

De Soto in La Florida

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Division of Historical Resources
Florida Department of State



De Soto's Mission

Hernando de Soto sailed into Tampa Bay on May 30, 1539, with a fleet of ships carrying more than six hundred people, a few hundred head of livestock, and enough supplies to establish settlements. He was charged with the mission of conquering and colonizing the territory called *La Florida*, an unexplored expanse that stretched from the Chesapeake Bay to northeastern Mexico. For leading this venture, the Spanish Crown awarded de Soto numerous titles of honor, including governor, and promised him greater rewards if the expedition was a success.

Spain's New World dominion already extended across the West Indies and the Central and South American mainlands, yet her

foothold was tenuous. Having few industries or resources at home to rely on, she was dependent on colonial commodities, both natural and human, to maintain her grasp in the Caribbean. The conquests of the Aztecs of Mexico (1519-21) and the Incas of Peru (1531-35) had opened fabulous veins of wealth, but they also had alerted other Old World nations to the pipeline of profit that stretched across the Atlantic Ocean. To secure her position unquestionably, Spain sought to control all lands surrounding the Caribbean Basin. *La Florida* thus was important strategically; but it also was hoped that the territory might harbor another conquerable civilization with untold riches.

De Soto's exploratory force travelled four thousand miles during its four-year mission, eventually trekking through ten south-



eastern states. Although valuable geographical and cultural data were recorded, strictly speaking, the expedition was a failure. No colonies or trade routes were established; no grand civilizations or precious resources were found; and de Soto and half of his company did not survive. Nonetheless, the mission had an overwhelming impact on the course of North American history.

In addition to opening the southeastern United States to European expansion, the expedition affected native inhabitants directly by introducing diseases against which Amerindians had no immunity. This microbial assault decimated populations and traumatized traditional social and cultural patterns among the survivors. After de Soto's visit, the lifeways of Native Americans were never the same.

The 450th anniversary of de Soto's arrival in 1989, and the 500th anniversary of Spanish contact in the New World in 1992, have refocused scholarly and popular interest on the landmark events and consequences of the Spanish Colonial era. Historical studies are being aided by archaeological finds, such as the discovery in March 1987 of de Soto's 1539-40 winter encampment in modern-day Tallahassee, Florida. This and other archaeological sites with comingled 16th-century Spanish and Indian artifacts are helping to pinpoint the explorer's route through the Southeast. The same evidence is enabling a clearer picture to be drawn of the Native American populations that met and were changed by the vagaries of exploration. Yet despite the conclusions drawn by scholars, some details about de Soto's journey will remain the subjects of controversy and conjecture for years to come.



Hernando de Soto was about fourteen years old when he sailed from Spain, probably in 1514, bound for a conquistador's life in the New World. Over the next fifteen years, he participated in military actions against Indians and Spanish land poachers in modern-day Panama and Nicaragua, using his rewards to fund profitable private ventures. His valor during the conquest of the Incas of Peru earned him greater wealth, which he used to finance his expedition to *La Florida*. He died during that mission, in May 1542, in modern-day Arkansas.



Map of De Soto Trail through Florida

To recognize the historic significance of the de Soto expedition, the federal government and southeastern state governments are engaged in efforts to designate and to mark an official "de Soto Trail" along existing highways which approximate the explorer's suspected route through *La Florida*. Roadside signs and interpretive exhibits are inherent in the plans. The first section to actually be marked with signage and displays was the Florida de Soto Trail, which extends from the De Soto National Memorial in Bradenton to the Georgia border northeast of Tallahassee.

A Clash Of Cultures

From the onset, the imposition of Spanish culture in the New World was swift, aggressive, and relatively insensitive to native lifeways. Under the onslaught of foreign diseases, enforced labor and resettlement, military actions, and the sheer impact of Old World customs on their cultures, Caribbean populations simply could not defend themselves. Confined by maritime boundaries and having no place to flee, most islanders were decimated within a decade of the Spaniards' arrival.

The colonial intrusion into *La Florida* was not so immediately overwhelming, in part because native social and political systems were more flexible. Being less geographically restricted than insular populations, southeastern Indians were able to move to new locations to avoid or to escape European contact. Because some North American tribes did not maintain year-round occupation in one location, or were sparsely populated in certain regions, many groups avoided direct contact with foreign aggression and disease. The hardest-hit populations were those with sedentary lifestyles in homelands localized around nascent European townsites and missions. While depopulation and settlement shifts occurred, these cultural changes transpired more gradually in the Southeast than in the West Indies.

