

THE FINDING OF FORT RALEIGH

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For at least a hundred years a low mound of earth at the north end of Roanoke Island has been known as the site of Fort Raleigh—the place where the first English colonists settled in 1585. Occasionally someone would question the authenticity of this traditional site of Ralph Lane's "new fort in Virginia." There was sufficient evidence in support of the claim, however, to designate the site as Fort Raleigh National Historic Site. The tract containing the alleged fort site was deeded to the United States in 1940 and made a unit of the National Park Service of the Department of the Interior.

Further documentary research added some support to tradition, but it was recognized that archaeological evidence would be required to support conclusions based upon the study of documents and records. As soon as possible after the war archaeological explorations were started by the National Park Service. The area was mapped and exploratory trenches laid out across the traditional fort site and in the area surrounding it. It was expected that remains might be found of a stockaded fort probably similar to the one built at Jamestown in 1607, twenty-two years later. Instead a ditch was found, obviously the remains of a dry moat surrounding an earthen embankment. This ditch was encountered in each of the exploratory trenches at the fort site, and was found to be about ten feet wide at the top and nearly five feet deep.

During the second season's work in 1948, the entire outline of this ditch was followed out. The entrance to the fort was located and the area for some distance beyond the entrance thoroughly explored in the hope of finding remains of the settlers' homes. In the excavations thus far no positive evidence of the exact location of the village has been found, although a number of objects of the period have been recovered.

The fort proved to be of a unique shape, with three bastions, two pointed and one rounded. The most conclusive evidence for this being the remains of the 1585 fort is that it is very similar in plan to an earthwork built by Ralph Lane's party a few weeks earlier when they stopped in Puerto Rico to obtain salt. For-

tunately the artist for the expedition, John White, made a drawing of the Puerto Rico fort. If such a drawing were available for the Roanoke Island fort the historian's work would have been much simplified.

Although the English probably anticipated trouble with the Indians, the fort appears to have been built primarily as a defense against possible attack by the Spanish from the sea.

The fill in the fort ditch was carefully studied, and revealed rather interesting information. The bottom foot or so had filled in rather quickly, probably soon after construction. After that the fill accumulated very slowly with woods mould, sand, and other natural materials.

No excavating has been done as yet inside the fort, an area approximately fifty feet square. In the explored area no structural remains, such as posts, walls, or building foundations, have been found. It is hoped that further excavating will add to the present picture, both as to the appearance of the fort and the location of the settlers' cottages in the village, presumably nearby.

The project is somewhat different from conventional archaeology in this country, although the principles and procedures of good archaeological method apply equally to both. Here there was considerable historical data to appraise and relate to the archaeological findings. Neither the historical nor the archaeological evidence is conclusive in itself, but the two studied as a single body of related data furnish a surprisingly complete picture of the situation and relatively sound proof that this was the fort built by the Raleigh colonists in 1585.

A small model of the fort has been prepared, and is on exhibit in the remodelled museum at Fort Raleigh. The National Park Service plans to continue the archaeological explorations at the site and, if feasible, will reconstruct the fort on the site. In this full-scale reconstruction, the earth would be carefully removed from the original ditch and thrown up to form a parapet, or embankment, in much the same process as the fort was built originally.

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NOTE: A complete report of this excavation has been published in The North Carolina Historical Review, XXVI (April, 1949), 127-149

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