

# CONTACT *and* CONFLICT

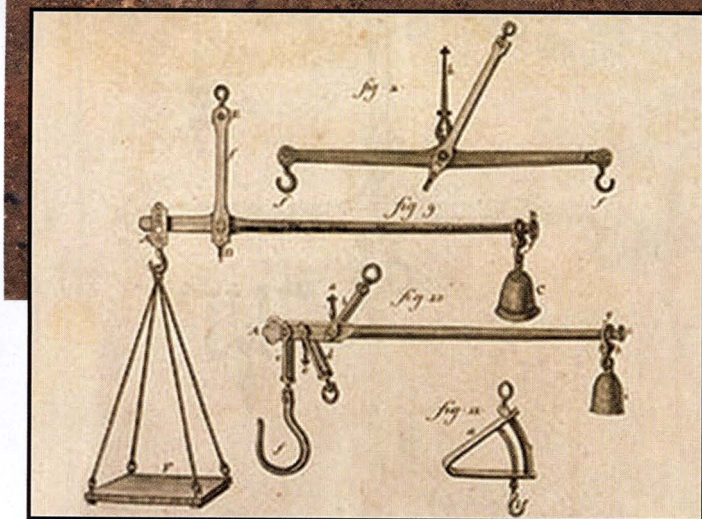


Excavators trowel the area over Structure 5, one of the burned buildings they discovered. This building was excavated in 2007 after it had been completely exposed beneath the plow zone.



***Spain's attempt to establish a 16th-century fort in what is now North Carolina seems to have started well and then ended disastrously. A site at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains could solve the mystery of what happened and why.***

*By Constance E. Richards*



*The archaeologists hypothesize that the iron scale they found in Structure 5 was used by the Spanish.*

*(Left) Drawing of typical 17th-century scales.*

As I trundled through the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Morganton, North Carolina, the usual landscape of colorful barbecue locales, fast food eateries, chain stores, and gas stations gave way to highway fruit stands, small ranch homes, hayfields, and the odd dilapidated tobacco barn. It is here, a few miles of twists and turns from town, that the Berry site lies. Berry contains the ruins of the oldest European settlement in what is now the United States. The investigation of this 12-acre site set among tree farms, green fields, and old homesteads, is overseen by archaeologists David Moore of nearby Warren Wilson College, Robin Beck of the University of Oklahoma, and Christopher Rodning of Tulane University. I pulled off the paved road onto a dirt drive leading to the excavation area. Gnats and sweat bees hovered, stirring into a frenzy as I walked through the long grass under a glaring July sun.

Greeted by Moore, who first investigated the site in 1986, and Beck, who joined him in 1994, I was ushered to the tent that offered shade to a group of field school students from Warren Wilson College. The college, in conjunction with Western Piedmont Community College, has conducted a field

school at the site every summer since 2001, the year Rodning joined the project. Some 40 to 50 archaeologists, students, and volunteers work at the site during the height of the dig.

The landowners, Pat and James Berry, said the site was plowed in the 1950s, disturbing some of the top layers of artifacts, and part of the site was plowed again in the late 1990s. Despite this, the archaeologists are still recovering valuable data. "This year was extraordinary," Beck said. "It was the first year we were able to completely excavate one of the buildings. We've been waiting 10 years to raise the resources to do so."

The archaeologists excavated Structure 5, one of five burnt buildings that they think were associated with the Spanish settlement at Fort San Juan. Some of the areas between and around those structures have also been excavated. The structures were first noted when a 1997 proton-magnetometer survey identified several anomalies there. Excavations in 2001 revealed that these anomalies were the vestiges of buildings that formed a compound around a central plaza. Sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts such as lead shot, nails, copper lacing tips used for fastening clothing, links of chain



**Robin Beck (left), David Moore (center), and Christopher Rodning (right) codirect the investigation. Moore began working at the site in 1986. Beck and Rodning subsequently joined the project in 1994 and 2001, respectively.**

mail used as body armor, and shards of olive jars and blue majolica ointment jars were also recovered in this area. The only other known site in the Southeastern interior with a similar assemblage of 16th-century Spanish materials, according to Beck, is the Governor Martin site in Tallahassee, Florida, where Hernando de Soto wintered in 1539.

Several historical documents tell of a Spanish fort near, or adjacent to, Joara, a Native American village. The more detailed of these accounts came from Juan de la Bandera, a scribe who traveled with Captain Juan Pardo, the military officer who led Spanish explorations into Tennessee and the Carolinas in the 1560s. Pardo penned a shorter account.

Neither of these accounts speaks of the lives of the 30 Spanish soldiers who were garrisoned at Fort San Juan for 18 months to help establish a Spanish foothold in the continent's interior.