However, among the early explorations, de Soto's expedition had a major impact because it was so large, it lasted so long, and it covered so much territory. With few exceptions, his troops offered Amerindians their first encounter with Europeans, and they did little to leave a flattering impression. By even the most indulgent 16th-century standards, the Governor's men dealt with aboriginal groups brutally and ruthlessly.

Information travelled quickly between contiguous tribes, as the explorer soon discovered. News of his coming and his treatment

of locals usually preceded him, and the expedition sometimes found villages abandoned or burned. When contacts were made, inhabitants hastily urged the army onward with assurances that food or gold could be found farther along. Because the Spaniards



were dependent on locally acquired supplies and porters, when these were not offered hospitably, de Soto simply took them, inevitably by force. But direct aggression was not the primary cause of depopulation among the people of *La Florida*. As in the Caribbean, it was disease. Though the effects and extent of decimation varied among regions, it is clear that de Soto and his company blazed a trail through the immune systems of thousands of people during their four-year reconnaissance. Spanish missionaries and travellers who visited locations along the de Soto route as early as twenty years afterward found evidence that populations had vanished or that cultures were in steep decline.

"And they wintered there and remained until the fourth of March [1540], in the which times many notable things happened with the Indians. The latter are the bravest of men... And although the Spaniards pursued them and burned them, they never showed any desire to come to peace..." Rodrigo Ranjel

"... they all began to shoot arrows at us, ... As we were so wholly unprepared, having considered ourselves on a footing of peace, we were obliged, from the great injuries we were sustaining, to flee from the town [of Mauvila], leaving behind us all that the carriers had brought for us..." Luys Hernandez de Biedma

De Soto's Route In La Florida

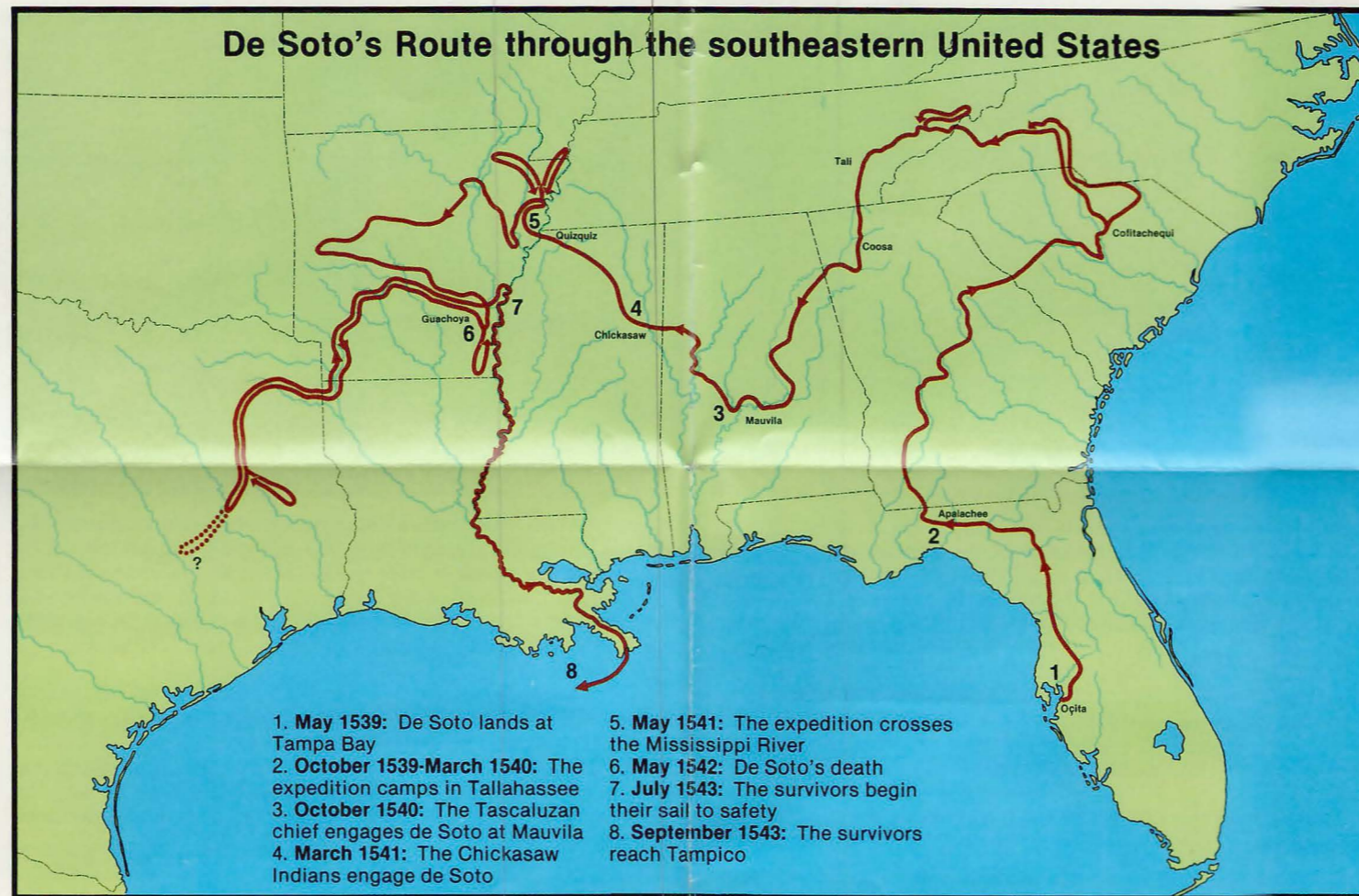
Four significant accounts exist of de Soto's journey, three of them penned by participants. From descriptions of lands and peoples encountered, scholars long ago determined the explorer's general route through the Southeast. In recent years, archaeological evidence has helped to hone the reconstruction by pinpointing places which the expedition definitely, or quite probably, passed by.

