

The Roanoke Island Colony: Lost, and Found?



By Theo Emery Aug. 10, 2015

MERRY HILL, N.C. — Under a blistering sun, Nicholas M. Lucchetti swatted at mosquitoes as he watched his archaeology team at work in a shallow pit on a hillside above the shimmering waters of Albemarle Sound. On a table in the shade, a pile of plastic bags filled with artifacts was growing. Fragments of earthenware and pottery. A mashed metal rivet. A piece of a hand-wrought nail.

They call the spot Site X. Down a dusty road winding through soybean fields, the clearing lies between two cypress swamps teeming with venomous snakes. It is a suitably mysterious name for a location that may shed light on an enigma at the heart of America’s founding: the fate of the “lost colonists” who vanished from a sandy outpost on Roanoke Island, about 60 miles east, in the late 16th century.

On and off for three years, Mr. Lucchetti and colleagues with the [First Colony Foundation](#) have been excavating parts of the hillside, hoping to find traces of the colonists. As if clues in a latter-day treasure hunt, hidden markings on a 16th-century map led them to the spot on the sound’s western shore, which Mr. Lucchetti had previously surveyed.

Mr. Lucchetti, 66, chose his words carefully as he described the fruits of their latest work. “I’m trying to make sure that I say this correctly,” he said. “We have evidence from this site that strongly indicates that there were Roanoke colonists here.”

In Chapel Hill, N.C., on Tuesday, the foundation will reveal its findings, which have been submitted for peer review, and the theory that at least a few of the settlers moved inland to Site X.



The announcement, along with separate findings from another excavation on a coastal island, is sure to stir excitement. Some scholars who have seen the evidence are supportive of the findings, but at least one sees the evidence as too slight to draw firm conclusions. All agree that more digging is needed. The new findings are likely to set off a new round of questions: Why would some of the settlers have split off to the inland site? Where did they go after that? And what became of the rest of the Roanoke colonists?

“We need to know more,” said Eric Klingelhofer, a vice president for research at the foundation and a history professor at Mercer University in Macon, Ga. “This whole story is a blank — a blank page, a blank chapter of history, and I think archaeology is the only way to come up with answers.”

The story of the Lost Colony of Roanoke has long lent a spooky note to grade schoolers’ study of American history. In 1587, an intrepid Englishman named John White took more than 100 settlers to Roanoke Island, which lies inside the chain of barrier islands that is today called the Outer Banks. It was Sir Walter Raleigh’s second attempt to colonize North Carolina, but the first to include civilians and families. White’s granddaughter, Virginia Dare, was the first child born in the New World to English parents, just a few weeks after their arrival.

A resupply trip sent White back to England, but a naval war with Spain delayed his return. When he finally came back, three years after he left, the settlers had vanished, but they had left behind cryptic clues: the word “Croatoan” carved into a fence post, and the letters “CRO” on a tree. Many people believe these referred to what is now Hatteras Island, 50 miles south. A search run by a separate group has been going on there for the last several years.



Part tragedy, part mystery, part historical curiosity, the fate of the colony and Virginia Dare has spawned a folkloric cottage industry, a mix of sober scholarship, wild speculation and at least [one outright hoax](#). A widely held theory — though unproven — is that colonists hitched themselves to area tribes and gradually assimilated.

The most tantalizing clue in centuries as to the Lost Colonists’ fate came in 2012, after the [British Museum](#) re-examined one of White’s [coastal maps](#) for the First Colony Foundation. X-ray

spectroscopy and other imaging techniques revealed that a patch hid a four-pointed blue and red star on the western end of Albemarle Sound. That spot, near the outlets of the Chowan River and Salmon Creek, roughly corresponded to White’s oblique reference to a site 50 miles inland, which he mentioned in testimony he gave after trying to return to the colony.

James Horn, a foundation board member, had written a book hypothesizing that the location, with its protected harbor and a nearby Native American village, could have been a destination. The idea was without concrete evidence, though; while the map appeared to support it, only shovels in the ground could confirm it.

The fact that the property was undisturbed was something of a miracle. Tucked into economically depressed and largely rural Bertie County, the land had been slated for development into more than 2,000 luxury condominiums, restaurants and a marina, but the plan collapsed after the financial crisis of 2008.

