

De Soto

De Soto National Memorial
Florida

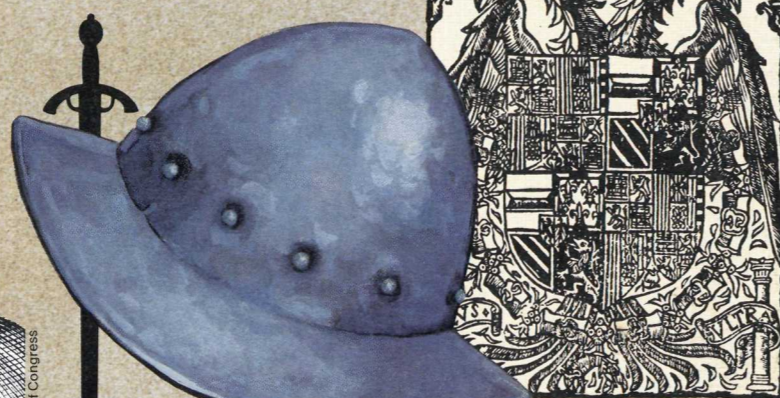
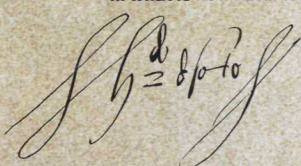
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Some old men of authority... say that... two days journey beyond, is another town called Ocale... that there are many traders among them... and abundance of gold and silver and many pearls... Glory be to God... it seems He has a special care that this be for His service.

— Hernando De Soto

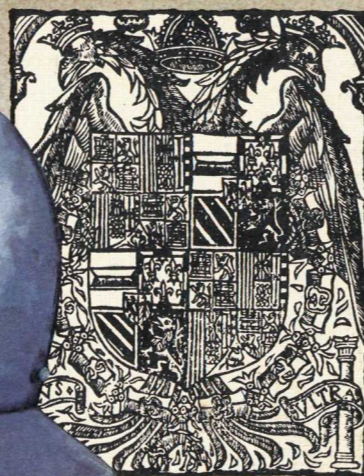


Hernando De Soto, born c. 1500, Jerez de los Caballeros; died 1542, in what is now Arkansas.



Helmet and broadsword of a 16th-century Spanish soldier.

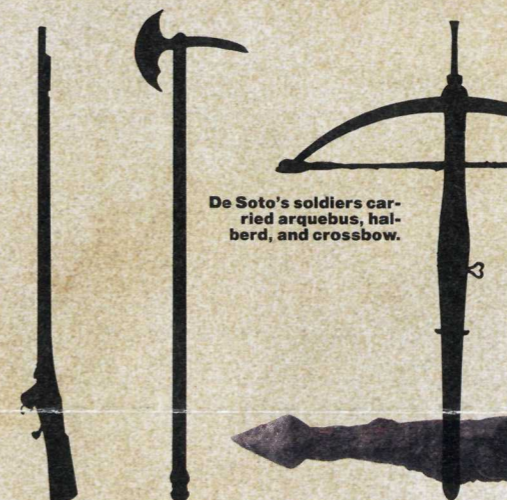
1539



Hapsburg family emblem of Charles V, who licensed De Soto's venture.

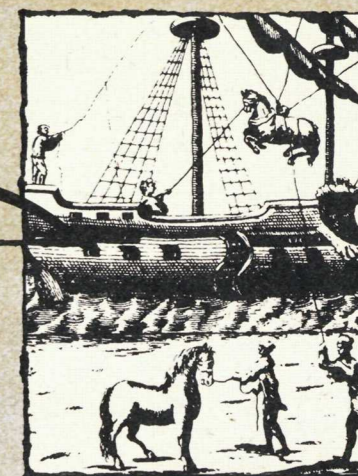
He went about for five years... thinking it would be like Peru. He made no settlement, and thus he died, and destroyed those who went with him. Never will conquerors do well unless they settle before they undertake anything else, especially here where the Indians are valiant bowmen and strong.

— Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia General de las Indias*, 1552



De Soto's soldiers carried arquebus, halberd, and crossbow.

Crossbow bolt point was unearthed at De Soto's first winter encampment at present day Tallahassee.



Without horses, De Soto's army would have found it more difficult to subdue the Indians.



Sixteenth-century navigators used the astrolabe to find latitude.