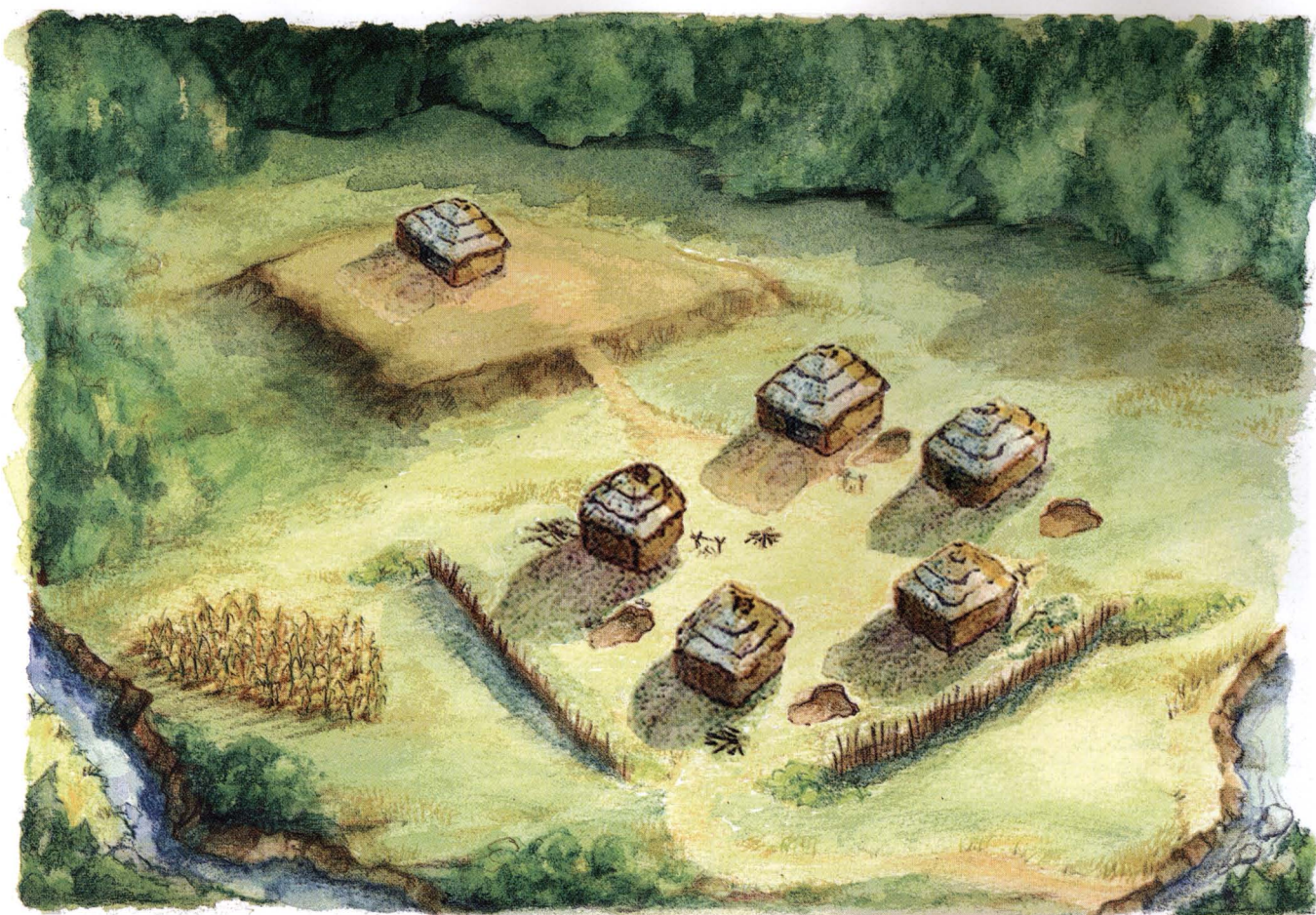
The archaeologists are searching for evidence of the fort, how the Spanish lived, and the nature of their interaction with the Native Americans. The soldiers apparently coexisted peacefully with the Indians during their stay, then, for reasons unknown, the natives attacked the fort, killing all but one soldier who managed to escape to Santa Elena. The fort was burned to the ground, but the archaeologists are uncertain whether this occurred during the attack or sometime after.

This project is unusual, according to Rodning, because "the relationship between Fort San Juan and the native community of Joara is one in which native people were dominant, and, arguably, the Spanish soldiers were dependent upon native help and, perhaps, even threatened by the possibility of troubled relations with native groups. This situation is very different than the more common scenario, especially later in time, of European dominance or at least influence."

