

De Soto

NATIONAL MEMORIAL • FLORIDA

BE ALERT TO POISONOUS
SNAKES IN THE AREA

Of strange lands, strange peoples, and strange customs; of danger, gallantry, and despair; of priceless data on a new land and an ancient way of life—of these Hernando de Soto, historian and adventurer, found much on his 16th-century expedition into the vast unknown North American wilderness. And when we trace the growth of the United States from the founding of the English colony at Jamestown in 1607, we sometimes forget that it was the encouraging results of this expedition that, in large measure, sustained the faltering colonial enterprise in Virginia. While the English "Adventurers of Person" were dying by the hundreds, the "Adventurers of Purse," the Virginia Company stockholders in Britain, ironically, were using the record of De Soto's journey to drum up support for the Jamestown colony. The great conquistador would have been considerably less enthusiastic about exploring this unknown

and hazardous wilderness had he known that the English, not the Spanish, would ultimately gain from his efforts.

In De Soto's time there were many who believed that an expedition into North America would prove as lucrative and as successful as the expeditions of Hernando Cortéz in Mexico and Francisco de Pizarro in Peru. There, in the 1520's and 1530's, Spanish conquistadors discovered and conquered vast empires of golden temples and sophisticated civilizations. Tales abounded of similar riches to be had in the interior of North America. Since no one had as yet penetrated deep into the continent, hope gave rise to speculation, speculation to rumor, and rumor was soon accepted as fact. So De Soto, the noble-born, veteran conquistador, decided to find the fantastic "golden cities" of North America.

The Spanish Crown granted him the "opportunity" to invest his personal fortune in the enterprise, and on April 7, 1538, his flotilla left Spain for the wild lands that became the southeastern United States. De Soto stopped first in Cuba (he had been appointed governor), gathered his forces and supplies, and on May 30, 1539, landed about 600 men and 220 horses somewhere on the southwest coast of Florida. Four years and 4,000 miles of discomfort, disappointment, and death followed that landing.

It was clear from the beginning that the army would eventually have to depend upon Indian stores of food and upon Indian bearers to carry them; but friendly relations with the Indian tribes were the exception rather than the rule. The natives' fierce pride and their warrior traditions prompted them to rebel time after time against these strange, sometimes cruel invaders with their shiny armor and awesome mounts.

The journey deteriorated into a series of skirmishes, punctuated by four major battles: the Battle of the Lakes with Timucuan Indians in north central Florida; the Battle of Mabila with Muskogean in southern Alabama; the battle with Chickasaws in northeastern Mississippi; and the battle with the fierce Caddo Indians of southern Arkansas. When combat took place on open plains, where the horses could run easily, the conquistador was master—the natives had no effective defense against the mounted lancer. But in wooded country, where the horses could not move freely, the Indians, with their light bows and swift arrows, proved superior to the Spaniards armed with awkward cross-bow and musket. And in hand-to-hand fighting, the Indians were quick, strong, and fearless.

Throughout the long march, hunger, sickness, and harsh weather took their toll. The battles with the Muskogean and Chickasaw tribes destroyed most of the expedition's supplies and property, depleted further the Spanish

ranks, and reduced the army to relying largely on Indian food and clothing for survival. The specter of disappointment also haunted the expedition. Although great stores of pearls were uncovered in northeastern Georgia, the legendary land of gold had not been found and De Soto would not settle for less. This was his measure of success.

By May 1541 the Spaniards had crossed present-day Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. On May 8 the army beheld the mighty Mississippi, which they called "The Great River." A year later, after wandering through southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana, they were again on the banks of the Mississippi. This time De Soto was discouraged at finding no great golden empires and tormented that so few of his force were still alive. Embittered and ill with fever, he died on May 21, 1542, and was buried in "The Great River."

Those who marched with De Soto said that he was "one of the best lances who have passed to the New World." One of his officers also said that he was "an inflexible man, and dry of word, who, although he liked to know what the others all thought and had to say, after he once said a thing he did not like to be opposed, and as he ever acted as he thought best, all bent to his will."

