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Local group promotes exploration of Burke's ancient past

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A 12-acre plot of land just north of Morganton called the "Berry site" has caught the attention of archaeologists and history buffs from across the nation, as well as the interest of many Burke County residents.

Evidence found by archaeologists such as David Moore, Rob Beck and Chris Rodning indicates that the site was not only home to an ancient American Indian town called Joara, but was also the location of a Spanish fort built by explorers trying to get to Mexico in search of silver and gold.

A group of local archaeology enthusiasts headed up by Moore has started a nonprofit organization called the Exploring Joara Foundation to help support and promote the project.

According to one of the group's founding members, Linda Wall of Morganton, the purpose of the Exploring Joara Foundation is to "advance the archaeological study of Native American societies in the Piedmont area."

A primary goal of the foundation, said Wall, is to create a facility in Morganton that will provide dormitories, a kitchen, offices and lab space for use by archaeologists and students, as well as a permanent educational exhibit for the community.

The organization hopes to involve the public in the investigation of the sixteenth-century interactions between the Spanish settlers and American Indians in the village that was once known as both Joara and Fort San Juan.

In 1566, Captain Juan Pardo and 125 men arrived at Joara while trying to establish a route to Spanish silver mines in northern Mexico. Pardo built Fort San Juan de Joara and left 30 men to defend the fort and occupy the town. In 1568 Spain's only effort to colonize the interior ended when the people of Joara destroyed Fort San Juan during a surprise attack.

The Berry site is important because it offers a rare opportunity to study the remarkably intact remains of what is possibly the first European settlement in the interior of North America alongside the remains of a native town, said Wall.

Artifacts found at the site could help archaeologists answer numerous questions about the social structures of the native people of the upper Catawba Valley as well as the effect of the Spanish explorations on native cultures. Moore said examples of typical artifact discoveries include lead shot, pieces of chain mail, pottery shards, wrought iron nails and glass beads.

The excavation has received attention from local media as well as national and international publications such as Smithsonian, National Geographic and American Archaeology magazines. Teams from the University of Oklahoma, Tulane University, UNC Chapel Hill, Southern Illinois University and other colleges come to Morganton to continue excavation.

The project receives support from Warren-Wilson College, Western Piedmont Community College, the city of Morganton and Burke County as well as from grants. Moore, a professor at Warren-Wilson College in Swannanoa, said the Exploring Joara Foundation is important because the involvement of the local community and the establishment of a multipurpose facility are vital to the continuation of the investigation.

"This will give us the ability to set up a real laboratory situation in addition to a field situation. For every hour in the field, we spend 10-20 hours in the lab," Moore said.

Now all excavated material and artifacts are transported to different colleges and laboratories for storage and study. "Having a facility in Morganton would give us the ability to do that locally," Moore said.

Moore also said that through fundraising, the foundation hopes to support the exploration of other archaeological sites in Burke County before they are destroyed by development.

The Exploring Joara Foundation recently received its legal nonprofit status, and the board of directors has plans to begin fundraising efforts in the near future.

If you are intrigued by all of this and would like to get some hands-on experience on a real archaeology site, Moore invites anyone 16 or older to take part in the project's summer field school. "There are always new things happening," said Moore. "We find a lot of artifacts. It's a very enjoyable place to work."

Moore said you don't need any experience but you should be prepared to get dirty and hot.

The project will also hold a public Field Day event July 12 that will allow people from the community to tour the site.

For schedules, prices and other details about the summer field school and information about the Field Day event, visit www.warren-wilson.edu/arch/.

Take a hike to welcome spring

If you are tired of winter and ready to get outdoors, the Foothills Conservancy has alerted me to some upcoming fun and educational activities to get you out of the house.

At 2 p.m. next Sunday, Park Ranger Lance Huss will offer a workshop called "Peppermint Beetle" at the Visitor Center at South Mountains State Park off N.C. 18 south of Morganton. Huss will help students learn how animals, including insects, use their sense of smell to respond to their environment and how we humans use our sense of smell in our daily lives.

Bob Benner will lead an Easter weekend hike 10 a.m.-2 p.m. March 22 from the Wilson Creek Gorge to Harper Falls. The hike will be about three miles round trip along the Harper Falls

