

# The First Latrines and Privies: Time Capsules for the 1559 Luna Settlement on Pensacola Bay

by  
David B. Dodson  
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This succinct article points out the potential of finding latrines and privies related to the Luna Expedition of 1559 on Pensacola Bay. These archeological features could well appear as trash pits and time capsules that could reveal the life and times of the people on the Luna Expedition.

One of the more important aspects of a settlement expedition consisting of over 1,500 soldiers and colonists was the establishment of latrines and privies for the necessary disposal of human waste. It is perhaps the written legacy of the Roman armies and their standards for their expeditions that we derive knowledge of how to dispose of vast quantities of human wastes of an army. It is appropriate to dispose of human waste in areas separate from living spaces and drinking water sources. Indeed, the 1559 Luna settlement site on Pensacola Bay, no matter its location, would have had numerous pits for the disposal of human excrement.

One might think that the colonists could have easily used the waters of Pensacola Bay as their latrine, however, the bay waters can get very cold and uninviting at times of the year. Also, common sense, even in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, said, “you do not purge yourself where your food might come from.” It would be absurd to assume that Governor Luna, the Royal Officials, or the officers in the army would literally use the open waters of the bay to relieve themselves.

The task of coordinating the construction and maintenance of latrines and privies for the encampment and subsequent settlement was under the charge of the *mastre de campo*—head of the camp—that was Jorge Cerón Saavedra. He would have had another captain or lieutenant in charge of the actual digging and maintenance of the latrines. The work would have most likely been accomplished by forced laborers sent on the expedition to attend to such menial tasks. With over 1,500 people, such matters would have been an enormous task. Over a period of over two years there would have been many holes in the ground filled with human waste and all sorts of other trash—the waste from cooking, broken pottery vessels, animal bones, and anything else that might rot, smell, or need discarding.

Therefore, the initial latrines constructed soon after the Luna Expedition arrived on Pensacola Bay were temporary arrangements most likely located on the edge of the encampment. Those latrines were probably very simple, composed of a wooden platform over an excavated trench with perhaps a simple hole or holes in the platform for one to sit to relieve oneself. Privacy walls of draped canvas might have been afforded, especially for the women.

The accumulated feces underneath was likely, from time to time, covered over with small layers of dirt to mask the smell and reduce the flies. When the trench was slowly filled back in, new ones would be dug. The impact of latrines on the subsurface landscape would remain to serve as succinct time capsules.

Thus, over the centuries, the effluent from the initial latrines at the Luna Colony site would have decomposed and been absorbed by the sandy-loam soil leaving dark stains as a signature of their original use and would appear today as archeological features.

While latrines from the Luna Expedition were intended for human waste, they also might have become *de facto* trash pits and time capsules for the first long-term European settlement on today’s United States soil. The settlement endured from August 1559 until November 1561. The subsurface features left by the Luna Expedition, including latrines/trash pits should be findable by archeologists.

(NOTE: This article is an excerpt from a more in depth essay relative to latrines dating from the 1500s through the early 1900s.)



Refuse Pit. 16th-Century, Spanish  
Santa Elena, South Carolina