

OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE, PATRONESS OF THE AMERICAS



The Virgin Mary appeared four times to the Aztec visionary St. Juan Diego in the year 1531. We know that the news of these apparitions had made it to Georgia's mountains by 1560 (if not earlier), because of the "Coosawattee Plate," an artifact found by archaeologists on a farm about thirty miles up the road from Jasper beneath the dam of Carters Lake. The plate is named after the Georgia river that flows by the farm. Archeologists found the copper plate in one of the hundreds of graves of the native peoples who had been buried there five centuries earlier.

The plaque was made in Mexico and was brought almost certainly by a Spanish expedition led by Ensign Mateo del Sauz who was accompanied by two Dominican priests. They had landed in 1559 in Pensacola, but a hurricane had destroyed most of the ships and supplies, so Sauz sent the priests as emissaries (together with about 150 men) to try to negotiate for food supplies with the chiefdom of the Coosa people. The Coosa were a tribe that Hernando de Soto had encountered some twenty years earlier on his first expedition to the Appalachian mountains. It took Sauz's weary party about two and a half months to make it up here, where the Spaniards helped the Coosa people and where obviously the Dominican friars sought to evangelize along the way. They took with them a book with this copper plate as its cover.

While invisible to the naked eye, infrared, ultraviolet, and X-ray tests revealed what is almost certainly the oldest extant image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Georgia. The drawing above reveals the image to us as it would have appeared when it was newer. We see the Virgin Mary speaking to St. Juan Diego (who is dressed in his tilma and holding a rose). The third figure is thought to be that of a malevolent spirit seeking to tempt us. Whatever this book was, or however more complete or more beautiful this book plate had been, it was something that was buried with an eleven year old child, whose family must have placed great significance in the story of Mary's visitation and of the spiritual and artistic treasure of this book that had made it over 1,300 miles north.

With the help of the Coosa people, the expedition would return to Pensacola, and Sauz would later find himself on the other side of the world as an explorer in the Philippines (in 1565). But in 1560, his expedition brought the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the Native American people of the North Georgia mountains.