

Junior archaeologists dig into 16th-century world



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CHAPEL HILL -- Water poured over stones collected from the earth, and a crowd of young eyes gathered around to see what they found. A discovery was made -- a piece of what could be a 16th century Spanish olive jar.

This was an opportunity for young hands to touch pieces of history that predated them by hundreds of years. An arrowhead that could have been used to kill a deer for dinner more than 400 years ago just passed through the hands of 8-year-old Kristen Lewis. She said her favorite part was washing the dirt away from the rocks to see the colors that were there.

This is the work the Exploring Joara Foundation does.

The foundation is a nonprofit that welcomes public support and involvement to educate members of the community about European settlements and Native Americans through archaeological experiences.

Much of what they do is with the cooperative efforts of Warren Wilson College and Western Piedmont Community College. They welcome student groups and hope that more will take advantage of the archaeological digs.

Members of the Homeschool History Hunters became junior archaeologists for three days and made discoveries at the Berry site in Morganton.

The 15 students excavated the location of the Fort San Juan. The fort was the first

European settlement in the interior of the United States and predates Jamestown by 40 years.

Michelle Lewis, a parent who supervised the children, said students visited the site to study history by using archaeology. The dig allowed the children to learn about Native Americans and the colonies that were settled there.

Lewis home schools her children and is a member of Chapel Hill Homeschoolers, which is an organization that combines resources and ideas so parents can enrich the education of their children. They plan to go to Patrick Henry's home and meet archaeologists at Monticello.

"You don't get much more hands-on than by digging up a piece of pottery that is hundreds of years old," said Lewis.

The students not only learned about Native American and early European settlements in the Yadkin and Catawba River Valleys, but they were taught proper ways to dig and handle archaeological findings.

"That's an opportunity most people never get, and I was really happy about that," said Chase Lewis, 11, who was a student at the dig and describes himself as, "not a favorites kind of guy."

The 2-acre site is surveyed each digging season, usually between June and July, and separated into a grid of 3x3-foot sections using string and nails.

"We are able to see a snapshot in the middle of the 16th century," said David Moore, professor of archaeology at Warren Wilson College.

Moore began research and excavation in 1986 at the Berry site. He said that each summer they uncover between 20,000 to 25,000 artifacts, which are usually fragments, but only 200 have been identified as Spanish artifacts. He said that being able to identify the fort was a huge accomplishment but that it is very well preserved.

"They got to do something real with real archaeologists who were with them shoulder to shoulder," said Lewis.