Dr. John Worth at the Luna excavation site

PENSACOLA PAY DIRT

Foodways findings from the oldest European-led US settlement

BY SUZANNE COPE

Photos courtesy of University of West Florida

On September 19, 1559, a devastating hurricane made landfall at what is today Pensacola, Florida. Spanish explorer Tristán de Luna y Arellano described the storm in a letter dated a few days afterward. "There came up from the north a fierce tempest, which, blowing for twenty-four hours from all directions until the same hour as it began, without stopping, but increasing continuously, did irreparable damage to the ships of the fleet." Luna sent it to his patron, Philip II, King of Spain, via one of the surviving ships. The storm scored a direct hit to the month-old settlement and decimated their food supply. Through letters, cargo lists, and other written accounts, much has been documented about this first European-led settlement in North America. But physical evidence had proved elusive until recently.

In late 2015, a local archaeology enthusiast named Tom Garner discovered pottery fragments on a residential construction site in Pensacola. Construction stopped, and archaeologists from nearby University of West Florida (UWF) examined the findings. Based on the markings and materials, they dated the potsherds to the mid-1500s. The following summer, the UWF Archaeology Institute organized a field school, where students and professors helped excavate the construction site and created a working map of the area. During the second field school this summer, students will excavate land and underwater sites, where they believe one of the settlement ships rests.

As they analyze their findings, researchers hope to learn how the diverse people of this settlement—Europeans, Africans, and natives of present-day Mexico—interacted with each other and with their new environment. Evidence of the settlement's foodways could reveal the workings of day-to-day life in the two years from founding to abandonment.

John Worth is an associate professor of archaeology at UWF and one of the leaders at the site, which overlooks Escambia Bay. On a recent spring day, he pointed out where his colleagues began square shovel tests. They dug a dozen meter-deep holes in a single yard, Worth explained, and then sifted through the sandy soil for artifacts, refilling the holes when they were done to erase the intrusion and discourage treasure hunters. That work promised to help write a narrative of what the United States might have looked like had this settlement survived.

> *If the Luna settlement had succeeded,* **THE SOUTHEAST MIGHT HAVE BECOME PART OF NEW SPAIN.**

Facing the bay where the ships had first dropped anchor, Worth began a history lesson: Luna, awarded the title of Governor of Florida, was the leader of what the Spanish crown intended to be the first of numerous settlements on the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The eleven-ship fleet left Veracruz, in what was then called New Spain, on June

11, 1559, with upwards of 2,000 settlers. More than half were Spanish soldiers and their families who had been living in New Spain alongside native Mexicans, sometimes intermarrying. The remaining settlers included about 200 Aztec soldiers and artisans as well as free and enslaved Africans. When they arrived in Pensacola in August, they assembled on a low bluff and stored their food on their ships. When the hurricane landed, it sunk two-thirds of the fleet and much of the colony's food supply. Despite these adversities, the settlement persevered for two years. It predates both the Spanish settlement at St. Augustine, founded in 1565, and the 1607 English settlement at Jamestown.

Court treasurers kept meticulous records of the voyages the Spanish crown financed, explained Worth. According to the ships' logs, the Luna expedition arrived with a million pounds of corn, tens of thousands of liters of wine (their primary beverage), as well as olive oil, vinegar, hardtack, salted meat, beans, spices, and other provisions. They brought horses, livestock, chicken coops, fishing nets, and grinding stones for corn.