North Carolina law requires archaeological surveys before large coastal developments can proceed. By coincidence, the developers had hired Mr. Lucchetti's outfit, the James River Institute for Archaeology, to survey the site in 2007. The dig had turned up many Native American artifacts, which are common in the region — but also some European artifacts. At the time, Mr. Lucchetti hypothesized that they had been left by later European settlers, from a nearby plantation or the homestead of a trader who arrived in the mid-1600s.

But the recent insights from the British Museum's analysis of the map prompted the foundation to re-examine the 2007 findings from Merry Hill and other dig sites in the region. A key to identifying the earliest colonial life was a type of ceramic known as Surrey-Hampshire Border ware, which was no longer imported to the New World after the Virginia Company dissolved in the early 17th century.

The reconsideration of the Site X artifacts led to a decision to explore further. With the landowner's cooperation, archaeologists began sifting the soil again in 2012.

Slowly, the pits gave up their secrets. In just the small areas excavated, the hillside has yielded an unusually high concentration of Border ware and other colonial artifacts, such as a food-storage jar called a baluster, a hook used to stretch hides, a buckle, and pieces of early gun flintlocks called priming pans. No signs of a fort or other structures have been found, but the aggregate of the artifacts convinced the archaeologists that at least a few of the colonists wound up there.

Mr. Lucchetti insists on the caveat that only a small number — fewer than a dozen — were present for an indeterminate amount of time. "It wasn't the relocated colony — I keep emphasizing that — and we need to do some more work here to understand," he said.

There are theories for other locations where colonists might have scattered to, including the one farther south, on Hatteras Island. That site has been known since the 1930s and in the past has yielded intriguing metal items such as a signet ring, part of a horse bridle, two 17th-century coins and part of the firing mechanism for a gun.

Over the last few years, a British archaeologist, Mark Horton, has led an excavation there. He, too, [has found unusual artifacts](#), such as a rapier hilt, late 16th-century gun hardware and part of a slate writing tablet. Many of the 16th-century items were mixed in with artifacts from almost a century later, though, making it nearly impossible to date them. And no Border ware pottery — a telltale sign of habitation — has been found on the Hatteras site.

Mr. Horton, whose findings have not been published or peer reviewed, posits that colonists made their way south to Hatteras around 1590 and assimilated with the tribe there. After years of cohabitation, European items could have been gradually discarded long after they were brought to the site, which would account for their being mixed in with later detritus, he said in an interview.

“I don’t necessarily see that what we’ve found on Hatteras rules out their site, or vice versa,” he said.

Mr. Lucchetti also said the two were not mutually exclusive; if the colonists split up, they could have ended up in multiple locations. But he says he believes Site X has stronger evidence of lost colonists because of the ceramics found there.

Carter L. Hudgins, the director of the graduate program in historic preservation at Clemson/College of Charleston, said, “Any evidence that helps open the door to this mystery, even if it’s just a little bit, is something folks have been looking for at least since John White’s return to the site in 1590.” While not directly affiliated with the foundation, Dr. Hudgins has volunteered at Site X and other foundation projects over the years.

Others are more circumspect. Charles R. Ewen, the president of the Society for Historical Archaeology and director of the Phelps Archaeology Laboratory at East Carolina University, says he wants incontrovertible proof of 16th-century occupation, such as a European grave from the period.

He is also unconvinced that colonists removed to the Hatteras site, although the findings there could indicate contact between colonists and Native Americans. “I know we want a definitive answer, and there’s just not enough evidence yet from either site to say that, yes, this is where some of the lost colonists went,” he said. “I’m not cynical, but I haven’t seen enough evidence to say, yeah, you bet, I’m on board with that.”

For now, the foundation hopes to find funding to secure the 15 acres to excavate it thoroughly. Michael Flannelly, whose company owns the land, said he hoped to find a way for the archaeological work to proceed while allowing nearby land to be developed.

“It’s a 430-year-old mystery, and if I can be a part of solving that mystery, that’s something I’m interested in,” he said.

As the sun reached its zenith one day last week, the work began to slow. Mr. Lucchetti retired to the shade, sweat dripping from his brow. Soon the pit would be filled, the sifting screens packed up and the work paused until the future of the site could be determined.

“Everyone has encouraged us that what we’re finding is really exciting and terribly significant,” he said, “and we just need to do some more here.”