

The Two Stories of San Miguel de Guadalupe

Written by Laura Von Harten



It's easy to study early European settlement in what is now the United States. There are lots of historic documents out there – countless manuscripts, letters, maps and ships' logs that provide priceless accounts of the Age of Exploration.

Really, the most difficult challenge that today's scholars face is remembering to take their allergy medicine before poring through the moldering archives. A close second, of course, is trying to make sense of all that loopy handwriting.

European conquistadors were keen to write about their experiences in the New World. In fact the only thing they enjoyed more than writing about the people they conquered was, unfortunately, burning the written works of the people they conquered.

Because of this wholesale and wanton destruction of ancient societies' intellectual property, many generations' worth of wisdom was lost to posterity. But that was OK with the conquerors. The Great Burning created a cultural vacuum that could be filled with their own pumped up versions of history, so they gained market share. In the end, European settlements developed strong brand recognition.

So nowadays we get an overdose of stories about all the half-hearted attempts of fool-hardy Europeans who tried to live on this foreign soil. The stories go something like this: the settlers stayed for two weeks (or two months or two years), then they ran out of supplies. The lucky ones died of starvation or malaria. The stupid ones got killed by Indians. The crazy ones died off in a series of mutinies. Any settler ucky enough to still be alive at the end of the movie tried to

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sail back to the Mother Country, but as cruel fate would have it, the ship was lost at sea. Or lost to pirates. Or lost to an enemy kingdom. Whatever. The point is there are dozens of stories with these elements.

Regarding early African settlements in the New World, however, the historical record offers only the merest whisper.

This is why, compared to the other tales of colonization, the story of San Miguel de Guadalupe is so unusual and so fascinating. There were 600 settlers – 500 Spanish and 100 African, the latter brought along as slaves.

So when the colony collapsed, it was something of a good news/bad news scenario. It was bad news for the surviving Spaniards, who got the heck out. For the Africans, on the other hand, the colony's failure was their ticket to freedom. They settled down and took up with the Indians.

But it's not as if there were that many Indians to take up with. Indians were actually in pretty sorry shape by that time. Some had been hauled away to be slaves in the Indies. Many of the Native Americans who escaped the slavecatchers later died as a result of diseases brought to the New World by Europeans. It was a weird New World version of the Dark Ages, with plagues wiping out entire villages.

When the tribes' social structures broken down, the survivors hooked up with each other and recombined and re-formed into a rag-tag band of bad-asses. In short, they were a mess.

And then you throw dozens of angry, displaced Africans into the mix. What happened next is one of the great mysteries of multiculturalism. I can't help but imagine that, given the destruction of Native American social structures, the Africans had some degree of influence on the culture of the Sapelo Island area. And so the Spanish colony of San Miguel, failed though it was, ended up producing something unique: the first African settlement in the New World.

So was it really a failed colony? It didn't meet Spain's expectations for success, that's for sure. So according to the orthodox histories it was a bust.

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Was it a happy ending for the African settlers? Not exactly. I'd bet they would have preferred to go home. But they made the best of a difficult situation, and became the first permanent non-European settlers in the New World.

And who knows? Even today their descendents may walk among us. I would call that a success.

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