

# **The Discovery of the 1559 Spanish Luna Colony in Pensacola: The Evidence?**

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## *Abstract*

*The University of West Florida (UWF) has recently claimed to have found the site of the 1559 Spanish Colony, the oldest long-lived European Colony in the current United States. The site is located at a large Native Indian village (8Es1) that contains 16th-Century Spanish artifacts. Is the UWF Luna Colony site location claim legitimate ... or not? This article examines the issues of: the Native burial mounds known at the site; the UWF claim of the Spanish Royal Warehouse; and the two Spanish shipwrecks offshore from the Native village site.*

## ***The Discovery***

Public claims by the University of West Florida (UWF) of the discovery of the 1559 Spanish Luna Colony site on Pensacola Bay in November, 2015, have been widely distributed on mass media outlets as well as through professional conduits (Pensacola News Journal: 12/18/15, 12/20/15, and 12/20/15; Worth 2016). The claim is that the 1559 Spanish Colony led by Tristan de Luna has been discovered at site 8Es1 in east Pensacola, Florida. Is the claim legitimate ... or is the claim premature (Contact Archeology 2016; Curren 2016)?

If the colony claim is justifiable, it would have national and international implications concerning studies of the earliest New World European settlements. The 1559 Luna Colony was the first long-lived European settlement in the current United States and uniquely important in studies of first European/Native cultural contacts.

The spark that led to the fire of the media frenzy happened in October of 2015. A local, independent historian happened upon a concentration of 16th-Century Spanish artifacts in a small area on a residential construction site. The artifact cluster found in that relatively small area was indeed impressive. The classes of 16th-Century Spanish artifacts in the small area included: glass trade beads, several varieties of glazed and unglazed Spanish pottery, Aztec pottery, and various metal items, as well as Native pottery sherds (pers.com., John Worth, 11/12/15; Worth 2016).

However, the fact that such a relatively small concentration (approx. 1/2 acre) of these artifact classes has not been found, so far, anywhere else on this large Native village (approx. 1/2 mile by 1/4 mile) could be significant. Why is the Spanish artifact concentration found, to date, in only one place on the large Native village site?

## ***The Burial Mounds***

Two burial mounds were reported at the 8Es1 Native village by Smithsonian archeologists in 1883 and again in 1947 (Walker 1885; Willey 1949). Could this Spanish artifact concentration be from the remains of one of these two burial mounds that was previously disturbed in modern times? The multiple classes of Spanish artifacts found in the 8Es1 concentration appear to resemble the contents of other Native burial mounds in the Southeast containing European contact trade items. Could a burial mound explain the, so far, unique concentration of Spanish artifacts on the site? The archeologists at the University of West Florida discount this burial mound hypothesis as fallacious (pers. com., Elizabeth Benchley, 12/19/15).

A UWF archeologist presented a paper at a recent meeting of professionals (Worth 2016). The claim presented in the paper was that: *The assemblage (of the 1/2 -acre artifact concentration) is completely unlike the typical assemblage of Spanish gift and trade goods found at a number of contact-era Native American sites across the southeastern U.S., which are normally dominated by glass beads, iron tools, copper-alloy bells, and other Similar, easily portable items, usually found in burial context* (Worth 2016: pg. 4). However, in the same paper the archeologist noted the artifacts from the concentration included, among others: glass beads, metal objects, and fragments of a copper-alloy bell. These “special items” could have easily been mixed with the more mundane items of Spanish and Native pottery when the burial mound was leveled for 20th-Century developments.

It appears that the burial mound hypothesis has merit enough for serious consideration based not only on the Spanish artifact concentration assemblage, but also on the recorded fact that two Native burial mounds at 8Es1 were reported previously by Smithsonian archeologists. Additionally, the fact that this artifact concentration is unique to the site, based on current data, lends credibility to the burial mound hypothesis.

### ***The Royal Warehouse***

An alternative hypothesis to the burial mound premise was proposed by the UWF archeologist in the same paper referenced previously: ... *While time does not allow me to elaborate extensively here, the extremely dense concentration of artifacts recovered during 2015 excavations suggest that this may actually be the location of the royal warehouse for Luna’s settlement* (Worth 2016: pg. 4).

Specific Spanish artifact tables with numbers and types found at the small concentration at 8Es1 did not accompany the January 2016 paper. Presumably, the tables will be released in a more comprehensive document at a later date. Judging from the general data in the current UWF paper, there were several hundred Spanish artifacts found in the assemblage (Worth 2016: pg. 5). It is reasonable to assume that thousands of Spanish artifacts, not just hundreds, should be present in an archeological feature as important as the Royal Warehouse.