De Soto and an army of noblemen and commoners left Spain in April 1538, arrived in Cuba in June, and spent nearly a year gathering men and supplies before sailing to *La Florida* in May. Most scholars agree that their landfall was somewhere in Tampa Bay. During a six-week reconnaissance of the area, a Spanish survivor from an earlier expedition, who had been captured by natives, was liberated and enlisted as an interpreter. Leaving a contingent of men to guard supply ships anchored offshore, de Soto led the remaining parade of people, animals and gear northward to begin his determined quest for gold.

Travelling northeasterly first, then turning west into the Florida panhandle, the expedition arrived in early October in Tallahassee, where it found the capital village of the Apalachee people, called *Anhaica*. The inhabitants had fled from their townsites to avoid the intruders, and their 250 abandoned structures and abundant foodstuffs offered an ideal site for a winter bivouac. De Soto sent a small party on horseback to collect the men and supplies in the south, and the reassembled forces remained at *Anhaica* until the following March, unflinchingly harrassed by natives.

The expedition advanced through Georgia in the spring. In late April it reached central South Carolina, near present-day Camden, where the local population was ruled by a female chief, called a *cacica*, named Cofitachequi. From her, de Soto received the only precious materials he acquired during the entire mission—350 pounds of freshwater pearls. Ironically, these later were destroyed in a fire.

During the summer of 1540, the army pushed through northern South Carolina, western North Carolina, and into the hilly regions of Tennessee, where de Soto hoped to find a native civilization that would rival the wealthy, mountain-dwelling Aztecs and Incas. But none was found; and as the march turned southward into Georgia and Alabama, de Soto's troops, dispirited by disease,



fatigue, and the failure to win easy fortunes, began to contemplate desertion.

Disaster struck in October as the expedition was crossing south-central Alabama, and it was an event of the Spaniards' own making. De Soto had a policy of kidnapping native leaders and holding them hostage until his company had passed safely through their lands. He seized the powerful *cacique* of the

Tascaluzan province, who convinced de Soto that provisions would be plentiful in the neighboring province of Mauvila. Ostensibly to carry word of the company's coming, an Indian was dispatched to Mauvila, although in reality, his message was for warriors loyal to the Tascaluzan chief to prepare an ambush at a particular village. Unknowingly, de Soto led his people into the arms of a savage conflagration. Although the day-long battle left the Indian population massacred and their town destroyed by

fire, more than 20 Spaniards also died; at least 140 were wounded, including de Soto; and virtually all of their supplies were lost.

