

Diggers look for lost colony clues

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Report on dig

BARBARA MIDGETTE, head of the Croatan Committee, talks with Charles L. Heath, consulting archaeologist with the Lost Colony Center for Science and Research. Heath reported on the most recent archaeological survey digs conducted beginning June 23 and ending July 9. (MHG-M photo)



Diggers for history are working again on Hatteras Island.

For the first time since 1998, the archaeological search resumed for clues about the Croatan of Hatteras Island and the whereabouts of the Lost Colony. This three-week search ended Sunday, July 9, with a report to three dozen interested Hatteras Islanders and volunteer diggers and sifters of sandy soil.

Since 1993, Fred Willard and Barbara Midgette have sparked this hunt to connect the dots. Willard's Lost Colony Center for Science and Research, located in Jamesville, organized this 2006 dig. Midgette leads the center's

Croatan committee.

Charles L. Heath is the new scientist directing the clue hunt at the Buxton dig. This year's dig explored sites around Cape Creek, an archaeological site indentified in 1937, reaffirmed in 1958 and first tested in 1983 by now-retired East Carolina University archaeologist David S. Phelps.

Heath has worked on the Cape Creek site before. He's now a doctoral degree candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the consulting archaeologist with the Lost Colony Center.

On the 2006 dig, a more systematic approach to exploration started. With permission from several landowners, the search team conducted a six-site survey, gridding possible locations, shoveling down as deep as possible and recording what turned up.

Two survey sampling sites yielded significant evidence of the Croatan society, reported Heath. At one, very large pieces of 15th century Algonkian pottery were found. From the second, diggers found material from around 1680 to 1690 in a shell midden or trash heap. At this second site, the explorers also uncovered evidence of a brick house built around 1700. The remaining sites were "culturally sterile," said Heath.

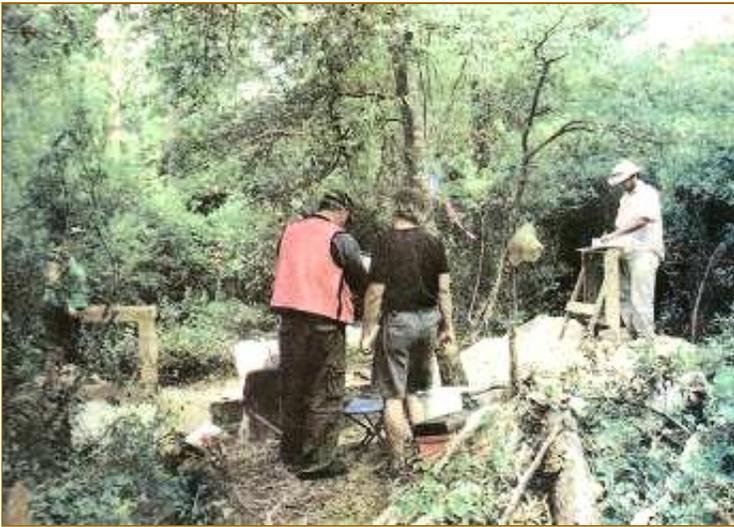
The Croatan chiefdom was part of the coastal Algonkian culture that stretched the eastern seaboard from the Neuse River into the northeast. Between AD 800 and 1000, the Algonkian radiated out of New York, possibly from population pressure and because of warfare. The Croatan chiefdom roughly corresponded to today's Hatteras Island villages of Avon, Buxton, Frisco and Hatteras and perhaps Ocracoke.

Sifting for evidence

TEAM MEMBERS for the most recent archaeological dig in Buxton work on a survey site. Large pieces of Croatan pottery

About the sites explored in Buxton, Heath postulates that the area was not a habitation location, but perhaps a trading station because

were uncovered along with evidence of a brick house constructed around 1700. (MHG-M photo)



there is no real evidence of structures. Posts identified in the first dig could not be plotted in any recognizable shape. Heath speculates that most likely the Croatan were living in Buxton Woods and that the shoreline site was used seasonally, much as visitors enjoy the soundside shoreline today.

During two 1990's digs, smaller pottery shards, an almost complete pot, various styles of beads, pipe bowls, flints and points have all surfaced with careful screening. Tantalizing links to Europeans have emerged, including farthing coins, a bale seal, a gunlock, a ship's caulking iron, a chisel, punch and awe, and, a gold signet ring, with a prancing lion motif. The ring is

thought to represent the Kendall family. Abraham Kendall sailed with Sir Francis Drake in June 1586 and a Master Kendall visited here with the 1585 Ralph Lane expedition.

Heath hopes to use the large pottery pieces to decode symbols. Paintings of native Americans show tattoos with similar geometric designs to those found on pottery pieces.

Also new to this Croatan project is Philip McMullan, a board member at the Lost Colony Center, who introduced Sarah Whitford from the Coastal Carolina Indian Center.

"We're very much alive." said Whitford. "We didn't all go north." Whitfield started genealogical research into her native American family, whom she believed to be the Tuscarara, but contact with Willard and the Lost Colony Center has opened up "all sorts of paths" for her research. "I'm just excited to see what this research uncovers." said Whitford.

Whitford and McMullan are two of the researchers working with the Lost Colony Center.

The archaeological research started by Phelps before his retirement has been turned over to the Lost Colony Center, which has recently closed on a newly renovated 15,000 square foot Farm Life School on 17 acres in Jamesville. The working assumption at the Buxton site is that some members of the Lost Colony came to live with the Croatans. Willard says artifacts uncovered at this archaeological site will be processed, cleaned and catalogued at the Center in Jamesville. He anticipates that the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences will assist with displaying the items.

Assisting with this 2006 dig were Buddy Harrell with Bennett Vineyards Ltd., Chris and Tracey Latta at the Falcon Motel in Buxton, and Rocky Rollinson Road property owner Betsy M. Bennett, director of the state's Museum of Natural Sciences.

Members of the present Croatan committee which Barbara Midgette heads are Clyde Stowe, Bob Teagarden, Mel Covey and Betsy Bennett.

This exploration of Hatteras Island's first residents and the hunt for the Lost Colony is a long-term project. The Croatan dig expects to continue in May 2007.