A quote from a paper by two UWF archeologists supports this premise. The paper reported financial account records of materials loaded onto the Luna fleet in Mexico before it sailed for Pensacola Bay: *Limiting our analysis to those materials in the (Luna Expedition) accounts that were likely at least in part destined for use on land ... the roster includes 1,332 horseshoes and 1,400 lbs. of mule shoes, as much as 1,800 lbs. worth of grinding stones ... and more than 68,000 nails and tacks of diverse sizes, some of which may instead have been used on the ships ... 2,237 iron barrel hoops*” (underlining added) (Worth and Bratten 2014: pgs. 4-5).

Those figures add up to 71,569 iron objects and 3,200 pounds of iron and stone objects shipped with the Luna fleet. Considering those numbers, a few hundred Spanish artifacts in a half-acre concentration do not seem to add up as a legitimate claim for the Luna Colony Royal Warehouse location. Even considering the loss of supplies from the hurricane that hit the Spanish fleet, the use of supplies for the land colony, and the unknown amount of materials taken to the Spanish inland settlement at Nanipacana, a few hundred Spanish artifacts do not warrant such a conclusive Royal Warehouse discovery suggested by the UWF archeologists.

It has been assumed by some that the majority of the Luna Colony equipment was lost when the hurricane sank most of the fleet. That is an erroneous assumption if the writings of the Spanish are to be believed. The following quotes indicate that a very large amount of the supplies, tools, and weapons on the ships were, indeed, brought ashore by the Spanish before the hurricane hit the fleet in the summer of 1559:

*...more than half of the supplies, and all of the tools and arms ... (were taken ashore about 20-25 days before the hurricane hit) (Priestley 1928 vol. II: pg. 285).*

... he had assisted in unloading a part of the supplies, and the arms and tools which they took in order to erect edifices and make farms ... (Priestley 1928 vol. II: pg. 303).

... they disembarked at the Port of Ochuse ... and after all the people, the horses, the arms and tools and part of the supplies had been disembarked, the governor sent certain captains with men into the country ... (Priestley 1928 vol. II: pg. 313).

The very large amount of equipment that was offloaded to the Luna Colony site from the ships seems to support the hypothesis that thousands of artifacts were present in the area of the Royal Warehouse. It is logical to assume that at least some of the equipment was left behind when the last of the Luna Colony people left Pensacola Bay in October of 1561 (Priestley 1928; Childers 2003).

In addition to the large number of artifacts likely to be found at the Royal Warehouse, there should reasonably be numerous archeological features as well. The features might include post holes and fire hearths associated with the structure. To date, no such specifically identified features have been reported at the site. A cluster of four features were reported at the site but no artifactual contents or feature types were provided (Worth 2016: pgs. 5,7,10).

Given the considerations outlined above, the UWF public claims concerning the Luna Colony and the Royal Warehouse site locations appear to be premature when compared to the criteria requirements for the archeological fingerprints of the actual Colony and Warehouse.

### ***The Shipwrecks***

UWF archeologists are using the two 16th-Century Spanish shipwrecks as direct or insinuated support for their claim that archeological site 8Es1 is definitely the site of the Luna Colony. In the recent paper by a UWF archeologist it was stated that:

(Site 8Es1) ... *seems likely to have been the closest ideal spot to the inferred landing from the ships at anchor ...* (underlining added) (Worth 2016).

First, the Luna fleet anchorage has not been found at 8Es1 or any other location. It seems logical to first locate the fleet anchorage before suggesting what might be *the closest ideal spot* for the Luna Colony location relative to the anchorage.

Second, there is currently no definitive archeological evidence that either of the two Spanish shipwrecks off 8Es1 were anchored when they sank. Quite the contrary, underwater archeologists from the Florida Bureau of Archaeological Research and the University of West Florida have stated that the two shipwrecks off 8Es1 were grounded by a storm and not anchored.

*The ship apparently had grounded violently during a severe storm on a shallow sand bar ...* (Smith 2009: pg. 79).

*While the locations of these two vessels in the same vicinity may suggest that others lie nearby, it still cannot be determined if the ships were blown to this location by the hurricane, or grounded near their anchorage* (Cook 2009: pg. 98).

Until such time that definitive evidence of the Luna fleet anchorage off 8Es1 is forthcoming, it is inappropriate to use the two grounded shipwrecks as evidence of the UWF claim that the Luna Colony site is located at 8Es1.

