

Where, pray tell, was San Miguel?

Written by Laura Von Harten

Part of an ongoing series about the Lowcountry's colonial history



San Miguel de Guadalpe was the first miserable failure of a European colony in what is now the United States.

Saint Augustine, Florida, gets more attention but that's just because it was the first successful colony. Therefore it has a long, unbroken chain of civic boosterism that, over the past 500 years, has done much to bolster its Municipal Creation Myth.

Back in the day, failed colonies were not good PR for a community so they tended to be forgotten, their history neglected. There is good reason for this. Besides introducing awkwardness into an otherwise delightful conversation, the discussion of failed colonies created a chilling factor that jeopardized recruitment of new colonists.

The impact on the historical record is that failed colonies lack detailed documentation of their founding. That is why they are so hard to locate.

Fortunately for lovers of history, when it comes to the negative PR value of failed colonies there is an unwritten statute of limitations. In an ironic twist, the possible presence of a failed colony now enhances the cool factor of any destination.

That's why, in the past century, San Miguel de Guadalpe has been proudly claimed by every coastal community south of the Chesapeake Bay. The South Carolina Lowcountry was hopeful

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that the remains of San Miguel would eventually be discovered in our neck of the woods, but alas, that was not to be.

Currently scholarly thought is that San Miguel was probably located in Georgia, in the Sapelo Sound area that lies halfway between Savannah and Brunswick.

San Miguel failed for many reasons, the most significant of which was bad karma. The CEO of the colony, Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon, was, to put it politely, ethically challenged.

Luke had a handful of business partners in Santo Domingo who were supposed to be in on the whole San Miguel thing. They helped pay for many of the startup costs, including the not insignificant salary of the ship's pilot they kept on retainer for several years just so he wouldn't head back to Chicora in the employ of other Spaniards.

These partners expected Luke to negotiate with the King of Spain and the Council of Indies on their behalf, but Luke pulled a fast one. Instead of coming back to Hispaniola with a Spanish franchise agreement bearing the names of all the partners, he returned with a document that reeked of cheap wine and back-stabbing. It gave authority to create new colonies to one person: Luke.

He procrastinated for a couple of years about organizing the colony until the crown finally told him use it or lose it. So Luke hurriedly recruited 500 Spanish colonists to accompany him to what was called "Tierra de Ayllon."

Adding to the enterprise's bad-karma burden, de Ayllon transported 100 enslaved Africans to San Miguel.

He also brought with them a bunch of horses (for riding) and other livestock (for eating). So if you have animal rights or vegetarian leanings, that's just one more thing (or two more things) to hold against him.

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Not to worry. In the end justice was served.

Next: more about this ill-fated colony, its collapse, and the implications for African diaspora studies.

NOTES ON PAST PIECES IN THE SERIES

- Error of fact: Lucas de Ayllon was not exactly a mayor in Hispaniola, as was reported. He was, however, a high muckety-muck. Ayllon held a number of prestigious-sounding job titles during his stellar career as a conqueror, colonist and converter of pagans in the New World: judge, magistrate, licenciado, that kind of thing.
- Spelling correction: Lucas de Ayllon (not Allyon).
- Spelling variants: Quejo was also spelled Quijo and Quexos. In the ships' logs it's sometimes abbreviated as QJO, kind of like J-Lo.

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