

The Spanish Empire's Failure to Conquer the Southeast ^[1]

Juan Pardo's expedition erected six forts in the Southeastern interior, including one at Guatari. Most of them seem to have fallen in short order.

That result wasn't surprising. The forts — Guatari (Trading Ford), Joara (Morganton), two in the Appalachian Mountains and two in South Carolina — were isolated, lightly garrisoned in most cases, dependent on the Indians for food, and prone to trigger Indian resentment.

Most of the forts had apparently fallen by 1568. The forts at Guatari and Joara may have lasted longer than most of the others. In his own written account of his expedition, for example, Pardo took full responsibility for establishing the forts at Guatari and Joara, but he explicitly noted that others in his expedition had jointly supported creation of forts in the mountains. Pardo may have been trying to shift the blame for the fall of those forts, says Charles Hudson, a University of Georgia archaeologist who has written extensively on the expedition.

"Leaving those guys in those little garrisons in the midst of those really tough individuals — I can't imagine they lasted very long," Hudson says. "Did they pick them off one at a time, did one community get fed up with them, or was there a general uprising? There's not any way to answer that at all."

The soldiers were "forced guests" who likely drew the ire of their Indian hosts in a number of ways, says Paul Hoffman, a historian at Louisiana State University. The Spanish would have demanded food, and in some cases, Indian women. There would have been friction with some Indians over status.

"What little evidence we have suggests they wore out their welcome," Hoffman says.

Ghost

The predicament facing Pardo's soldiers was reminiscent ^[2] of the situation faced a century earlier by a figure well-known to most Spanish soldiers: Pedro Carbonero. In the 1400s, Carbonero, a Spanish military officer fighting to expel the Moors from Spain, led his men deep into Moorish territory. The Moors killed the entire Spanish contingent ^[3], including Carbonero.

To Spanish soldiers, the name "Pedro Carbonero" thereafter embodied the idea of a military venture that had overextended itself and ended in disaster. Pardo's soldiers who manned the interior forts may have felt haunted by Carbonero's ghost.

Father Juan Rogel, a Jesuit ^[4], wrote from Havana in July 1568 that five of the Southeastern forts had fallen. He placed the blame on the Spanish soldiers' lust for Indian women. Spanish harassment of Indian women would complicate the Spanish conquest of North America for two more centuries.

One solution was offered by the chief of the Catawba Indians in 1701, according to English explorer John Lawson: Whenever European visitors entered the Catawba settlement, the chief would offer them Indian women he kept as prostitutes.

When the Pardo expedition was organized, the Spanish territorial governor had specifically ordered that the soldiers leave the Indian women alone. Pardo had reiterated ^[5] that point at Guatari when he put Lucas de Canizares, a corporal, in charge of Fort Santiago, the Spanish fort completed in January 1568.

Santiago was the patron saint of Spain. Spanish soldiers regarded him as the exemplar ^[6] of the Christian warrior.

Jaime Martínez, a Spanish colonist, wrote that demands for food by the Pardo soldiers triggered Indian hostilities. Martínez apparently based his conclusion on statements by Juan Martín de Badajoz, whom Martínez said had escaped from one of the interior forts and passed through miles of forests and brambles to reach Santa Elena, the Spanish territorial capital at what is now Parris Island, S.C.

A curiosity stands out about the fort at Guatari: It's a confirmed fact that Sebastian Montero, the Spanish missionary ^[7] there, returned alive and eventually sailed home to Spain. Why wasn't he killed? What happened to the 16 soldiers left to garrison the fort? When exactly did Montero leave Guatari? Existing documents provide no answers.

A list of rations survives from Santa Elena, and notations alongside some of the names indicates which men were killed by Indians. The list does not indicate which soldiers served at which forts, but it does show that the soldiers manning one of the mountain forts, at the Indian settlement of Chiaha, were all killed.