Salvation from their misfortune was closer than de Soto's troops ever knew. Via Indian messengers, de Soto learned that his army was less than a week's travel from the coast, where his supply ships lay at anchor. However, fearing mass desertion and unwilling to abandon his enterprise, the Governor suppressed the news and instead led his battered, ill-equipped company northward into Mississippi, where they endured another cruel winter.

In March 1541, the army was fiercely assaulted again. Resentful of de Soto's demands for food, blankets and furs, a group of Chickasaw Indians attacked his camp at night, successfully setting it ablaze. People, livestock and equipment perished; the expedition was left virtually naked. But despite this second devastation, the Spaniards rallied themselves amazingly and spent two weeks fabricating weapons and gear from local materials and salvaged effects. When the Chickasaw returned, the Spaniards defeated them easily, but it was clear that the mission had to continue westward out of this hostile territory.

In May, de Soto and his men reached the Mississippi River, the first Europeans ever to do so. Stunned by its size but scarcely aware of the importance of their discovery, the Spaniards moved quickly to build barges for crossing—not only to avoid conflict with brooding locals, but also to continue their relentless quest for riches. The expedition wandered through modern-day Arkansas and Louisiana for nearly a year until finally it became clear to everyone, including the Governor, that no fortunes would be found. Resigned, exhausted and ailing, de Soto proposed that his army return to the Mississippi, build boats and float down the river, then send a barge to Cuba for help. However, before he could effect this plan, de Soto died on May 21, 1542. His body deliberately was buried in the Mississippi River to ensure that it would not be desecrated by Indians.

Free to abandon the enterprise and to flee to safety, the survivors tried to reach Mexico by crossing overland through Texas, but they were repelled by the barren desert and the inability to obtain provisions from natives. Tracing their steps back to the Mississippi, they built boats which they launched in July 1543, sailed to the Gulf of Mexico, then followed the coastline to Tampico, one thousand miles away, which they reached in September.

Evidence Revealed

In March 1987, Archaeologist Calvin Jones of the Florida Department of State, Bureau of Archaeological Research, sought permission to dig several test holes on a six-acre tract of land destined for development near downtown Tallahassee. He believed that remains of a late 17th-century Spanish mission lay buried there, which would be destroyed by the impending construction. To Jones's surprise, the limited excavation instead yielded Spanish and Indian artifacts from the early 16th-century, as well as building debris and other evidence suggesting occupation.

Of two known events that could be represented by these finds, de Soto's 1539-40 winter encampment seemed the more likely when historic documents were studied for details. If the site did harbor remains of the Spaniards' five-month bivouac, it would provide the first direct archaeological link with a de Soto encampment. The potential significance of the discovery was lost to no

one, including the land developers, who agreed to postpone construction until the site could be studied scientifically.

During the next six months, a full-scale excavation directed by Jones and



Archaeologist Charles Ewen produced artifacts and other evidence supporting the site's de Soto connection. In addition to early 16th-century Spanish and Indian pot sherds, archaeologists unearthed coins, beads, nails, links of chain mail armor, and the tip of a crossbow arrow. Features indicative of long-term occupation, including trash pits, hearths, and building remains, also were found. But the most important discovery came in the form of bone fragments and teeth from a pig's jaw. De Soto was the first European to bring pigs to *La Florida*.

To ensure that part of the encampment site would be preserved, the Trust for Public Land, a private preservation organization, negotiated with the developers to purchase about five acres of the imperiled property, agreeing to hold it until the State could buy the land from the Trust. The parcel which the State purchased in August 1988 also included the home of Florida's twenty-third governor, John Martin, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.



The winter encampment site has historic significance beyond its simple association with de Soto. Because the Spaniards were devoutly Catholic, they undoubtedly conducted a Mass on December 25th—the first Christmas celebration in the United States. Additional buildings which de Soto ordered to be constructed at *Anhaica* represented the first European-built structures in the United States.

But particularly important is the archaeological evidence which the site yielded. Although 16th-century Spanish artifacts have been found throughout the Southeast, either the method of their recovery or the context in which they were found does not assure that the objects were "lost" or deposited in these locations. Scientific excavation of the encampment site not only identified with certainty one point along de Soto's route, but it also provided a trustworthy array of artifacts which helps to describe an early Spanish military expedition and a native culture at the time of European contact.