

The Oldest Gun



Certainly the oldest firearm ever found in the continental United States, and possibly the oldest-known firearm produced in the New World, a rampart gun recently discovered in Arizona is one of six associated with Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's famous search for the "Seven Cities of Gold."

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In 1540, Spanish conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado set off from what is now central Mexico and entered the United States through southern Arizona in his search for the fabled "Seven Cities of Gold" in the American Southwest. Ultimately, the Coronado expedition traveled as far north as Kansas before returning to Mexico City in 1542. In a groundbreaking discovery that will change the history books, an abandoned town that Coronado established in 1541 along his route has recently been found in the Arizona desert. Wind and rain had erased all obvious traces of this town over time, but one of Coronado's six wall guns was recently found at the site, where it was lost in a battle 480 years ago with the local natives, the Sobaipuri O'odham, irrigation farmers who lived in permanent settlements along most of the rivers in southeastern Arizona. It is they, not the Ópata as scholars have thought, who repulsed the Spaniards at this early date.

The Coronado gun is the oldest firearm ever found inside the continental United States and is also the first firearm found from this roughly 2,500-person expedition. The design of the small cannon, called a "hackbut" by some, is from the mid-to-late 1400s, and it was practically obsolete when the expedition started. It is a rampart or wall gun, wherein the right-angle hook on the bottom of the barrel was placed on the off side of a rampart wall to take up the recoil when fired. Alternatively, it could be fired in an open field using a portable tripod made of stout wooden planks; the crotch of a tree would also have served in a pinch.

The site where the cannon was found is believed to be the first purpose-built settlement in the American Southwest (referred to as a *villa* [town] in the Spanish documents). It is believed to be Coronado's