

# De Soto

NATIONAL  
MEMORIAL



*Florida*





# De Soto

## NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Commemorates De Soto's landing in Florida, 1539, and his exploration of the southern portion of what is now the United States

**T**HE DE SOTO Expedition, a typical instance of organized Spanish exploration, was the first European penetration into what is now southern United States. Crossing 4,000 miles of wilderness, the explorers earned for Spain a broad knowledge of the interior lands and peoples and recorded priceless information on native American life of the 1500's.

### *The Conquistadores (The Conquerors)*

COLUMBUS had given Spain an early claim to the New World and its wealth, and her warrior nobles penetrated the new-found continents with amazing rapidity. Hardy and courageous men, loyal to King and Church, they had built some 200 permanent towns in the Americas long before Jamestown, Va., was settled in 1607.

While Cortés was still having difficulty with the Aztecs, Spanish explorers were moving out from the West Indies. In 1513, Ponce de León discovered Florida; by 1519, the Gulf coast was charted; by 1525, navigators had probed Atlantic shores from Cape Horn to Newfoundland. In 1526, Ayllón set ashore a short-lived colony, believed to have been at or near South Carolina's Pee Dee River. Two years later Narváez landed on Florida's west coast. His sole survivors were the resourceful Cabeza de Vaca and a trio of companions. Still the vast North American interior lay mysterious and untouched, ru-

mored to be "the richest land of any which until then had been discovered."

### *Hernando de Soto*

DON HERNANDO DE SOTO, Knight of Santiago, "a gentleman by all four descents" (i. e., by all four grandparents), was a typical conquistador. Born in Spain about 1500, he achieved wealth and a brilliant career in Nicaragua and Peru. Charles V appointed him Governor of Cuba and Adelantado (Leader) to "conquer, pacify, and populate" the northern continent.

On April 7, 1538, trumpets sounded and cannon thundered as the flotilla left San Lúcar, Spain, with about 700 volunteers aboard. The winds were favorable, and De Soto's bride was at his side.

### *Landing in Florida*

IN HAVANA, on May 18, 1539, De Soto bade farewell to his Dña Isabel and set sail for Florida. On May 30, the army landed on the west coast. The exact site of the landing has not been positively identified but probably lies within the area between Tampa Bay and Estero Bay. A few ruined pearls lay in the dust at the deserted Indian village where they camped, and the Spaniards believed themselves at the threshold of fortune. So Narváez thought when he chanced upon a single golden ornament!

Spanish scouts found the lost Juan Ortiz, who had come to Florida with Narváez and had been saved by a native princess from death at the stake. For 10 years Ortiz had been a slave of the Indians, and, while he had seen no riches, he had heard wonderful reports of the interior land. De Soto assigned 100 men to guard the camp and sent the ships back to Cuba for supplies. The march through 4,000 miles of unknown land began on July 15, 1539.

### *Into the Wilderness*

DE SOTO led 600 or more disciplined veterans who averaged—and sometimes doubled—a steady 10 miles a day on the march. Counting the Indian carriers drafted as they went along, the expedition must often have numbered up to 1,000 people. About 200 horses mounted the lancers. There were about 300 crossbowmen and harquebusiers (see man on cover), a dozen priests, a physician, and workmen to build boats and bridges or repair weapons and rivet the slave chains.

As they pushed northward, heat and hunger plagued them; hidden natives rained arrows upon them. De Soto followed the practice of seizing village chieftains and forcing them to supply food, carriers, and guides. Once beyond Ocale (in what is now Florida), Indians gathered to rescue their chief, but the Spaniards moved first, driving the warriors into nearby lakes.

De Soto continued onward. Then from winter quarters in the hostile Apalachee farmlands (now northern Florida, near Apalachee Bay), he summoned the men left at the landing site, while to Havana he sent a present of 20 Indian women for Dña Isabel. Meanwhile, his scouts discovered Pensacola Bay; others saw the bleached bones of Narváez' horses at Apalachee Bay.

### *Search for Treasure Continued*

IN the spring of 1540, they marched toward the Savannah River, where the comely chieftainess of Cofitachequi, an Indian village, bestowed her pearl necklace upon Don Hernando. Another 200 pounds of pearls were dug from the burial mounds.

But the Adelantado pushed onward. If no richer land were found, they could always return.

Some were lame and sick by the time they reached a region called Xuala in what is now western South Carolina, but here they saw "more indications of gold mines than in all the country they had traversed." Up into what is now North Carolina, then across the Smokies into Tennessee they went. Mulberries, nuts, maize, and turkeys the natives gave willingly, as the army pressed southward toward "Coosa" in central Alabama, still searching for treasure.

### *The Tragedy of Mabila*

POWERFUL Tascalusa, lord of the Mobile Indians, hid his anger when the Spaniards seized him, and agreed to furnish 400 carriers as soon as they reached the town of "Mabila." But warriors—not carriers—surrounded De Soto in Mabila. The Spaniards fought free and in a fierce day-long battle burned the Indian town and slaughtered 3,000 Indians. De Soto suffered crippling losses in this battle: 20 men killed, including a brother-in-law and a nephew; a number of horses killed; most of the expedition's supplies and property destroyed; "and the wounded comprised all the men of most worth and honor in the army."

De Soto had planned to meet supply ships on the coast and send the pearls of Cofitachequi to Havana. But the pearls were lost at Mabila. Some of his disillusioned men, naked under their rusty mail, planned to sail with the ships. To prevent this, De Soto again turned his face from the coast.

*De Soto's signature.*

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and enjoyment of its people.