In the wake of Columbus, other adventurers sailed to America to see what could be made of it. Hernando De Soto, a Spanish soldier who had tasted the rewards of conquest, dreamed of matching the deeds of the celebrated conquistadores. When he was granted a license to explore La Florida, his prospects were good. De Soto was ambitious, seasoned by forays in Central and South America, and commander of one of the best armies to set foot in the Americas. After landing on Florida's west coast, probably near Tampa Bay, in May 1539, his army spent the next four years threading its way some 4,000 miles across what is now the southeastern United States.

De Soto's march was difficult, but it was not a trek entirely through wilderness. In the 16th century this land was settled by tens of thousands of American Indians in hundreds of villages. De Soto and his men spent much of their time moving from village to village, walking on Indian trails, led by Indian guides, and eating Indian food. Conscripting Indians as servants and porters as it progressed, the horde at times numbered a thousand people. Since many tribes were not willing supporters of the expedition, the Spaniards fought countless skirmishes and four major battles. Persevering despite the attrition of men, horses,

weapons, and supplies, De Soto's troops were the first Europeans to push deep into North America, the first to see the Mississippi above its mouth.

Yet it was a futile mission, doomed by unfamiliarity with the land, hostile Indians, and the leader's overzealous pursuit of riches. What had begun as an adventure became an ordeal. Driving his army relentlessly, De Soto killed and enslaved large numbers of Indians and lost half his soldiers to sickness and Indian retaliation. He found no gold, established no colonies. Three years

after landing in Florida, he was felled by fever and buried in the Mississippi River. Sixteen months later, his second in command led the ragged army back to Mexico. The expedition was inconsequential for Spain but disastrous for the Indians it encountered, leaving behind disease and social dislocation. Despite its failures and acts of inhumanity, however, the venture was not without benefit. De Soto and his men were among the first to encounter North American Indians before European contact. The real treasure brought out of the New World was the rich store of information about the American land and its first people.

There is currently a debate among scholars over the exact route of the De Soto expedition. Recent archeological excavations and discoveries of documents are adding to our knowledge of this event. The research is being conducted by

scholars interested in the expedition, its route, contacts with Native Americans, and the consequences. As ongoing work uncovers new information, it will be included in updated versions of this publication.

Quotes are drawn from personal accounts of the expedition or from recorded interviews of survivors.



The Journey

Hernando De Soto's agreement with Charles V of Spain was simple: he was to explore, exploit, and colonize Florida, bearing all costs. In return he would become governor of Cuba and of the new colony. They would divide the spoils. De Soto and his 622 soldiers arrived in Havana in June 1538. He swelled the expedition's ranks with slave carriers and camp followers, including several women; artisans and priests; an engineer; 200 horses; a herd of pigs; and fierce dogs for punishing Indians. Landing in Florida on May 30, 1539, he left a temporary colony of 100 men and led his army inland.

It started well. They found a Spaniard from an earlier expedition who had lived among the Indians and could translate. But before they reached the village of Ocale, they were dependent on the Indians for food. Hungry and impatient for

gold, they threw to the dogs guides who deceived them. Many were ready to stop and settle in rich Cofitachequi. But De Soto insisted they keep searching. Even after the battle at Mabila, where 22 were killed and supplies were lost, he refused to meet a supply fleet at Mobile Bay, afraid of mass desertion.

Indians inflicted even greater damage at Chicasa; more dead, horses and pigs lost, clothes and weapons destroyed in the fire. By spring 1542, it was over. Their translator was dead, and cavalry parties to the north and west had found only nomadic hunting tribes. After De Soto's death in May, his army made an abortive overland attempt to reach home, then spent one more winter on the Mississippi. They built boats, abandoned 500 slaves in alien country, and in July 1543 floated down the river to the Gulf.

Illustrations by John Lytle

Arrived Panuco River, September 10, 1543

Entered Tampa Bay, May 30, 1539



University of Georgia, Dept. of Anthropology

National Museum of Natural History

The Peabody Museum

National Museum of the American Indian

Florida Division of Historical Resources

Arkansas Archeological Survey

Conflict and Decline

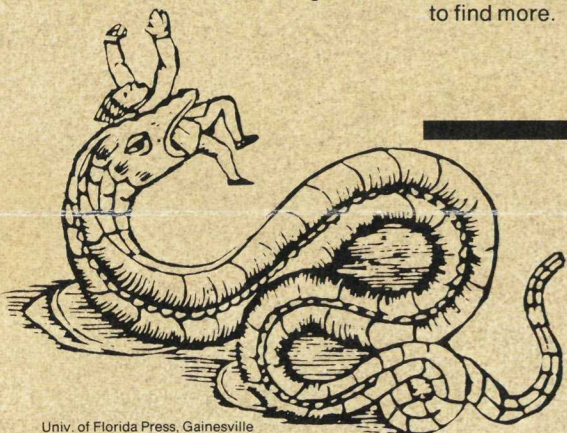
De Soto National Memorial Florida

For Your Safety • Be careful while wading. Sharp shells and barnacles can cut your feet, rays can sting you, and deep holes in the river can catch you unaware. Be alert for poisonous snakes, cacti, fire ants, and poison ivy along the nature trail. Please stay on developed trails.