"Scholars have debated about the routes of Pardo and de Soto for years," Moore said, but there is a consensus that both expeditions passed through the upper Catawba Valley of North Carolina, with de Soto preceding Pardo. The latter first traveled from Santa Elena, the Spanish capital located on what is now Parris Island in South Carolina, searching for an overland route to Spanish silver mines in northern Mexico. The Spanish wanted to establish the route to protect the silver mines, which had been repeatedly attacked by native groups living north of the mines. They were also intent on "pacifying the local native populations and establishing a Spanish colonial presence in the interior," said Rodning. During his march, Pardo built six small forts between what is now Beaufort, South Carolina, and eastern Tennessee to



**Archaeologist Sarah Sherwood of the University of the South takes soil samples from the floor of Structure 1. The samples will be examined for evidence of micro-stratigraphy and micro-artifacts to help interpret the function of the structure.**



CHARLOTTE HILL-COBB

***This illustration shows a portion of Joara at the time of Spanish contact. Archaeological research shows that the five buildings grouped together were burned. It's unclear what purposes these buildings served. The ceremonial mound in the upper portion of the illustration was then more than 12 feet tall. The archaeologists assume it was crowned by a structure.***

secure the route. The Spanish were dependent on native villages for food; therefore, though their silver mines were to the southwest, they initially headed north to take advantage of the hospitality of friendly Native American villages de Soto had previously visited.

According to Bandera's account, in January 1567 Pardo arrived at a large native town at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains that the Spanish originally called Joara. (The archaeologists think Joara is a corruption of Xuala, which de Soto called the town.) Pardo renamed it Cuenca, after his home in Spain, and Fort San Juan was built. The threat of a possible French attack drew Pardo back to Santa Elena, and the 30 soldiers remained to defend the fort. "Before England had made any viable and sustainable claims to North America, both the Spanish and French were trying to establish their own claims and their own permanent presence on the colonial frontier," Rodning noted.

The archaeological evidence from the Berry site confirms the historical accounts of Joara. During their investigations in the 1980s and '90s, the archaeologists recovered ceramics at the Berry site that are characteristic of Native Americans who inhabited the upper Catawba and Yadkin river valleys during the 14th to 16th centuries. The site also contains the remnant of an earthen platform mound that

was discovered in 1887 by the Bureau of American Ethnology during a mound exploration program led by the noted archaeologist Cyrus Thomas. This ceremonial mound, which was originally more than 12 feet high, was bulldozed in the early 1960s to a height of two feet.

The archaeologists are trying to determine the purposes of the five structures they've identified, as well as who used them. "We don't have a description of the fort itself," Moore said, such that only extensive, large-scale excavations can clarify the nature of these buildings and the Spanish compound. "The overall pattern of the buildings is Native American," he observed, though all five of these buildings are unusually large by native standards. These "semi-subterranean" structures, as Moore called them, had a below-ground foundation from which wattle and daub walls arose. But at least one of the timbers from Structure 1, which was excavated in 2003, had a square-cut notch that was used to join this element to other timbers, suggesting Spanish influence. "We feel they were built by natives under the direction of the Spanish," he said.

Last season, the archaeologists unearthed a central hearth and numerous upright burned wooden posts that were likely part of Structure 5's frame. They also discovered burned firewood, fallen roof timbers that still retained their bark, and artifacts such as decorated ceramic fragments, and

a link of chain mail armor. The most significant artifact found within Structure 5 is an iron scale that the Spanish likely used to weigh materials. A detailed list of supplies, with pounds of nails, lead shot, and other objects were included in Bandera's account. "Its presence inside the building is another very good indication that Spanish soldiers were using that building," Beck surmised. "Whether it was being used as a place to live or as a storehouse, or both, the scale suggests that it was Spaniards primarily using the building." The Europeans introduced metals to the natives, who valued them as ornaments rather than tools, therefore the "Native Americans would not have had a use for the scale as an instrument for measuring things in standard weights," he explained.

