

European Fort Discovered In The Appalachian Mountains

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A team of archaeologists, led by the University of Michigan, has discovered the remains of the earliest European fort in the interior of what is now the United States. This find will provide new insight into the beginning of the US colonial era, and the all-too-human reasons spoiling Spanish dreams of gold and glory.

In 1567, nearly 20 years before Sir Walter Raleigh's colony at Roanoke was lost and 40 years before the Jamestown settlement was established, Spanish Captain Juan Pardo and his men built Fort San Juan in the foothills of the [Appalachian Mountains](#).

"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," said University of Michigan archaeologist [Robin Beck](#), assistant professor in the U-M Department of Anthropology and assistant curator at the U-M Museum of Anthropology.

Beck, along with archaeologists [Christopher Rodning](#) of Tulane University and [David Moore](#) of Warren Wilson College, excavated the site of Fort San Juan near the present-day town of Morganton in western North Carolina, nearly 300 miles from the Atlantic Coast.

The site, called the "Berry site" in honor of the landowners James and the late Pat Berry, is on the location of the Native American town of Joara along a tributary of the Catawba River. The inhabitants of Joara were part of the mound-building Mississippian culture that flourished in the southeastern US between 800 and about 1500 CE.

Beck and his team, with support from the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation, began excavating several of the houses at Joara that had been occupied by Spanish soldiers. This small colony of Spanish houses was named Cuenca, after Pardo's hometown in Spain. The remains of the fort, however, escaped discovery until last month.

"We have known for more than a decade where the Spanish soldiers were living," Rodning said. "This summer we were trying to learn more about the Mississippian mound at Berry, one that was built by the people of Joara, and instead we discovered part of the fort. For all of us, it was an incredible moment."

The team used a combination of large-scale excavations and geophysical techniques, such as magnetometry that provides x-ray-like images of what lies below the surface, to identify sections of the fort's defensive moat or ditch. They have also found what are likely a corner bastion and a graveled surface that formed an entryway to the garrison.

In late June, excavations in the moat area revealed it was a large V-shaped feature measuring 5.5 feet deep

and 15 feet across. The scientists have recovered Spanish artifacts this summer, including iron nails and tacks, Spanish majolica pottery and an iron clothing hook of the sort used for fastening doublets and attaching sword scabbards to belts.

Historical records show Fort San Juan was the first, and largest, of the six garrisons founded by Pardo as part of the ambitious Spanish effort to colonize the American South. The Spanish colonies of St. Augustine and Santa Elena established in 1565 and 1566, respectively, were founded by Pedro Menendez de Aviles, who spearheaded the colonization effort. So far, Fort San Juan is the only one of Pardo's garrisons to have been discovered.

Beck explains during the brief time Pardo's men were at Joara, they actively prospected for gold but never found it. The gold was there, however. American settlers found so much just lying on the surface near rivers in the early 1800s that a 17-pound nugget was used as a doorstop. A US mint was established in Charlotte, North Carolina, triggering the first gold rush in US history.

Had the Spanish discovered the gold, Spain would more than likely have launched a full-scale colonial invasion of the area. England would have had a harder time establishing its foothold at Jamestown, and the entire southeastern part of what is now the US might instead have become part of Latin America. The Native Americans wiped out the Spanish quickly, before they could discover the gold. The question is, why?

The research team argues the Spanish originally bartered with the natives for food.

"The soldiers believed that when their gifts were accepted, it meant that the native people were their subjects," Beck said. "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. By that time, they had also committed what Spanish documents refer to as "indiscretions" with native women, which may have been another reason that native men decided they had to go. So food and sex were probably two of the main reasons for destroying Spanish settlements and forts."

The significance of Fort San Juan extends far beyond the Carolina Piedmont, according to David Moore.

"The events at Fort San Juan represent a microcosm of the colonial experience across the continent," he said. "Spain's failure created an opening that England exploited at Jamestown in 1607, 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."

