

A Peer Review of the University of West Florida's Luna Expedition Project—2015-2020

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In 2015, when the University of West Florida claimed to have found the site of the 1559 Luna Settlement in Pensacola, I was skeptical mainly because the site 8ES1 on the East Pensacola Heights peninsula had been excavated by archeologists during the 1990's with little results and historic colonial maps absent of any noteworthy features. But especially because of the glaring lack of an adequate, continuous water source; a source that could hydrate well over 1,500 soldiers, colonists, Aztec warriors, horses and other livestock. Further, the water source also had to have a year-round flow adequate for what was to be expected for a growing port town with the capability to also furnish water for ships returning to New Spain or sailing to Cuba.

A professional engineer in hydrology did an extensive analysis of the site and substrate and confirmed that the East Pensacola Heights site could not have supported a Spanish Colony due to an insufficient lack of water.¹ This was true even for a temporary settlement of seven months before the relocation of the main expedition up to the Native town of Nanipacana located on the lower Alabama River. Further, there is no Spanish document that I can find that the Luna expedition ever suffered from the lack of potable water. The lack of food was always a problem; water never was.

However, with some surface-collected artifacts that were from the 16th century as well as some found in situ, I cannot discount that the site could be related in some manner to the Luna colony, especially with at least two 16th century shipwrecks just offshore. Perhaps the site was a lookout location for the main Spanish settlement colony located elsewhere, or even a salvager's work area or encampment? Further, the site had been designated in 1883 by the Smithsonian Institute as archeological site 8ES1 because of the remnants of what appeared to be a Woodland and Mississippian Period Native

¹ See *The Water Problem: The Luna Colony and More*, by William L. Merrill, P.E., Merrill Engineering, Inc. <http://archeologyink.com/the-water-problem-the-luna-colony-and-more/>

settlement. Importantly, however, the existence of two Native burial mounds and midden located on the site was irrefutable evidence of Native occupation before the Luna Colony arrived, and possibly during the time the expedition was situated on the bay. Indeed, when the Luna expedition arrived in August of 1559, Luna noted the existence of a few fishermen huts and a small cornfield, but gave no clue to their locations.

I was critical of the rush by UWF to make their claim without a more in-depth analysis supported by solid archeological excavations and other scientific investigation. Such an investigation would find the remnants of the Luna Colony including numerous fire hearths, refuse pits, remains of the known structures, and Spanish burials. These features have been found at other Spanish colonies of the period, including Isabella founded on Hispanola in 1493, St. Augustine founded in 1565, and Santa Elena founded in 1566. Hard archeological verification was needed before headlines and a claim of their “irrefutable finding of the Luna colony” was quickly screamed out to the world.

I thought the actions of UWF and their “well orchestrated hoopla” was premature for what might be one of the most important archeological finds ever for Pensacola as well as the State of Florida. Reserved excitement was called for until verification was truly established. But soon afterwards, with minimal artifacts being found and the lack of relevant features in the soils there began an exaggeration of what actually had been found. One possible posthole begat a building and a measuring weight defined the location of the warehouse. I found the accumulative actions of UWF irresponsible and unprofessional, and let them know. Just ask UWF President Martha Saunders, the Board of Trustees, and the faculty.

So, after five years of archeological excavations by UWF, documental research and translations, my opinion of the project and archeological site has not changed much. It is a Native American site mixed with 16th century Spanish artifacts, along with artifacts and archeological features from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Also, my opinion of the overall professionalism and “scholarship” by UWF has unfortunately only worsened.

It would take too much time to fully critique all the mistakes UWF has made, so I will just focus on a few examples to support my Peer Review opinion.

Example 1

Some of the important translations of historic documents by UWF are incorrect and some “cherry picked” from a longer passage that has led to wrong analysis and conclusions concerning the Luna expedition.

Sentences can be translated differently depending upon the modern translator and how much peripheral information one has to more fully understand the intent of the original writer. The latter can also be influenced or determined by the vocabulary of the original writer, that being where were they educated, Spain or Mexico, and what they had previously written about the subject at hand. Also, by studying the personal life of a 16th century author, one can understand that the author’s biases or points of view that can assist in a more correct translation. But you still have to read and translate an entire passage of a document or risk making errors and presenting inaccurate analysis. Indeed, “cherry picking” a document is poor scholarship no matter what the language.

When you begin with an inaccurate translation or potentially false or questionable narrative any further expansion, utilization, or building upon that narrative only perpetuates the mistake. Well renowned Texas historian Robert S. Weddle became aware of his own “mistakes” and how they had been perpetuated over and over again by fellow scholars. He therefore believed that we needed to go back to the beginning and re-translate and re-evaluate the original documents, especially with today’s wider knowledge of both the French and the Spanish during the colonial centuries.

Over a 35-year period, I have been dealing with UWF as an invited archeological site advisor and an architectural advisor as well as a guest speaker for UWF archeological classes, I have personally experienced or found many instances where UWF has made errors in their archeological interpretation, much less mistakes and lack of foresight in their excavation endeavors. Advice is asked then dismissed when it might contradict what has already been said to the students in the field. Therefore these mistakes sometimes become presented as “documented facts.” Because the people at UWF are perceived as highly educated, “experts” in their fields, and associated with a state university, those interpretive mistakes have been and will now be perpetuated by subsequent scholars in theses, dissertations, and printed books. Mistakes unfortunately become “truths.”