De Soto the Conquistador

In 1539 the "New World" still existed on the edge of myth. Maps showed the Americas as a vague outline of unknown size—"terra incognita" inhabited by subhumans. But the tales also told of green Edens and unimaginable wealth. The facts alone were enough to

whet ambition and spur greed in restless soldiers. They learned of small bands of Spaniards whose horses and guns had defeated armies of native warriors, opening the way to great caches of silver and gold. Monarchs in need of coin metal sanctioned expeditions to find more.



Univ. of Florida Press, Gainesville

The 16th-century imagination conjured up sea monsters and human grotesques awaiting those who crossed the ocean to an alien world.

Their motives were not entirely mercenary. Eight centuries of war with the Moors in Spain had produced a class of warriors who clung to the ideals of a now defunct knighthood. After the expulsion of the last Arabs in 1492, they were left with no outlet for their religious and nationalistic impulses. Conquistadores found it in America, where the heathen Indian replaced the heathen Moor, and where old practices, from the battle cry of "Santiago!" to the use of war dogs, continued. A moral basis for coercion of the native population was provided by Catholic dogma, which taught that the Indians had to be redeemed by being brought into the Church. Though the Crown warned against ill-treatment of the Indians, its concern rang hollow, given its own orders to obtain as much treasure as possible. (In De Soto's agree-

ment with Charles V, the crown was to get one fifth of the treasure was taken by battle or trade, and half if by the easier method of grave or temple plundering. Mining was not mentioned.) In any case, moral guidelines were a loose rein on hardened warriors an ocean away.

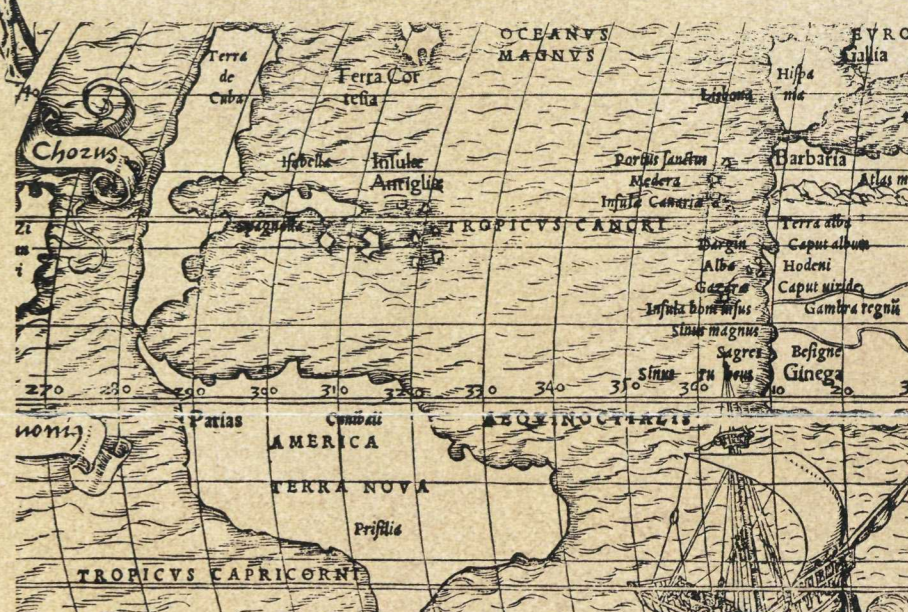
It was in this rough school that Hernando De Soto learned his trade. Leaving Spain a youth of 14, he raided in what is now Panama, made a fortune in Indian gold and slaves in Nicaragua, and joined Pizarro in the conquest of Peru. He returned to Spain 22 years later a skilled soldier and a rich man. But he grew bored with the idle life, chafing to go to La Florida at the head of his own army. That De Soto invested in his second trip to the New World virtually the entire fortune he had won during the first may account for the singleminded-

ness with which he pursued treasure.

