

You're invited to see the mystery in the mud



Brittany Callis shows David Moore an arrowhead she found.

By [Ragan Robinson](#) | Hickory Daily Record

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Morganton - The Berry site is like a woman with a past. The secrets she first yields tell only part of the story.

For decades, people watched the farmers who owned this fertile property, all Berry family ancestors for the last 200 years, plow up the coffee-colored land. Then folks would walk the fields, kicking at clumps of dirt and digging in the soil for pieces of its history, mainly arrowheads and pottery.

"A lot of people who live around this area have collections they got right here," said Dub Hord, an 80-year-old Morganton man who's spent time on the archaeological dig for the past six summers.

James Berry, who owns the land, has an almost completely intact clay cooking pot a tenant farmer dug up more than 100 years ago. The farmer sold it for 25 cents.

American Indians left a mound on this spot. It's like a beauty mark on the chin of a mysterious woman, adding intrigue to attraction.

Inhabitants of the Indian village that stood here shaped the summit for an important building, maybe a chief's home or a priest's temple, said David Moore, the archaeologist leading this year's field school dig at the spot off Henderson Mill Road in Burke County. It was one of a few such mounds in Western North Carolina. It is the only one Moore has been able to document in the Catawba Valley.

Berry can remember the mound, how, when he was a boy, he was afraid driving over it would flip the tractor. It is gone now. His father had it bulldozed to make the land easier for alfalfa farming.

But the Berry site did not lure Moore simply with its American Indian charms. He came here because historical reports indicate the Spanish traveled through the area in the late 1500s. At the time, archaeologists couldn't say with any certainty even American Indians lived in this Burke County bottomland.

That part was easy, relatively speaking. Pottery shards and proof of villages pointed to a dense population of American Indians, Moore said.

More ardent admirers of this enigmatic terrain look beyond the prizes she gives up. They look to the veil she uses to hide the rest. Moore points out the color of the dirt where students dig, the almost indistinguishable line of reddish soil butting up against a darker patch

The dark earth tells him this was where the trash went. Another spot's ruddy blush says it was a hole, perhaps for a post.

A student interrupts Moore's silent commune with the dirt. He found a round piece of metal, hollow like a shell casing. It is probably modern, they decide, considering the tool marks inside.

Still, a dozen people will look at it to make sure it isn't proof of something more, something bigger than the American Indians who lived here or the farmers and treasure hunters who followed.

This is the mystery that has kept Moore courting the Berry site since 1986, when he was working on his PhD at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

He and other archaeologists believe the land on which they are working was the Native American town of Joara, where the Spaniard Juan Pardo built Fort San Juan in 1567. That was 20 years before the Lost Colony. It predates the Mayflower. It was the earliest European settlement in the inland United States.

It could be the land's most closely guarded secret.

Moore and his teams have proof there were structures here that were built at the same time, then burned at the same time, and never rebuilt. Such was the case for Fort San Juan, which was burned by the native inhabitants of Joara around June 1568.

Word of an inch-long bit of metal, probably a wrought iron nail, brings a crowd of students to watch as Moore examines it and another bit of metal. The women who found

them get their pictures taken. The pieces go into plastic film containers and in bags on which the exact location is recorded.

These are things the Spanish would have used. They wouldn't have traded them so the pieces wouldn't have gotten to an American Indian village without the Spaniards.

These are pieces of a puzzle that summons students and volunteers year after year to spend 90-degree days scrutinizing the dirt.

They are small, silent but certain replies from a 400-year-old mistress, finally giving up her story.

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