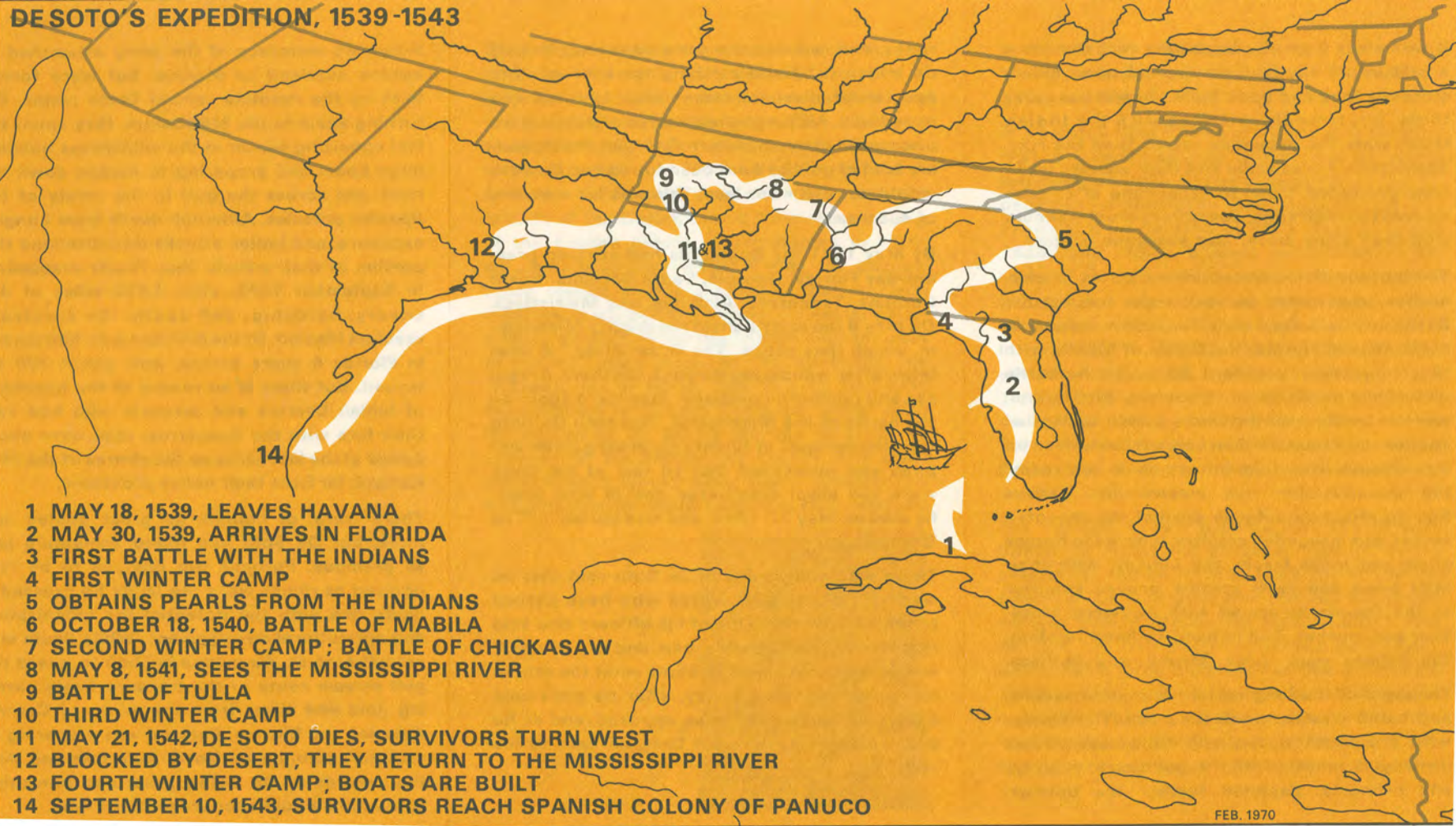


A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "H. de Soto". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Surviving members of the army attempted to escape overland to Mexico, but were forced back by the desolate central Texas plains. Returning again to the Mississippi, they spent the last agonizing winter in the wilderness building large boats and preparing to escape down the river and across the gulf to the safety of the Spanish colonies. Although death from hunger, exposure, and Indian attacks also attended this portion of their travels, they finally succeeded. In September 1543, after 4,000 miles of discovery, hardship, and death, the survivors reached Mexico. Of the 600 men who had landed in Florida 4 years before, only about 300 returned. But there is no record of the hundreds of Indian bearers and servants who had cast their fate with the Spaniards; they were abandoned at the last camp on the shores of the Mississippi, far from their native provinces.

There were, of course, no great golden empires; but De Soto had found something just as precious. Perhaps too obvious to be recognized as riches were the lands he crossed—lands rich with the potential for colonization and agricultural development. While Spain was establishing St. Augustine in 1565 to guard the gulf stream route of the treasure fleets carrying gold and silver from the mines of Central America and Mexico, England was preparing to establish colonies on North American soil. And the records of De Soto's great and punishing expedition would encourage that effort.

DE SOTO'S EXPEDITION, 1539-1543



REVISED 1970

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

De Soto National Memorial is on Tampa Bay, 5 miles west of Bradenton, Fla. Exhibits and an audiovisual program in the visitor center will help you better understand De Soto's accomplishments. A nature trail in the park features native flora, and markers along the trail tell how the plants were used by Indians and Europeans.

ADMINISTRATION

De Soto National Memorial is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 1377, Bradenton, FL 33505, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States—now and in the future.

National Park Service

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