



National Park Service
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Old-Growth Bottomland Forest Research and Education Center
Congaree National Park

Hopkins, SC

The Hernando De Soto Expedition at Congaree National Park

Resource Summary

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Above: 1865 Engraving of Hernando De Soto. Recent historical and archaeological research has firmly placed the De Soto expedition as passing very near - and likely through - parts of Congaree National Park. © SMITHSONIAN ARCHIVES

Monday, April 26, 1540

This day the Governor (de Soto) arrived with some on horseback (although few) at the town that is called Himahi... He found in this town a barbacoa of corn and more than two and a half cahices of prepared pinol, which is toasted corn. And the next day the army arrived, and they gave out rations of corn and pinol; there were infinite mulberries, because there were many mulberry trees and they were in season: this was a great help. And also they found in the savannahs some morotes like those that grow in Italy on some plants and next to the ground, which are like delicious and very fragrant strawberries, and even in Galicia there are many of these. In the kingdom of Naples they call this fruit fraoles, and it is a delicate and exquisite thing, and they esteem it. And apart from this, they found there by the fields infinite roses, and native ones like those of Spain; and although not of so many petals through being wild, they are not of less fragrance, but rather more delicate and mellow. This town they named of Succor [salvation] ~ Rodrigo Rangel, Translated by John E. Worth.

This vivid account is the arguably the earliest written description of the area known today as Congaree National Park. The purpose of this summary is to provide some background on the expedition, its reconstruction, and its legacy.

El Gobernador

As a young Spanish soldier serving under Francisco Pizarro, Hernando de Soto won fame and fortune during the conquest of the Incas. King Charles V later appointed him El Gobernador (Governor) of Cuba and Adelantado (President) of la Florida. Despite a few earlier expeditions in la Florida, the Spanish did not yet fully realize that la Florida actually encompassed a whole new continent - North America.

In 1539 de Soto ("El Gobernador") prepared to lead an expedition from Cuba to find wealth in la Florida. He also hoped to find an overland route to Mexico. This expedition has been described by some scholars as

"more medieval than modern." Expedition members provided their own gear in exchange for a promise of plunder. Other than De Soto's absolute command, there was surprisingly little formal organization or structure.

Records and Reconstructions

There are four written accounts of the De Soto expedition. This includes three first-hand accounts by Rodrigo Rangel (De Soto's private secretary and often considered the most reliable), an unidentified Portuguese man named "the Gentleman of Elvas", and Luys Hernandez de Biedma (perhaps a royal scribe). The fourth account, a second-hand account by Garcilaso de la Vega, is often regarded as a bit exaggerated.

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While the four accounts generally agree on the broad narrative of the expedition, there are still a number of discrepancies in distances, dates, numbers, etc. Historically these discrepancies were the subject of intense debate for scholars trying to reconstruct the expedition's route. Over the last several decades, however, scholars have begun using archaeological research to "pin" the route between a few known sites that can be definitively tied to the expedition. One example is the Mulberry Mound Complex, which is located alongside the Wateree River to the north of Congaree National Park. Archaeological research firmly identifies this as the fabled kingdom of Cofitachequi.

From Tampa Bay to Columbia

The expedition landed near present day Tampa Bay, Florida in May of 1539, along with 11 ships, and approximately 250 horses, a 1000 foot soldiers, many dogs, and a herd of pigs. The Spaniards soon captured a young boy named Perico. Perico convinced the Spaniards of a distant northern province called Yupaha. Yupaha was situated on another ocean, ruled by a powerful woman, and was rich in both pearls and shiny white and yellow metals. These descriptions fit well with rumors from the failed 1526 expedition of Lucas Vazquez de Ayllón, which settled in a place called "Chicora" on the Atlantic Coast. Yupaha instantly became De Soto's destination. He would later learn that it was also called Cofitachequi.

The expedition struggled northward, and by the following March was in present day Georgia. There De Soto befriended the Chief of Cofaqui, who was amidst a war with the great Lady of Cofitachequi. The two kingdoms were separated by an uninhabited province called the "wilderness of Ocute." This province was located around the Savannah River. The Chief of Cofaqui supplied De Soto with 700 warriors, guides, and enough food for the supposed four-day march north.

The trip was much further than planned, and the Cofaqui forces abandoned the Spaniards. On April 19, 1540, the expedition reached the Saluda River. Two days later they crossed the Broad River, which was described as a wide river with a treacherous current and a depth that forced the horses to swim. Food supplies were exhausted. The expedition was desperate. Lost and starving, De Soto sent scouts up and down the riverbank.

Hymahi and Cofitachequi

On April 25, Juan de Añasco, one of the scouts, brought word of a small village downstream near the confluence of two rivers. This village was called Hymahi - and also

Aymai or Guiomae in other accounts. The two rivers must have been the Congaree and Wateree. While no Spanish artifacts have been found to date in Congaree National Park, Hyamahi was very possibly located in the present park boundaries. On April 26 De Soto arrived at Hymahi. In the initial contact described above by Rangel, De Soto confiscated all of the town's food. He later burned at least one of the inhabitants to death while interrogating them about Cofitachequi.

On May 1, the expedition marched north to Cofitachequi. Despite being greeted with food and gifts, de Soto brazenly raided local temples and graves for treasure. To de Soto's frustration, many of the pearls were of poor quality and the shiny metals were only copper and mica - not gold or silver. Among the plunder were beads and metal axe heads that could only have come from the de Ayllón expedition. De Soto also learned that many people had died of disease a few years previously; this is the earliest written record of disease epidemics in North America, and also potentially consistent with contact with the de Ayllón expedition. De Soto tried to kidnap the Great Lady of Cofitachequi for strategic leverage, but she was rescued and escaped down the Wateree River in a canoe.

Aftermath and legacy

After Cofitachequi the de Soto expedition wandered on, ever hoping for plunder and a route to Mexico. De Soto died in 1542 on the banks of the Mississippi River. Remnants of the expedition wandered into modern-day Texas but then returned to the Mississippi River. There they built a raft that they (amazingly) used to navigate back to Spanish ports along the western Gulf of Mexico.

Hyamahi was later visited in 1566 and 1567 by the Juan Pardo expedition. The inhabitants remembered the earlier Spanish visit, and the location near the Congaree and Wateree Rivers fits well with historical reconstructions the Pardo expedition.

The legacy of the De Soto expedition is complicated. It is difficult to understand and judge their actions by modern standards. In any event, these records provide a rich glimpse into the history of Congaree National Park.

For More Information

1. *De Soto National Monument website.* <http://www.nps.gov/deso/index.htm>
2. *Hudson*, Charles M., *Knights of Spain, Warriors of the Sun: Hernando De Soto and the South's Ancient Chiefdoms*, University of the Georgia Press, 1997. ISBN 0-8203-1888-4.

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