

# Civilization Through a Keyhole

Take too many divots at the Marine Corps golf course on Parris Island and you could wind up in the remains of a 16th century Spanish settlement. Fore!

BY JOEL GREENBERG

If there's anything more unlikely than finding a golf course on the Parris Island Marine Base in South Carolina, it's the discovery of what lies underneath the course's 11th hole: a 16th century Spanish fort that protected a town founded 41 years before Jamestown.

The remains of the fort, San Felipe II, were unearthed July 4 by a team from the University of South Carolina's Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. The scientists uncovered numerous pieces of Spanish and Indian pottery and the remains of two bastions of the fort and a moat, 14 feet wide and 5 feet deep.

San Felipe II, the oldest European military structure ever found in the United States, is believed to be one of three forts that protected Santa Elena, a settlement of 60 homes with a peak population of 400 after it was founded in 1566, just one year after the founding of St. Augustine. Laboratory analysis indicates that the excavated materials contain clay from the homes of Santa Elena itself, which was once the capital of Spanish Florida. More conclusive evidence is expected to be unearthed when the project resumes this fall. "I have no doubt... the town is there — the documentary evidence is unquestionable," says Paul Hoffman, a historian at Louisiana State University.

Stanley South, the University of South



South with 16th century "clothes hanger."

National Geographic Society

Carolina archaeologist who led the expedition, followed a computerized projection of where the fort and town should be; he dug 42 "windows in the ground" — each 3 feet square and 12 to 18 inches deep — into the 11th hole's rough, which runs along the island's tidal marsh. "We found more of the fort than we had imagined or dreamed in our original plan," South says. Bits of 16th century Spanish pottery called "Columbia plain" and other relics, including an olive jar neck and a spike upon which soldiers hung their belongings, were recovered from nearly all 42 holes. And the outline of a man-made moat was unmistakable, according to the researchers.

San Felipe II is the 24th, and earliest, fort South has excavated in his career and the second of the three Santa Elena-protecting forts to be found. In 1923, Maj. George Osterhout of the marines unearthed artifacts from Parris Island that he believed came from Charlesfort, a French structure erected in 1562. But recent reexamination of the artifacts and historical study by Hoffman, Eugene Lyon of Vero Beach, Fla., and others indicate that Parris Island was

the site of Santa Elena, and what Osterhout thought was Charlesfort was actually San Marcos, one of the three forts protecting the town. This observation led to the excavation, which the researchers believe will soon uncover both the settlement, which was abandoned in 1587, and the third fort, San Felipe I.

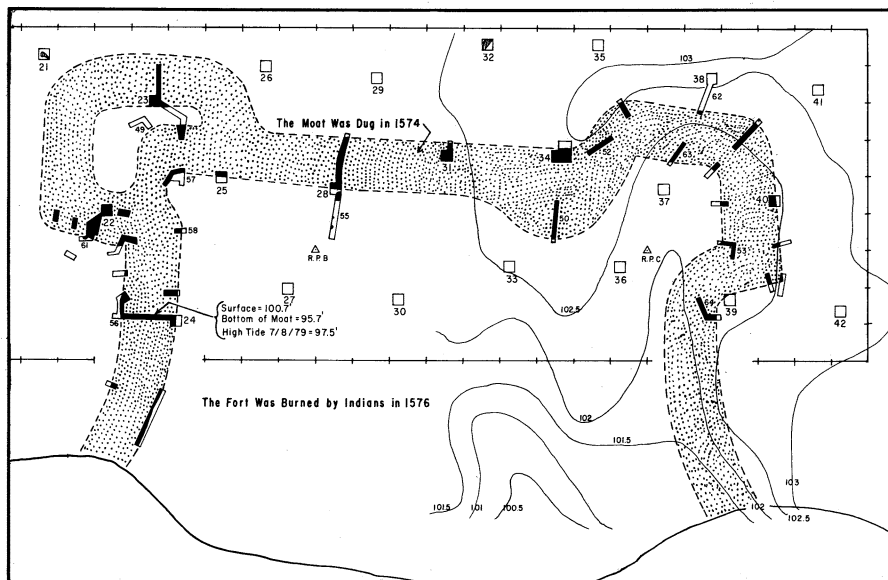
"There should be a plaza and a church... we don't know the layout [of the town] yet," Hoffman says. Because of the marshy conditions, the researchers hope to find actual pieces of structures and other materials intact. Wood, leather and even paper can stay preserved in the oxygen-depleted lower levels of watery muck for "hundreds of years," says South. Several wooden posts from Fort San Marcos still had visible ax marks in them, he notes.

The discovery, announced at the National Geographic Society in Washington (which will contribute to the funding of future work on the project), tends to confirm historical accounts that Pedro Menendez de Aviles, governor of Florida and founder of St. Augustine, built a fort and settlement in the Parris Island area in 1566. That first fort — the yet-to-be-discovered San Felipe I — was burned down in 1570, after which San Felipe II was built, according to Hoffman.

Santa Elena was originally occupied until 1576, when Indians forced the townspeople to retreat into the fort and burned much of the town. It is said that the women of the settlement had to forcibly carry the general of the fort to a boat in order to facilitate escape before the structure was destroyed. The town was rebuilt and reoccupied in 1577, when Fort San Marcos was also built. In 1587, settlers abandoned it for good to rush to the aid of St. Augustine, which was under attack by Sir Francis Drake.

The archaeologists are not sure how much more they will have to dig to unearth conclusive evidence of Santa Elena. But South says, "The work so far represents only a sneak preview of what's to come. When you dig trenches only three feet wide, it's like looking at civilization through a keyhole. We will have to dig much wider trenches."

Marine officials, somewhat nervous about losing part of their golf course to Spanish history, have agreed to "negotiate" with the scientists about terms of future digging. Hoffman says there is a chance the settlement might have run parallel to the ocean, which would make it unnecessary to excavate beyond the rough and into the fairway. And since the 11th rough is particularly hazardous to one's scorecard, Staff Sgt. Brad Heck, who plays the course, acknowledges, "We wouldn't mind too much if they took out a few trees." □



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Moat (shaded area) surrounding Fort San Felipe II was discovered through nine of the 42 squares dug into the 11th rough of the Marine golf course on Parris Island.

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