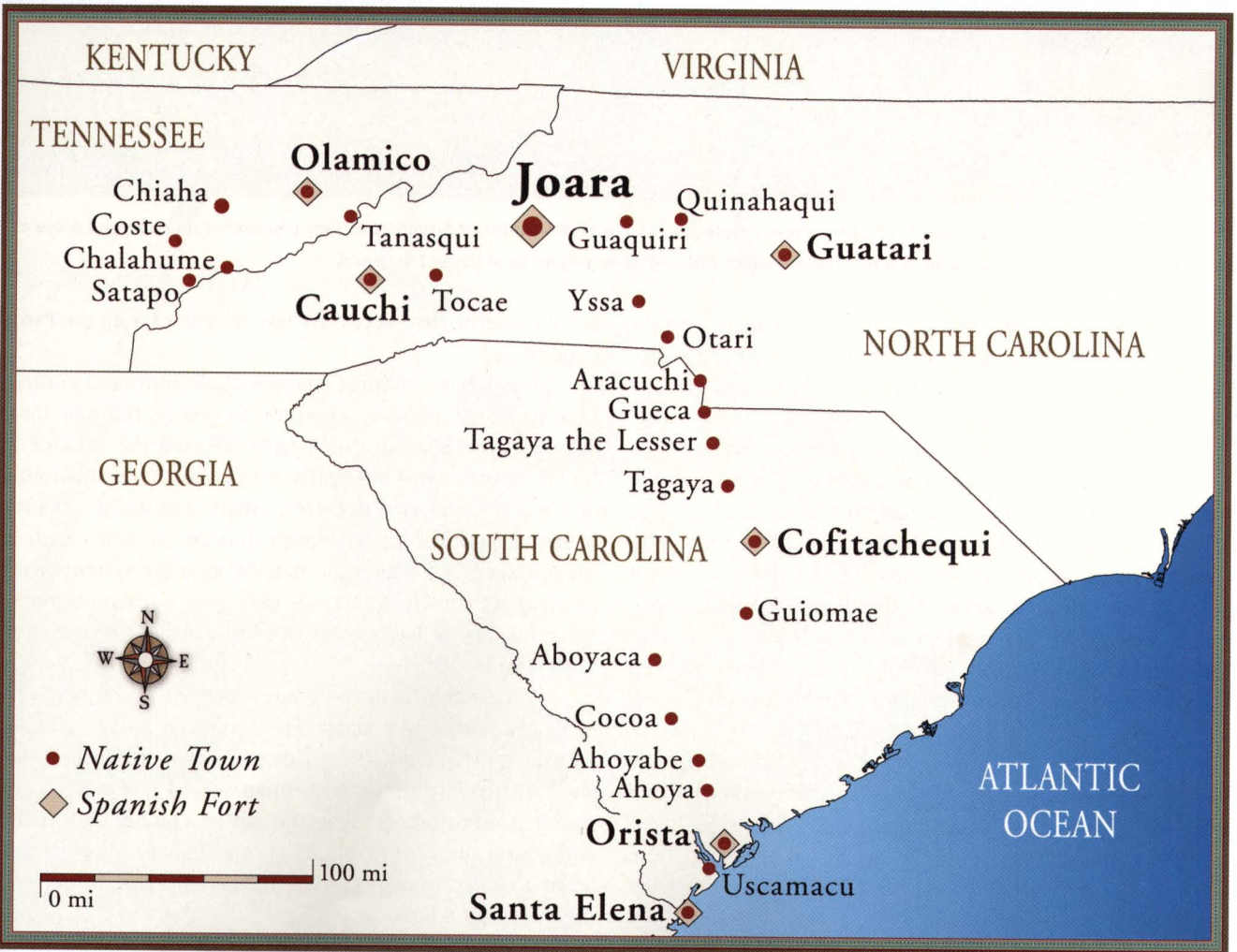
Both Native American and Spanish items were found in the pits that surround Structure 5 and the other buildings. The Spanish items correspond to the supplies enumerated in Bandera's document: nails, lead shot, olive jars, and ointment jars. It's very unlikely the soldiers would have traded these goods to the natives—nails, for example, were a precious commodity—therefore, these artifacts serve as additional

evidence that the Spanish used the buildings.

Charred food remains are being analyzed so that the archaeologists can get a clearer picture of the soldiers' diet. It's known that they ate corn and beans that were obtained from the natives.

"It was an economic relationship, but also a military alliance of sorts," Beck said of the Spanish-Native American relationship. "The presence of the Pardo expedition changed native politics. The chief of Joara was expanding his influence, and he used the expedition for his benefit." Bandera wrote of how Pardo's sergeant, Hernando Moyano, led groups of soldiers into the mountains to burn down two villages that were enemies of Joara.

But likening them to dinner guests who refused to go home, Beck believes the Spanish wore out their welcome. "The Spanish may have been blind to the problems they were causing," said Moore, noting that Bandera's and Pardo's writings made no mention of conflict. However, other Spanish documents suggest that the soldiers' continuous demands for food—they were no longer getting supplies from Santa



The Spanish were intent upon establishing a route from Santa Elena to their silver mines in northern Mexico. They were also intent on colonizing the region. But their geographic ignorance and dependence on Native Americans for food caused Captain Juan Pardo's expedition to head north, where they knew Native American villages were located, instead of west. In addition to Santa Elena and Joara, Pardo established five other forts, but his expedition failed to get anywhere near Mexico. Pardo eventually turned west and reached several Native American villages in eastern Tennessee, but at that point, learning of a possible ambush by hostile Native Americans, he and his men retreated to Joara.