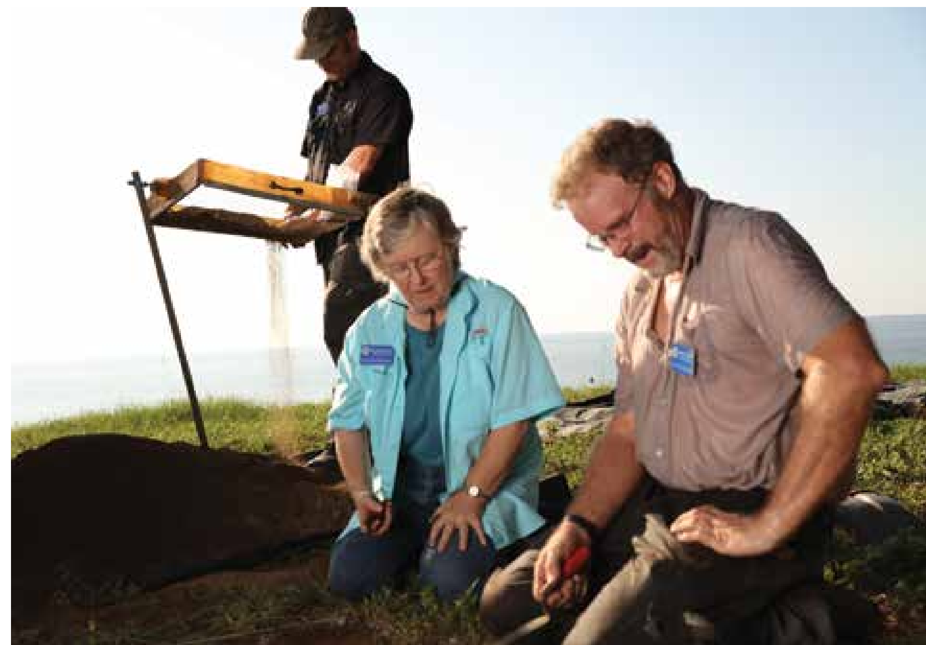
Historians already knew that Spanish settlers adopted Aztec and native Mexican foodways in New Spain, beginning with the Hernán Cortés expedition. They substituted native corn and black and pinto beans for wheat and garbanzos. The Luna settlers ate chocolate, chiles, preserved fruits like guava and apricot, and, according to primary documents, a ration of nine tortillas per person, per day.

The Pensacola excavation can potentially tell researchers even more about how Spanish and native food cultures integrated. "Here we have a precise two-year time window and so we get a snapshot, a time capsule, of Aztec culture and of Valley of Mexico Spanish culture," Worth said. "That's a really cool opportunity. I'm still enthralled with it."

Ships' logs and correspondence reveal much about the settlers' foodways, Worth said, but "the archeology can tell us so much more." Last summer, the archaeologists excavated a trash pit and uncovered oyster and conch shells. They found a deer antler at the bottom, an indicator that the settlers hunted local game.

These findings confirm and contradict what scholars thought they knew. Prior research had suggested that there was little interaction between the settlers and natives. But the excavation has shown otherwise. In addition to Spanish-made ceramics, "we found a smashed pot in the trash pit—clearly an Indian pot that had been intact and they were using it," Worth said. Findings from last summer have catalyzed excavation goals for this second field school. Worth and his team hope to use material evidence to make inferences about the Luna colonists' interactions with natives from the nearby villages of Nanipacana and Coosa.

In April, the Pensacola Downtown Improvement Board and UWF hosted Repast, a celebratory dinner that highlighted the diverse foodways of the Luna settlement. Margo Stringfield and Catherine Parker, both of whom specialize in foodways archeology at the university, invited diners to reconsider what they might think of as native and immigrant foods. Six local chefs brought the menu to life through dishes like mole poblano chicken and paella made with Gulf shrimp.



ABOVE and OPPOSITE: Students, faculty, and staff from the UWF Archaeology Institute at work during the 2016 summer field school

Stringfield said that their ongoing work could uncover pollen grains, carbonized plant remains, and other "wonderful botanicals," which will help tell the story of the Luna expedition's original provisions and what they adopted from natives. For the Repast event, she and Parker created a display of the foods the settlers would have eaten.

Their display recalled what Worth said about how the Luna settlement might have changed American history. The eventual goal of the colony was to send expeditions from Pensacola to the Atlantic, near South Carolina, establishing a Spanish colony south to Veracruz: "If Luna succeeded, the bottom half of the southeast might have become part of New Spain." This, he added, might have discouraged the English from ever sending settlers. Stringfield said these foods "are the story of America." Tortillas and chiles have long been American foods, she implied. Today, with the South's vibrant and growing Latino population, that's clear. Were it not for one devastating storm, we might have realized that far earlier.

Suzanne Cope has been published in The New York Times, The Atlantic, *and* NPR. *Her upcoming book,* Feeding the Revolution, *is about the role of food in revolution.*