Under attack

The Spaniards' dreams for a Southeastern empire crashed against painful reality in the years following Pardo's expedition. An Indian uprising in South Carolina in 1576 led to evacuation of Santa Elena, whose residents fled south to St. Augustine. One victim of the first Indian attack was Hernando Moyano. He had been a sergeant on Pardo's trip, eager to find precious metals. For a time he had commanded the fort at Joara.

The Spanish returned and built a new fort at Santa Elena in 1577, re-establishing the capital. But the challenges remained formidable [8].

While Indian resistance remained determined, the English government under Elizabeth I stepped up pressure on Spanish forces in the Southeast. Sir Francis Drake led a successful naval assault on St. Augustine in 1585. He intended to attack Santa Elena as a follow-up but wound up missing the harbor.

Spanish authorities decided in 1587 that they lacked the military capacity to adequately defend Santa Elena. So, the Spanish themselves torched the settlement and sailed to St. Augustine. Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the territorial governor who had ordered the Pardo expedition in 1566, didn't live to see the abandonment. He had died in 1574.

The Spanish Empire later achieved successes in California and maintained power throughout Latin America for centuries. But its area of control in the American Southeast shrank to include only Florida and the Gulf Coast area.

Manipulators

In the 1600s and 1700s, England would conquer most of the Southeast. Spearheading the drive against the Spanish was a set of savvy [9], wealthy trader/planters in South Carolina who had a powerful combination of traits Juan Pardo and his Spanish contemporaries never mastered: sharp trading skills, wide-ranging organizational talent, and a cynical [10] ability to manipulate the Indians by drawing them into the European trading network.

When necessary, the English traders, masters of their own private empires, demonstrated a cold reliance on brute force. The Spanish, reeling, had no choice but to fall back. Many reasons can be cited for the collapse of the Spanish empire in the Southeastern interior.

The Hapsburg Empire, of which Spain was a part, stood in the late 1500s as a classic example of imperial [11] overstretch. The empire was often waging war on multiple fronts in Europe. French and English ships attacked Spanish ships and ports in the Caribbean, often with great success. Despite the enormous flow of silver and gold into Spanish coffers [12] from the New World in the 1500s, the empire declared bankruptcy not once but twice. Spain's colonial endeavors in the 16th century Southeast were a money-losing enterprise for the empire, the same as they were in the American Southwest during the same period.

Funds and soldiers that the empire could have used to aid the conquest of the Carolinas and other parts of the Southeast were directed instead toward European problem areas, most notably the Netherlands. There, the Spanish waged a ferocious, decades-long campaign to retain control — and ultimately failed.

Possibilities

So, the great opportunities that seemed to stand before the Spanish Empire for much of the 16th century gradually slipped away. There was a time, however, when the possibilities seemed endless.

Many landmarks in North America received Spanish names early in the 1500s from Spanish explorers, from Rio Espiritu Santo (the Mississippi River) to Bahía de Santa María (Chesapeake Bay) to Cabo de las Arenas (Cape Cod). Spain's imperial ambitions stretched completely up the Atlantic seaboard and across the continent to the Pacific. For a time in the mid-1500s, it looked as if Spain, with its awesome war machine, just might conquer whatever it set out to claim.

To this day, 400-year-old Indian paintings of Spanish soldiers on horseback are still visible on a canyon wall in Arizona, a testament to that imperial vision.

In 1663, Henry Hilton, an English navigator in the employ of planters from Barbados, sailed into the Port Royal region on the South Carolina coast. Hilton Head Island gets its name from him.

Hilton landed at an island the English called Port Royal. A century earlier, the Spanish had another name for it: Santa Elena.

When Hilton stepped onto the beach at Port Royal, nearly a century had passed since Juan Pardo had ventured from the island into the Southeastern interior, and 76 years since the Spanish had burned Santa Elena in their final evacuation. Hilton moved forward and scrutinized [13] the landscape. Indians had resettled there. They greeted him. A number of them spoke Spanish.

In the plaza of the Indian village, he found one other, decades-old remnant of the Spanish occupation. Just outside the Indians' main lodge, as if standing guard against the forces of eternity, stood a large wooden cross.

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3 January 2018

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