## *The Native Village*

There is little question, based on artifactual remains, that the large Native site of 8Es1 (approx. 1/2 mile by 1/4 mile) contains archeological components dating to the Mississippian and Protohistoric Periods and earlier. Based on Native pottery types from the site, it seems highly probable that the 1559 Luna Colony occupancy falls within that Native occupation period (Fuller and Stowe 1982; Fuller 1985; Fuller et al. 1984; Curren 1992; Fuller and Brown 1998).

As previously noted, the University of West Florida archeologists are claiming that 8Es1 is the Luna Colony site. In a recent professional paper, one of the UWF archeologists addressed the Native village issue at the site. It appears to us that he is suggesting that the Native village of 8Es1 may not have been occupied during the alleged Luna Colony occupancy at the location. He attempts to present evidence supporting that premise. First, we present the entire paragraph from the UWF paper. Then, we isolate quotes along with our comments:

*I should not omit the fact that there is also a reasonably robust assemblage of local Native American ceramics on the site, most of which fall within the late prehistoric to contact era Pensacola series ... Given that there is no documentary evidence for direct trading with local Pensacola Bay Indian groups during the expedition, three possible explanations may be forwarded for their (native pottery sherds) presence, all of which may be the case. First, they may predate the Luna settlement, and could even relate to the Soto-era chiefdom of Ochuse on Pensacola Bay. Second, they may post-date the Luna settlement, potentially even belonging to 17th-century Panzacola or Chacato Indians documented to have lived on the Bay. Third, they may even have been pots brought back with the Luna colonists after their four-month stay at Nanipacana in south-central Alabama. Teasing out the associations and origins of these ceramics will be of particular interest to interpreting the site (Worth 2016: pg. 8).*

1. The UWF archeologist stated that ... *Given that there is no documentary evidence for direct trading with local Pensacola Bay Indian groups during the expedition ...*

Looking more closely at that statement ... There are references to people of the Luna Expedition trading with the Native peoples during the course of their travels through Northwest Florida and Alabama. Also, the Spanish writers did indeed make mention of the presence of Native peoples on Pensacola Bay (Priestley 1928 vol. II: pg.275). If they traded with other Native groups, why not those on Pensacola Bay as well? The following translated quotes from writers referring to the Luna Colony reinforce this premise:

*At the Native town of Nanipacana ... they (the Spaniards) gave them (the Natives) trinkets of broad silk ribbons and several glass beads which they prized for their novelty (Davila Padilla 1596: pg. 243).*

*At the Native town of Olibahali ... the Indians did not want money, because they had never used any type of money in all their antiquity: what goods they esteemed the most, and appreciated on this occasion (were) the Colonial ribbons, and trinkets of colored beads which they gave them (Davila Padilla 1596: pg. 247).*

Additional evidence for 16th-Century Spanish trading with Pensacola Bay Natives comes from an impressive array of numerous European glass trade beads on a bayside site (8Sr36) several miles from 8Es1. Many of the beads date to the 16th-Century, some most likely from both the Luna (1559) and Soto (1540) Expeditions. A total of 64 glass beads were found at the burial site. Some of the most diagnostic beads included: Nueva Cadiz (9), Faceted Chevrons (11), Gooseberry (7), and Turquoise (22) (Head 1967; pers. com. Randolph Head 2016). These bead types have been determined to date primarily to the 16th-Century particularly when found in the same archeological context (Little 2008; Smith and Good 1982; Smith 1983, Kidd and Kidd 1970). A number of archeological surveys and excavations have been conducted in the area of 8Sr36 over the years and have resulted in the conclusion that the sites in the area are multicomponent in nature and include Mississippian Period mounds and habitation sites (Griffin 1946; Lazarus 1961; Phelps 1969; Tesar 1973; Huston and Stoutamire 1982; Joy 1988).

In summary, the historic Luna documents clearly state Spanish trade with Native groups in present-day Alabama. Native peoples certainly lived on Pensacola Bay during the Luna Expedition (Priestley 1928 vol. II: pg.275). Contradictory to the statement of UWF that no trading occurred between the Spanish and Natives in the Pensacola Bay area, there are two Native villages on Pensacola Bay that contain 16th-Century Spanish traditional trade items (8Es1 and 8Sr36). Considering these data, the inference by UWF that the Luna Expedition did not trade with Native peoples on Pensacola Bay appears to be incongruous with the facts.