On his return he adopted the predatory methods of his mentors Pedrarias and Pizarro. Upon reaching a village, he took the chief hostage to ensure he would supply food, women, and guides and porters to the next village. He appropriated whole towns as winter quarters. If a village resisted, the army terrorized the people, looting, burning houses and fields, raping, enslaving, and cutting off noses and hands. The defiant were burned alive or thrown to the dogs. De Soto's tactics kept him and half of his army alive for three years, but they gained him nothing but the hostility of the new world's people.



This map reflects knowledge of the world in the early 16th century. By 1539, though the New World itself was mostly uncharted, Spanish ships were regularly plying the Atlantic, bringing soldiers and settlers, taking back silver and gold.



National Maritime Museum, Greenwich

The Native Americans

Europeans had difficulty defining native Americans. Early reports painted them as gentle, thoughtless children of paradise. As explorers met more resistance and began to exploit the Indians, they portrayed them as brutal, promiscuous cannibals subordinate to Europeans in the natural order. Both portraits denied them humanity, until the pope in 1537 finally pronounced them "true men" with souls.

The true men encountered by De Soto represented the flowering of the ancient Mississippian culture. Also called Temple Mound Builders, they had first settled the rich Mississippi valley in farming communities around 800 AD. Maize, the grain that sustained De Soto's army, was the center of their economy, but they also raised beans and squash, hunted, gathered wild crops, and harvested the rivers.

Influenced by the civilizations of Mexico, their aggressive culture spread over much of the southeast, with local variations in language and religion. At its peak, the Mississippian culture was probably the most sophisticated in North America. The tribes were often organized into chiefdoms, held together by diplomacy and force. The most powerful was the Coosa Confederation, whose supreme chief exacted tribute from subordinate towns. The chief, treated like a god, reigned over a complex society divided into hereditary ranks of nobles and commoners.

While the Indians had no treasures of the kind sought by the Spanish, the soldiers were impressed by their towns, some quite large and protected by palisades and moats. The religious centers featured earthen mounds—20 or more in the largest cities—built around central plazas. Up to 80 feet high, they served as bases for temples and the homes of the elite. The Spanish also admired the Indian arts. Most intriguing were the ritual masks, pendants, and gorgets (throat armor) associated with a widespread spiritual movement now called the Southern Cult. Motifs such as skulls, weeping eyes, and rattlesnakes lead some to call it a death cult. Others associate it with harvest and renewal or with ancestor worship.

This sophisticated culture met the Spanish with responses ranging from friendly (mostly early in the trek, before the army was preceded by its reputation) to hostile. Realizing the power gold had over these men, many tribes duped them, telling of gold in a city beyond the next ridge. Though they despised treachery, the Spanish admired the chiefs' noble bearing and their negotiating and rhetorical skills. When the two warrior cultures clashed, the Indians showed other traits respected by the Spanish: prowess with bow and arrow, courage and endurance, and loyalty to their chiefs. Avoiding open battles, they relied on stealth and knowledge of the terrain. Their guerrilla tactics worked well in the forest, but in the field they were no match for cavalry charges and armored infantry wielding crossbow, lance, and halberd. Most succumbed to Spanish demands.



Illustration by John Lytle

The southeastern Indians showed a variety of physical types, hair styles, and ways of dress. They fashioned breechcloths, skirts, and mantles from hide, bark fiber, grass, or Spanish moss. The southernmost tribes went naked in the summer.

As to what you say of your being the son of the Sun, if you will cause him to dry up the great river, I will believe you . . . as to the rest, it is not my custom to visit any one . . . If you desire to see me, come where I am; if for peace, I will receive you with special good will; if for war, I will await you in my town.

— Quigaltam Chief's response to a summons from De Soto

The Aftermath

Twenty years after De Soto visited the Coosa towns, other explorers found barren fields, abandoned towns, and fragmented settlements where there had been a prosperous chiefdom. These were the early signs of the European disease and depredation that brought about the collapse of cultures throughout the southeast.

De Soto's expedition alone did not cause this radical change. As early as 1502, coastal slavers had introduced to Florida diseases like small pox, typhus, and measles—lethal to Indians without immunity. But De Soto left a trail of death and cultural decline through the heart of the region. Enslavement, warfare, and disease brought by him and those to follow depopulated towns. Publicly demeaned and unable to defend their people, chiefs saw their authority weakened. Stab-

ilizing political confederations crumbled. The helplessness of shamans in the face of new diseases undermined faith in native religion. Societal bonds dissolved as ancient lines of tribal lore died with their custodians.

