

ARCHAEOLOGY AT FORT RALEIGH

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By Martha Williams

Whether we realize it or not, there is a bit of the archaeologist in all of us. Some of us collect antiques, while others save tawdry prizes won at carnivals long ago. A few lovingly restore old family homesteads remembered from childhood. Nearly all of us can identify settings—beaches, mountains, neighborhoods—that hold special places in our hearts. Deriving meaning from and deciphering the objects (artifacts), structures (features), and landscapes of the past is also what archaeology is all about.

From the outset, the story of Roanoke Island and the fate of its earliest European settlers were an archeological puzzle. When John White's re-supply expedition arrived at the deserted settlement in 1590, its leader noted both features and artifacts left in the town as he attempted to make sense of what had befallen the colony. "We found the houses taken downe, "a high palisado of great trees, with curtains and flankers very Fort-like," and "many barres of Iron, two pigges of lead, four iron fowlers, Iron sacker-shotte, and such like heavie things, thrown here and there. . ." Over a century later, John Lawson again noted Roanoke's puzzle of artifacts and features as he described ". . .Ronoak Island, where the Ruins of a Fort are to be seen at this day (1700), as well as some old English coins. . .a brass gun, a Powder Horn, and one small Quarter deck Gun made of Iron Staves and hooped with the same metal . . ." Union soldiers, occupying the island in 1862, dug holes in the sandy site, hoping no doubt to be able to touch relics of the Elizabethan Age. But not until the mid-twentieth century was the site of the first English colony in North America subjected to scientific archeological excavations.

Not that this was an easy task. To begin with, the sixteenth-century English efforts to colonize the North Carolina coast had entailed not one, but three, occupations of Roanoke Island.

- In 1585, Captain Ralph Lane and 108 colonists, including the Renaissance scientist Thomas Hariott of London and his metallurgist Joachim Gans from Prague, built a fort and a small settlement here. From this base, they explored parts of eastern North Carolina, obtained specimens of various metal ores, and tested them at the site. But in less than a year, having exhausted their supplies and antagonized the local Native American tribes to the point of open hostilities, Lane's group abandoned their settlement and left for England.
- Only two weeks later, a long-expected but long-delayed re-supply vessel arrived at the abandoned fort. Sir Richard Grenville, leader of this expedition, left behind a 15-man garrison to defend the site and thereby secure England's claim to the region. These men were never seen again.
- The third and final settlement was established the following year, in 1587, when a party of 110 men, women and children established what was intended to be a permanent English foothold at Roanoke. It was the remains of this "lost" colony that John White mournfully surveyed three years later.

The remains of the sixteenth century slowly disappeared from view during the succeeding three centuries. Natural forces and human activities acted to disturb, bury, or otherwise muddle the archeological record, including the possible construction of yet another fort in the eighteenth century, shoreline erosion, farming activities, and the random excavations of off-duty Union troops. Perhaps the most severe destruction resulted from the actions of well-intentioned groups and individuals who, in the early decades of the twentieth century, sought to commemorate the historic site and interpret it to the public. Monuments were erected, movies were made, roads were built, utility lines were installed, and replicas of the fort itself were constructed. All penetrated and mixed the neatly stacked cultural layer cake that archeologists know as “stratigraphy.”

At mid-century, a new breed of investigators arrived on Roanoke Island—still eager to decipher its secrets by revealing, recording, and “reading” its material culture. Armed with copious documentation and professionally trained, they eagerly took on the daunting task of unraveling the now 350-year-old archeological record. Jean C. Harrington, a National Park Service archeologist who had recently investigated Jamestown, was the first to confront the challenge. Between 1947 and 1950, he excavated a series of linear trenches across Park Service property and the adjacent Elizabethan Gardens—with generally disappointing results. Nonetheless, by 1950, Harrington had made enough progress that the NPS was able to reconstruct—following the lines of its original “moat” or ditch—the four-sided defensive earthwork that graces the site today.