Example 2

Another glaring translation and analysis problem involves the “repeated trips” UWF has the Luna Expedition making going up and down the Escambia River. But the evidence shows that around September 13, 1559, at least two ships returned from a river reconnaissance up to what is today’s Escambia River and reported that the river was shallow and had too many turns to be a river of importance, one that went far up into the hinterlands of la Florida. In other words, it was useless as a major “roadway” into the interior. Also, the lack of any great Native population along the river indicated its limited, regional nature. However, UWF has repeated expeditions continuously going up this river, and arbitrarily crossing over deserted lands and finding the Native town of Nanipacana, which was located on the much larger Lower Alabama River. Known documents in the possession of UWF relate that even before the first land reconnaissance returned and the hurricane of September 19-20th occurred, Luna was already contemplating moving the colony to today’s Mobile Bay with its “mighty river.”² Indeed, I possess the same documents as UWF, and the translations indicate that the town of Nanipacana was found by following the Alabama River banks upward, and not blindly crossing on an overland trek. Therefore, almost immediately, the Escambia River and any Natives that might have lived along its banks had been abandoned and all future river efforts focused on the lower Alabama River and its tributaries. There is no further mention of the Escambia River, much less sending more expeditions up the river. For whatever reason, UWF just plainly got it wrong.

Example 3

In a paper published in 2020 by the *Society of Historical Archeology*, UWF presents some tables of what they had found at their alleged Luna Settlement site. One such table listed the metal fasteners--nails, spikes, tacks, etc.—and poignantly gave the total weight of each type found. While the style was informative, and sometimes can insinuate as to the customary length of a fastener, the weight of a half-rusted spike or nail is practically worthless. There is a big difference between a 5-inch spike and a 10-inch spike or a spike that is said to weigh so many grams. A rusted nail of 3 grams means nothing, but a rusted nail 3 inches long can tell us where its intended use

² Captain Guido de las Bazares first reported of the “mighty river” (*una voca grande*, or a wide mouth of a river) flowing into Mobile Bay from his reconnaissance of 1558-1559. See Priestly, II, 334-335, *Declaration Of Guido De Las Bazares, Mexico City, February 1, 1559.*

might have been--or was--at the settlement. An actual bend in the nail might even indicate that it had been used to assemble parts for a door or shutters. Further, in an effort to date the land artifacts as being from the Luna Expedition, UWF informs that much of the artifacts found on land are the same as found on the shipwrecks. So does this mean the fasteners were made in Spain and/or were they salvaged from parts of the shipwrecks adjacent to the site? Were the spikes salvaged from construction elements of the ships or building the structures of the settlement as UWF suggests?

Example 4

One of the writing styles that UWF employs is when an author cites their own narrative from another previous work of theirs, one that is not easily accessible for peer review. How can we know that the UWF translations and analysis in the other papers were correct to begin with? UWF is guilty of this style of writing. It is not academically sound and seems more a tool to boast of ones “academic prowess” or self aggrandizement than true scholarship.

As an example, one such recent paper by UWF mentions four women taken from Coosa by the soldiers of Soto in 1540 who were ordered by Viceroy Luis de Velasco to return to la Florida with the Luna Expedition to serve as “advisors and interpreters.” The citation of this statement refers back to a previous paper that refers to another paper from a previous year. The statement is half-right in that the women were, indeed, to serve as potential interpreters, but in no manner was it indicated that they were to give advice while on the expedition. The latter idea is an error in translation. I was fortunate to have read and translated the same Spanish transcription myself years ago.

The document, written to King Philip II, appears to have been written in haste by three Dominican frays who were encamped in Tlaxcala with the Luna expedition while traveling the road toward departure at the ports of Veracruz for la Florida. Many last minute letters were being compiled and this one included a plea begging the king to provide additional monies for a more plentiful food supply, one that would suffice a year or two for the expedition. This would prevent the necessity of the Spanish soldiers of having to confiscate any of the Native food supply in order to survive, and importantly, greatly limit any interaction of the soldiers with the Native women. The four women wanted to prevent the future rapes of the Native maidens as well as to prevent the soldiers from making the women

concubines. Indeed, the four women had been taken from their families and they, themselves, had personally endured such horrors. Therefore, this “advice” or warning was given, but not that they were to continuously serve as advisors on the Luna Expedition. Interpreters, yes; advisors no!

Conclusion

I am sure researchers at UWF have produced some very interesting results that are yet to be shared with professionals and the general public. Excavating over 1,000 holes in the ground provides all sorts of data including what was found, and especially what was not found. More importantly, the “new” narratives by UWF concerning the Luna Expedition are based on translations in error, “cherry picked” and negligent omissions of known facts, which all contribute to incorrect analysis and faulty conclusions. I would have hoped and expected better from UWF; but apparently their original irresponsible and unprofessional actions as well as their erroneous analysis and writings that began in 2015 have thus far continued unabated.