

Artifacts make Telfair site a likely stopping point for De Soto

BY JIM WOOTEN

Two questions, one innocently inquisitive and the other fanciful, about an archeological dig in the deep woods of Telfair County express the sense of wonder and discovery that will rewrite the history of the first European explorer's expedition through Georgia 475 years ago.

The fanciful question came first. In 2006, Dennis Blanton, curator of Native American archaeology at Fernbank's Museum of Natural History in Atlanta and an assistant professor of archaeology at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., was at work with volunteers searching for the Spanish mission Santa Isabel de Utinahica on an Ocmulgee River site near Jacksonville, Ga.

"Do you think we'll find evidence of Hernando de Soto?" asked volunteer and local historian Julian Williams.

"Everybody laughed," recalls Frankie Snow, a professor at South Georgia College in Douglas, who has spent 45 years gathering information on promising archaeological sites in the region, including this one. Existing research placed the de Soto expedition's futile search for gold, which rambled some 4,000 miles through the Southeast until his death in 1542, as passing nearer Macon, 85 miles away.

The more serious question came from a volunteer, a high school student from Cobb County, Ellen Vaughn, who helped Blanton's crew sift the dirt. "Is this anything?" she asked, presenting a bead.

It was the bead that resonated through the encampment and, soon, the world of de Soto scholars and archaeologists. The Spanish mission



Archaeologist Dennis Blanton, left, and team excavate objects from the de Soto encampment site in Telfair County.

that was the object of the Fernbank search was a religious outpost that existed for only a couple of decades prior to 1640. The bead was about a hundred years older and consistent with those known to be carried by de Soto's entourage for barter.

Since the bead was first discovered in 2006, the site, which is now about 3 acres, has yielded an array of evidence that points to an important Native American village, probably Ichisi. It was headed by a one-eyed chief who provided de Soto with food, porters and translators to ease his contact with the chief of the next province he was to encounter on his journey northward.

The seven excavations Blanton has led back since the discovery of the bead have produced "the largest collection of archaeologically recovered pre-1550 European artifacts in the interior Southeast," he said in a keynote address to the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah in February. "We have now found 14 glass beads of five types, 14 iron tools of at least six types, a brass bell, a silver pendant, two brass finger rings, scraps of decorated brass, a brass ewer handle, and chain links—one



DAN SCHULTZ

Examples of the tools, beads and other findings from the Telfair digs are on display at the Fernbank Museum of Natural History's exhibition, "De Soto's Footsteps: New Archaeological Evidence from Georgia." The museum is at 767 Clinton Road NE, Atlanta. fernbankmuseum.org.

with a hook attached, and—among other things—a pig's tooth." (De Soto's 600 men brought at least 200 horses and a substantial number of pigs on their expedition.)

Snow, speaking to a Founder's Day gathering at Jacksonville United Methodist Church earlier this year, identified an array of tools, weapons, bells, brass finger rings, vessels for holy water, and beads associated with the Spanish found at the site.

Despite the enthusiasm generated by the Telfair site, Blanton and others are determined not to rush ahead with assumptions. Until they find de Soto's monogrammed cufflinks, he jokes, it's hard to assert with absolute certainty that it was de Soto who slept here.

"It takes a certain type of personality to have the patience" for archaeology, says Brandi Berry, vice president of the Fernbank Museum of Natural History. "Once in a while, patience is rewarded with something exhilarating. It is the immediate thrill that you're seeing something that nobody's seen for 500 years."

Jim Wooten, a retired journalist, is restoring the former home of Gov. Eugene Talmadge in his native Telfair County as a special-events facility.

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