Hit again and again with European military, biological, and social incursions, the tribes of the southeast never regained their balance. By the 18th century, simpler communities like the Creeks and Choc-taws no longer remembered their ancestors or who had built the great mounds around them.



The hand-eye motif on this slate disc, A.D. 1200-1500, made in the Apalachicola region in Alabama, is one of a complex system of symbols associated with the Southern Cult. The hand-eye circled by entwined rattlesnakes may symbolize fertility or ancestral ties.

Alabama Museum of Natural History



When Indians started dying of European diseases like measles and cholera, they found their traditional remedies useless. Here, the patient inhales the smoke of burning tobacco to purge his body of poison.

Library of Congress



Native and European styles are contrasted in these depictions of Indian trance-states: A bird-man bearing a human head has taken flight. A seer has dislocated his shoulders in the contortions that precede his vision.

Library of Congress



Getting There • Take state route 64 W for approximately 5 miles from downtown Bradenton.

Turn north (right) on 75th St. W and follow 2½ miles to park.

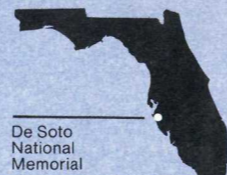
Visiting the Park • A good place to start is the visitor center, which is open daily. Here any questions about the area or the De Soto expedition may be answered. A 22-minute film on the De Soto story is shown hourly. Artifacts of the De Soto period are on display in the small museum.

From mid-December through mid-April, Camp Ucita is open. This model encampment, where reproductions of Spanish armor and weapons are displayed, represents the Indian village captured by De Soto for use as his first base camp. Costumed interpreters demonstrate how the weapons were used and food was prepared. They also

talk about the expedition and the attitudes of the 16th-century Spaniard.

Between Camp Ucita and the visitor center a large stone placed by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America commemorates the expedition and marks the beginning of the De Soto Trail.

Administration • De Soto National Memorial is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For information, write: Superintendent, De Soto National Memorial, PO Box 15390, Bradenton, FL, 34280-5390. Phone (813) 792-0458.



De Soto National Memorial

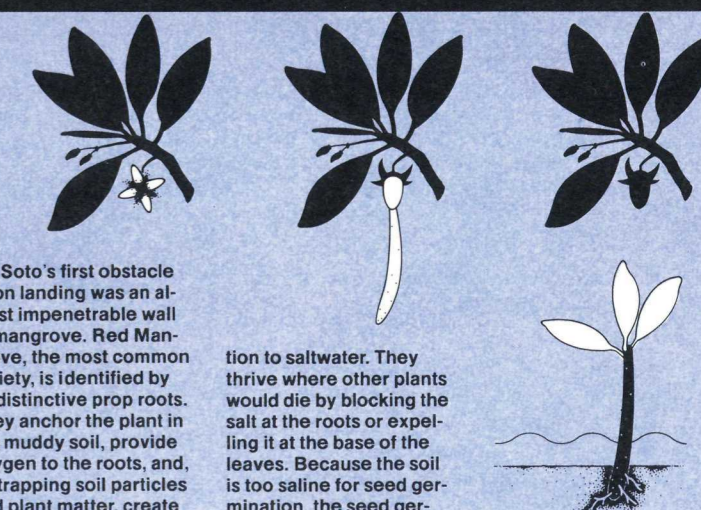
Archeological Evidence • In 1987, archeologists in Tallahassee uncovered Indian and European artifacts—beads, ironware, and a pig bone—identifying the site as De Soto's 1539 winter encampment.



A walk on the nature trail takes you through a mangrove swamp out to the Manatee River. Notice

also the unusual gumbo-limbo trees indigenous to this part of Florida. Please keep pets on a leash and

do not ride bicycles on the trail.



De Soto's first obstacle upon landing was an almost impenetrable wall of mangrove. Red Mangrove, the most common variety, is identified by its distinctive prop roots. They anchor the plant in the muddy soil, provide oxygen to the roots, and, by trapping soil particles and plant matter, create islands or expand the shoreline where new plants can grow. All varieties have developed mechanisms for adapta-

tion to saltwater. They thrive where other plants would die by blocking the salt at the roots or expelling it at the base of the leaves. Because the soil is too saline for seed germination, the seed germinates on the branch, producing an embryonic seedling. When it falls, it lands upright in the mud and takes root, or floats

away to take root elsewhere when one end finally sinks and touches the bottom.