As with many archeological “digs,” Harrington’s work raised as many questions as it answered, not the least of which centered on the tiny size of this bastion of England in the North Carolina wilderness. Which fort was it: Ralph Lane’s 1585 bastion? the abandoned 1587 “palisado of Great Trees” that John White found on his delayed return to the colony? Or some later pre-Revolutionary fortification? Even more curious were the remains of a 9-ft square timber structure that Park Service workers found in 1959 while installing a water line near the earthworks. Three circular pits in the middle of this building, all filled with broken pottery and curiously hollowed out bricks, added to the mystery. And the final nagging question--Where were all those houses in which 110 men, women, and children had lived?

Between 1983 and 1984, a new archeological team took up the challenge, armed with sophisticated machinery capable of sensing buried features such as ditches and foundations without physically penetrating the ground itself. The first season of remote sensing was followed by another season of excavation, targeting “features” revealed by the machinery. In the end, though, few answers emerged from this effort—only more fragments of strange pottery.

The search for the Roanoke settlements might well have ended in the early 1980s were it not for the fact that an array of scientists, historians and archaeologists working in other places also had been uncovering tantalizing evidence of England’s early colonizing ventures. Among them were Williamsburg archaeologists Ivor and Audrey Noel Hume, who had brought to light a little-known fortified “suburb” of Jamestown in Virginia

known as “Wolstenholme Towne” in “Martin’s Hundred.” NPS historian Phillip Evans noticed parallels between the size and configuration of the "outwork" at Fort Raleigh and one of the bastions of the Martin's Hundred fort. He contacted the Noel Humes, who identified the pottery sherds as crucibles used in Harriott's pioneering experiments. Together, these connections prompted a renewed effort to find and document the history of the First Colony.

Between 1990 and 1995, the Noel Hume team of experienced archaeologists once excavated at the Roanoke site. Their goals were to identify the "outwork" structure, to determine the chronological relationship between it and the earthen fort, and to locate evidence of the site of John White’s settlement. Late in the first season, having slogged through innumerable traces of previous excavations, removed old sidewalks, and even survived (barely) a dangerous Nor’easter that nearly blasted a new inlet through Nag’s Head, the group at last found the evidence that had eluded archeologists since the early 1960s—a single, narrow, undisturbed bit of original sixteenth-century ground surface. On it lay, where they had fallen four centuries earlier, over 100 fragments of Joachim Gans’ metallurgical experiments—crucible fragments, bits of glass, rusted nails and metal fragments, and Indian pottery. Further excavations the following year inside the reconstructed fort turned up a similar assemblage.

One question had been answered—the fort whose ditch Harrington had discovered in 1950 definitely had been constructed **after** Harriott had carried out scientific experiments on that first expedition of 1585. But how long after? In the spring of 1586, when Lane's forces were under attack by the local tribes? Or later that summer, when Grenville left a squad of soldiers to keep the flag flying. Or was it erected by White's colony, after he had returned to England for new supplies, or even by later military activity in Albemarle Sound?. But the other great question still remained. Where was the settlement, the "Cittie of Raleigh?" Three more two-week “seasons” of digging, primarily in the wooded areas west of the reconstructed fort, failed to resolve these questions.

Nonetheless, analysis of the evidence they uncovered, coupled with data provided by scientists in other disciplines, led to new insights. Some of the additional excavations found undisturbed soil layers containing Elizabethan artifacts (but no structural features) buried beneath the high sand dunes west of the fort. Even more intriguing were two wooden barrels, sunk into the beach north of the fort, which evidently had been used as linings for fresh-water wells, largely destroyed by shore erosion. Radiocarbon dating of the wood in the barrels showed that they were from the sixteenth century.

The handful of European potsherds under the dunes and those two unglamorous barrels, seemingly so insignificant, may be the markers that will guide the next generation of archaeologists as they search for what, if anything, remains of England’s first colony on the continent of North America.