2. The UWF archeologist also stated that ... *three possible explanations may be forwarded for their* (the Native pottery sherds) *presence, all of which may be the case. First, they may predate the Luna settlement, and could even relate to the Soto-era chiefdom of Ochuse on Pensacola Bay ... Second, they* (the Native pottery sherds) *may post-date the Luna settlement, potentially even belonging to 17th-century Panzacola or Chacto Indians documented to have lived on the Bay.*

This statement suggests that 8Es1 was not inhabited by Native peoples during the time of the Luna Colony. As has been noted earlier, one of the ceramic components found on site 8Es1 is clearly indicative of the Mississippian and Protohistoric Periods of the Native cultural timeline of the northern Gulf Coast. The UWF archeologist even stated this fact in his article ... *there is also a reasonably robust assemblage of local Native American ceramics on the site, most of which fall within the late prehistoric to contact era ...*

In summary, based on current data, it would be very difficult to demonstrate with any certainty that the ceramic complex at 8Es1 dated to the Soto Expedition and/or the 17th-Century Native occupations but did not date to the Luna Expedition. The UWF archeologist appears to contend that the Spanish artifacts show evidence that the Luna Colony was located at 8Es1 but, on the other hand, that no Native peoples lived at the site during that time. This contention is proposed even though the Spanish and Native artifacts are often found commingled within the same strata at the site.

3. The UWF archeologist also stated that ... *they* (the 8Es1 Native ceramic sherds) *may even have been pots brought back with the Luna colonists after their four-month stay at Nanipacana in south-central Alabama.*

To suggest that the Luna colonists may have taken Native pottery vessels from Nanipacana with them back to the colony on Pensacola Bay is unrealistic. The colonists left many of their own supplies at Nanipacana as was reported (Davila Padilla 1596). Having left their own metal and ceramic vessels behind at Nanipacana to make the arduous trip back down the Alabama River, why would the colonists take Native vessels instead of their own containers?

In summary: There was no mention in the historic Luna Colony documents of a Native village at the Luna Colony site. This fact does not totally negate the possibility of a Native village at the colony, however, it does raise questions concerning the validity of the UWF claim of the discovery of the Luna Colony at the Native village of 8Es1.

### ***Spanish Artifacts at Native Villages on Pensacola Bay***

The two largest Mississippian Period Native villages and burial mound sites on the lower half of Pensacola Bay both contain the largest concentrations of 16th-Century Spanish artifacts currently known on the entire bay. One of these villages is 8Es1. The other is 8Sr36 (see previous discussion).

A number of the Spanish artifacts found in archeological context at both sites likely originated with the Luna Colony. Logically, Spanish trade or salvage items would, most likely, be found at these larger concentrations of Native peoples. In our opinion, empirical proof of the actual Luna Colony site at either of these Native villages has not been demonstrated based on current data.

Again, there was no mention of a Native village at the Luna Colony site. Is it possible or even probable that the Luna Colony site might be discovered in a separate location other than these two large Native village sites? If so, the Spanish artifacts found at both the Native village sites could represent trade items as well as Native-salvaged Spanish artifacts from the colony remains and shipwrecks left behind when the last remnants of the Luna Colony left the bay area in late 1561.

## *Synopsis*

This entire article contains many archeological / historical details but they can be synthesized into a simple statement: It is the contention of Contact Archeology that the University of West Florida prematurely announced publicly the alleged discovery of the 1559 Luna Colony in Pensacola, Florida.

It could be, however, that the University of West Florida archeologists may be right. Site 8Es1 might eventually turn out to be the site of the 1559 Luna Colony. UWF might also may be right that the 2015 discovery of the small concentration of Spanish artifacts on the large Native village site is the Spanish Royal Warehouse used as a storehouse by the Luna colonists.

However, in the opinion of Contact Archeology, there is not enough current, conclusive archeological evidence to announce that site 8Es1 is the 1559 Luna Colony. Rather, it would be appropriate to propose a hypothesis that the site might be the Luna Colony. The next step would be to develop specific procedures to test the Luna Colony hypothesis, then proceed with the tests to determine a final conclusion. Hypothesis development and testing takes time ... a lot of time ... sometimes decades.

Contact Archeology is continuing its long-term excavations based on hypothesis testing in other portions of the Pensacola Bay area searching for the Luna Colony. This arduous archeological hypothesis development and testing program has been ongoing for some twenty-plus years. We have made significant progress and, hopefully, will continue to do so.

All of the recent attention to the Luna Colony is a positive stimulus toward filling in a huge gap in the early history of the unique historical place that is Pensacola, Florida.

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