” Moore said.

Moore stressed the significance of finding Fort San Juan.

“This is the landmark, first case of the Europeans attempting to settle on the interior. ... The story plays out

right here on this ground,” he said.

Over the years Moore and his teams have unearthed five burned buildings plus “mundane, everyday objects” Moore says helps prove the existence of Joara, including nails, broken pieces of clay jars and medicine bottles.

Moore and Exploring Joara Foundation president Sam Avery thanked the Colonial Dames for their work in preserving and honoring the site.

Speaking of the Berry site’s significance to the community, Avery said, “It gives the general public a chance to hands-on get involved in something as significant as this,” Avery said of the Berry site, “but to work under the guidance of professional archeologists.”

Morganton Mayor Mel Cohen read a proclamation for the marker before it was unveiled Monday.

The proclamation, in part, reads, “ ... this memorable event is important to all Americans and especially North Carolina school children as it gives them a look back into colonial history and the formation of our great state.”

The marker includes the name of Juan Pardo and the date 1567 (two decades before the Lost Colony on Roanoke Island) and proclaims Pardo made the earliest European settlement in the interior United States.

The marker also says the Catawba Indians destroyed the settlement in 1568, ending the Spanish colonization.

Moore said 125 men were part of Pardo’s expedition, having walked to Joara from what is present day Parris Island, S.C.

The settlement ended after only 18 months as the hosts, the Catawba Indians, grew displeased with the Spaniards, feeling they weren’t getting anything in return out of the settlers, Moore said.

Only one man survived when the Native Americans turned on the Spanish settlers, burning their fort and killing them. The lone survivor was married to one of the Native American women.

Moore said it is believed he was allowed to flee and went back to South Carolina to report the death and destruction he witnessed.

Before Monday’s ceremony, visitors watched archeologists at work and following the ceremony, the Colonial Dames provided a picnic lunch on the grounds.

The site will be open to the public again Saturday as Warren Wilson College, Western Piedmont Community College and the Exploring Joara Foundation host the annual field day from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The public can see the results of this year’s field school and activities include demonstrations, interactive exhibits, displays of Native American artifacts from the site and a replica Spanish arquebus, activities for children and pottery demonstrations.