

Introduction to NC Digital History, ANCHOR ^[1]

More than 9,000 years ago, the first humans arrived in what is now North Carolina. Their ancestors had migrated from Asia to North America about 12,000 years ago across a land bridge that had emerged when, during the last Ice Age, glaciers froze the oceans and sea level dropped. Or -- wait a minute -- maybe they didn't. For half a century archaeologists agreed on that version of events, but recently they've found evidence of human activity in South America much earlier than that. Could humans have arrived in the Americas 20,000 years ago? 30,000? Could they have arrived by boat rather than by land? Or could that new evidence be wrong, and the older story correct after all?

The first Europeans to set foot in what is now North Carolina were a party of Spanish explorers led by Hernando de Soto in the early 1540s. Strangers in a strange land, they lacked accurate means of measuring their location or how far they had traveled, and they left only written journals of their travels. In the 1800s, a researcher retraced De Soto's route and determined that he traveled through the Piedmont of North Carolina. But hang on, again. In the last twenty years historians and archaeologists have uncovered new evidence, and a newer version of De Soto's trail takes him only through the southwestern corner of the state, deep in the Appalachians. And the argument about where he was, and when -- and who he met, and how they lived -- is far from over.

In the 1580s, the English had a try at planting a colony in North Carolina, on Roanoke Island. Its governor, John White, sailed back to England for supplies, but was delayed there when war broke out with Spain. By the time he returned to Roanoke, the colonists had vanished, leaving only a word carved in a wooden post. He never found them, and neither has anyone else. Historians, archaeologists, ethnologists, linguists, and storytellers have searched for their traces and developed theories, but without hard proof. Maybe the colonists were all killed, or maybe they intermarried with the native residents of the Outer Banks and became today's Lumbee Indians. No one knows for sure.

The past is a mystery -- to be solved

Often, the most interesting thing about the past is not what we know, but what we don't know -- because what we don't know gives us the opportunity to learn something new. Historians, archaeologists, and other people who study the past -- like researchers in any field -- continually uncover new evidence and develop new ways of thinking about the topics they research. They construct the most accurate and complete version of events they can -- until they find still more evidence, and then they rewrite them again. There are two responses you might have, on realizing just how little we actually know about the past. The first is to say that history is a confusing mess. And that's true; it is -- but so is the present, for that matter. Most things are a confusing mess until you take the trouble to think them through. So that way of reacting to things doesn't do anyone a lot of good. The second, and better, way to look at the past is as a mystery to be solved. Everybody loves mysteries -- but imagine how quickly CSI's rating's would plummet if they told you in the first five minutes who committed the crime. Nobody would watch. Nobody would be a historian, either, if we had all the answers already. *It's the not knowing that makes history fun!* Traditionally in a secondary-school history course, students are given answers to historical questions, usually in the form of a heavy textbook, and then asked to repeat those answers on tests. Only later, if they study history in college -- and maybe only if they study it in graduate school -- do they get to pose the questions for themselves, and answer them the way historians would answer them. We think you ought to be let in on the fun now. So this resource is a little different.

Journeys into the past

The further back into the past we look, the less evidence remains, the more assumptions we have to make about it, and the more creative we have to be in developing theories about what actually happened. In this first part of our journey through North Carolina, you'll learn not only what scholars think the distant past was like, but why they think what they think, and what they still don't know. You can't go out "into the field" and look for artifacts, but you'll learn how archaeologists work. As we move closer to the present, you'll be given the raw materials of history to explore for yourself. Instead of just reading what it was like when Europeans and American Indians met for the first time, for example, you'll have the opportunity to read a first-hand account of contact on the Outer Banks, and -- with a little historical guidance -- draw your own conclusions. Will this be more challenging than reading a single story and committing it to memory? Sure. But let's face it: It doesn't really matter whether the first people arrived in North America 12,000 years ago or 20,000 years ago. That information has no impact on your life, today. It's the process -- the questioning, the discovery, the analysis -- that matters. It's the process that's fascinating. It's the process that uncovers deeper truths, and tells us things we need to know about ourselves. And by taking part in that process, you may well find that all those names and dates really *do* matter -- because you'll know the stories behind them, and you'll have helped to write them.

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