ARCHAEOLOGISTS FIND NEW CLUES TO “LOST COLONY” MYSTERY

Ongoing excavations at two sites in North Carolina have yielded new clues about what may have happened to the English settlers who vanished from Roanoke Island around 1590.

When John White, appointed by Sir Walter Raleigh as governor of Roanoke Colony, returned to England for more supplies in late 1587, he left behind his wife, his daughter and his infant granddaughter—Virginia Dare, the first child born in the New World to English parents—among the other settlers. Upon White’s return in 1590, he found no trace of his family or the other inhabitants of the abandoned colony. Over the centuries to come, archaeologists, historians and explorers would delve into the mystery of the “Lost Colony” of Roanoke, all failing to find definitive answers.

Based on the scant clues left behind, some speculated that Native Americans attacked and killed the English colonists. “Croatoan” was the name of an island south of Roanoke, now Hatteras Island, which at the time was home to a Native American tribe of the same name. Alternatively, they might have tried to sail back to England on their own and been lost at sea, or been killed by hostile Spaniards who came north from their own settlements in Florida. One enduring theory was that the settlers might have been absorbed into friendly Native American tribes, perhaps after moving further inland into what is now North Carolina.

Now, two independent teams have found archaeological remains suggesting that at least some of the Roanoke colonists might have survived and split into two groups, each of which assimilated itself into a different Native American community. One team is excavating a site near Cape Creek on Hatteras Island, around 50 miles (80 kilometers) southeast of the Roanoke Island settlement, while the other is based on the mainland about 50 miles to the northwest of the Roanoke site.
Cape Creek, located in a live oak forest near Pamlico Sound, was the site of a major Croatoan town center and trading hub. In 1998, archaeologists from East Carolina University stumbled upon a unique find from early British America: a 10-carat gold signet ring engraved with a lion or horse, believed to date to the 16th century. The ring’s discovery prompted later excavations at the site led by Mark Horton, an archaeologist at Britain’s Bristol University, who has been directing volunteers with the Croatoan Archaeological Society in annual digs since 2009. Recently, Horton’s team found a small piece of slate that seems to have been used as a writing tablet and part of the hilt of an iron rapier, a light sword similar to those used in England in the late 16th century, along with other artifacts of European and Native American origin. The slate, a smaller version of a similar one found at Jamestown, bears a small letter “M” still barely visible in one corner; it was found alongside a lead pencil.

In addition to these intriguing objects, the Cape Creek site yielded an iron bar and a large copper ingot (or block), both found buried in layers of earth that appear to date to the late 1500s. Native Americans lacked such metallurgical technology, so they are believed to be European in origin. Horton told National Geographic that some of the artifacts his team found are trade items, but it appears that others may well have belonged to the Roanoke colonists themselves: “The evidence is that they assimilated with the Native Americans but kept their goods.”

A watercolor map drawn by none other than John White inspired the search at Site X (as it’s known), located on Albemarle Sound near Edenton, North Carolina, some 50 miles inland. Known as La Virginea Pars, the map shows the East Coast of North America from Chesapeake Bay to Cape Lookout; it is housed at the British Museum as part of its permanent collection. White began drawing the map in 1585, two years before he became governor. In 2012, researchers using X-ray spectroscopy and other imaging techniques spotted a tiny four-pointed star, colored red and blue, concealed under a patch of paper that White used to make corrections to his map. It was thought to mark the location of a site some 50 miles inland, which White alluded to in testimony given
after his attempted return to the colony. If such a site did exist, the theory went, it would have been a reasonable destination for the displaced Roanoke settlers.

According to archaeologist Nicholas Luccketti of the First Colony Foundation, which is conducting the excavations at Site X, the group has found shards of pottery that they claim may have been used by Roanoke settlers after they left the colony. Located nearby is a site that archaeologists believe might have been a small Native American town, Mettaquem. After the Roanoke colony met its end, English settlers eventually came south from Virginia into North Carolina, but the first recorded settler in the area did not arrive until about 1655. But the recently uncovered pottery is in a style called Border Ware, which is typical of the pottery dug up on Roanoke Island, as well as at Jamestown, but was no longer imported to the New World after the early 17th century, when the Virginia Company dissolved.

In addition to the Border Ware pottery, archaeologists at Site X discovered various other items, including a food-storage jar known as a baluster, pieces of early gun flintlocks, a metal hook of the sort used to stretch animal hides or tents and an aglet, a small copper tube used to secure wool fibers before the advent of the hook and eye in the 17th century. Based on his team’s findings, Luccketti thinks the Roanoke colonists may have moved inland to live with Native American allies sometime after White left, and these artifacts might have been among their belongings. As reported in the New York Times, the First Colony Foundation will reveal more about its findings and theory this week in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Though the newly announced discoveries don’t solve this lingering historical mystery, they do point away from Roanoke Island itself, where researchers have failed to come up with evidence pointing to the Lost Colony’s fate. Archaeologists on both teams are hoping that a detailed study of their new finds will yield more clues, and—of course—that more evidence remains, waiting to be discovered, in the endless layers of dirt that surround them.