*The Landing in Florida. From Smith's Narratives.*

### *A River "Larger than the Danube"*

THE expedition almost ended in the spring of 1541, when the Chickasaw Indians made a surprise dawn attack on the northern Mississippi camp. Fortunately, the Indians mistook stampeding horses for cavalry and withdrew; yet a dozen Spaniards lost their lives, and 50 horses were killed. Clothing, saddles, and weapons were burned. Shaking with cold, the men covered themselves with grass mats, while they fashioned new saddles and lances.

On May 8, 1541, De Soto saw "the great River," so wide that "if a man stood still on the other side, it could not be discerned whether he were a man or no." Beyond the Mississippi lay the rumored wealth of Pacaha Province, so the artisans built barges and the army crossed for the march into Arkansas to the mouth of the St. Francis. Finding no gold, they turned west, then south, to winter on the west bank of the Ouachita River, near what is now Camden, Ark. Here, the interpreter Juan Ortiz died, a great loss.

### *The Death of De Soto*

EVEN De Soto was discouraged. He went back to the Mississippi, planning to settle at a seaport and refit for a westward advance, but the scouts found no news of the sea. To

terrorize the populous country and keep the Indians from uniting against him, De Soto ordered the destruction of the Anilco village in what is now Louisiana. The fighting was left to his lieutenants, for De Soto, called by his men "one of the best lances who have passed to the New World," was burning with fever. A few days later, on May 21, 1542, Hernando de Soto died.

Not all mourned his passing, for he was a stern man. Yet, skill and courage demanded respect, and his concern for his men won devotion. Secretly, they buried their knight within the village walls, telling the Indians that the "Child of the Sun" had ascended to his father. When the natives saw the loosened earth and whispered, the Spaniards dug up the body, weighted it in an oaken casket, and sank it in the dark bosom of the Father of Waters, as the Indians called the Mississippi.

### *Return to Civilization*

LUIS DE MOSCOSO, DE SOTO'S appointed successor, after a futile try to reach Mexico through what is now Texas, led the tired band again to the Mississippi, where they spent the winter building seven little ships. Before the fleet sailed downstream on July 2, 1543, most of the remaining 50 horses, which had been used in battle, were slaughtered for meat.



*View from Shaw's Point across the mouth of Manatee River to Tampa Bay. The De Soto Trail marker atop the Indian mound was unveiled under auspices of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America on May 30, 1939, the 400th anniversary of De Soto's landing*

Running a gauntlet of arrows, the ships found the gulf 19 days later. On September 10, some 300 Spaniards and 100 Indians reached Mexico's Pánuco River. There, haggard and worn, they found a warm welcome.

That fall, a ship took the news of De Soto's death to Dōna Isabel.

### *Florida and the Spanish Empire*

HEARTBREAK and hardship failed to destroy the golden myth of Florida. Moscoso and his tattered comrades, safe once more, painted glowing pictures of the north country. Around the Caribbean, however, Spain had precious metals, and docile natives, so North American furs and forests held little attraction. Florida was merely a dangerous coast on the treasure fleet route. After the martyrdom of Fray Luis Cancer by the Indians, and the unsuccessful colonies of Luna and Villafañe, the Crown prohibited Florida projects.

Then, in 1564, the French colony at Fort Caroline, on Florida's St. John's River, threatened the treasure fleets. The founding of St. Augustine was Spain's inevitable answer.

### *The Memorial*

DE SOTO NATIONAL MEMORIAL, established August 5, 1949, is located on Tampa

Bay, 5 miles west of Bradenton, Fla. The memorial commemorates De Soto's landing in Florida and the expedition that from 1539 to 1543 explored what is now the southeastern part of the United States.

### *Administration*

DE SOTO NATIONAL MEMORIAL is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Limited public facilities are under development. A superintendent, whose address is Bradenton, Fla., is in immediate charge.

Created in 1849, the Department of the Interior—America's Department of Natural Resources—is concerned with the management, conservation, and development of the Nation's water, wildlife, mineral, forest, and park and recreational resources. It also has major responsibilities for Indian and Territorial affairs.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department works to assure that non-renewable resources are developed and used wisely, that park and recreational resources are conserved for the future, and that renewable resources make their full contribution to the progress, prosperity and security of the United States—now and in the future.



UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE







## DE SOTO'S MARCH INTO THE WILDERNESS 1539 - 1543

1. May 18, 1539, left Havana
2. May 30, 1539, landed on west coast
3. July 15, 1539, left camp
4. Troops left to guard camp join DeSoto Nov. 1539
5. September 15, 1539, first battle with Indians
6. 1539-1540, winter camp
7. December 1539, scout ships explore coast
8. May 1, 1540, they meet the "Lady of Cofitachequi"
9. May 18, 1540, they eat "Dogs that do not bark"
10. May 23, 1540, signs of gold
11. Indians give much food
12. October 18, 1540, Battle of Mabila
13. October 1540, De Soto refused to meet supply ships here
14. 1540-1541, winter camp attacked by Chickasaws, March 4, 1541
15. May 8, 1541, they saw the Mississippi
16. September 1, 1541, they hunt bison
17. September 1541, here they made salt
18. October 8, 1541, attacked by Indians
19. 1541-1542, winter camp
20. May 21, 1542, De Soto died. They march west for Mexico
21. False guide thrown to dogs here
22. October 1542, they decide to return east
23. 1542-1543, winter camp; they build boats and leave July 2, 1543
24. September 10, 1543, they reach Pahuco River

Possible alternate routes

