

Florida's de Soto Trail commemorates the Spaniards' overland reconnaissance of Florida, following the approximate route. Documentary and archaeological research have made possible identification and signing of the trail, from Inverness to the state line. As future research determines the route from the point of landing to Inverness, the trail will be extended between those locations.

Trailside markers, at five-mile intervals, serve as modern-day trail blazes for motorists to follow. Roadside exhibits are located along the trail to interpret de Soto's exploration and the Indians he contacted. Exhibit locations are indicated on the trail map.



FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Division of Recreation and Parks

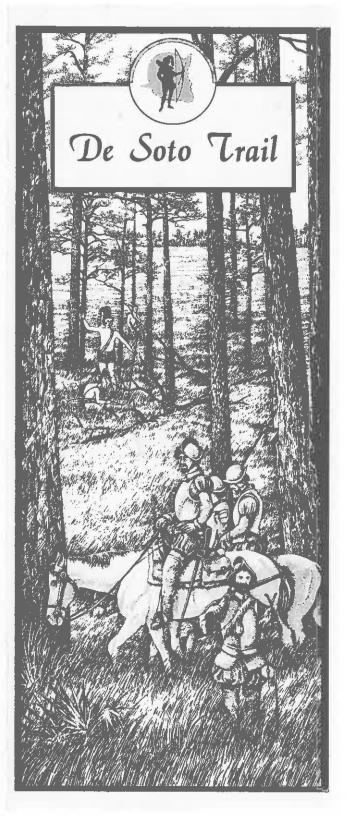
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DE SOTO IN FLORIDA

The Spanish expedition led by Hernano de Soto is famous in American history because it was the first major expedition by Europeans to explore the interior of the southeastern United States. Landing on Florida's west coast in May 1539. The de Soto army of 622 soldiers and other persons embarked on an ill-fated adventure that lasted over four years and covered eleven of our present states. More than 300 soldiers died during the attemped conquest, including their leader Hernando de Soto.

WHY FLORIDA?

A decade earlier (1528) Pánfilo de Narváez landed on the west coast of Florida with 400 Spaniards. After only five months of hostile encounters with Florida Indians, 250 survivors departed, destitute and distraught, in rough-hewn rafts bound for Mexico. Only four expedition members managed to return to Spanish civilization, but these few told stories of grandeur and wealth, as well as hostilities and strife.

Inspired by their stories, and by his earlier successes as a companion of Francisco Pizarro in the conquest of Peru, Hernando de Soto petitioned the King of Spain for the governorship of Cuba and permission to explore and settle Florida. King Carlos V granted de Soto his requests, and the conquistador selected 700 Spaniards and Portuguese to sail in seven ships to Cuba. They left Spain in April 1538, and arrived at Santiago, Cuba, on June 7, 1538. After eleven months of further preparations, including the acquisition of two additional ships, the army set sail from Havana on May 18, 1539, and arrived in Florida, possibly at Tampa Bay, on May 25.

DISEMBARKING AND RECONNAISSANCE

Several days were required to unload supplies from the overburdened ships. Food, clothing, weapons, armor and tools were necessary supplies for the army. In addition, 223 horses, mules, a herd of 300 domestic pigs, greyhounds, bloodhounds and numerous servants and slaves were also carried ashore.

Searching parties were immediately dispatched to capture Indians to be used as guides and supply porters. The Indians seldom cooperated with the zealous soldiers, and many were killed with lances instead of being captured. Among a group of Indians encountered on June 4 was one who pleaded in Spanish: "Sirs, for the love of God and of Holy Mary, slay me not..." Dressed like the other Indians and equipped with bow and arrows, this was Juan Oritiz, a soldier from Narváez's expedition who had been a slave of the Indians for over ten years. De Soto was delighted by this discovery, for now the army had a trustworthy interpreter. Ortiz's knowledge of the land was extremely limited, however, so the army still relied on captured natives to guide them through the unknow territories.

TRAVELING ARMY

On July 15, 1539, after depleting much of the food supplies of the local Indians, the army began marching northward in quest of gold and silver that was always professed to exist elsewhere by the tribes which wished to be rid of the army. The calvary led the way along the Indian trails and roads through the sparsely settled sandhills, consuming most of the newly-captured supplies of maize, beans and other Indian foods. The foot soldiers and slaves that followed were less fortunate, relying on wild foods and small rations to subsist. The droves of pigs that accompanied the foot soldiers were only eaten during times of complete desperation, because the Spaniards wanted to use them to stock any new settlements that they might found. On July 27 they reached Ocale, southwest of the present-day city of Ocala, where stores of Indian foods were found, but gold and silver were still absent.

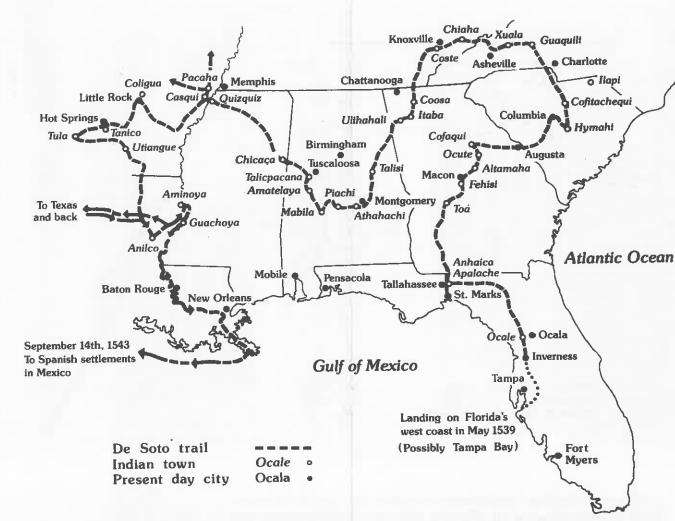
On August 11, 1539, the army departed Ocale in search of Apalachee, a province said to have much wealth and fierce warriors. The torrential summer rains had inundated the lowlands, requiring the construction of bridges from pine trees so that the army could cross the rivers which they could not ford. Indians frequently harassed the Spaniards, occasionally killing them or their horses. The Spaniards, rughless in their tactics, pursued the Indians and killed them or captured them to make them slaves, concubines and guides. Indians who did not cooperate often had their noses and hands severed or were burned alive or thrown to voracious Spanish dogs which tore them apart. The Spaniards and their livestock consumed the Indians' supplies and destroyed their crops, leaving them destitute. In this light, the wrath of the Indians seems understandable, while the plight of the Spaniards in this wilderness cannot be underestimated.

Deception was the rule. The Spaniards promised to release captives in exchange for guides and interpreters; the Indians promised supplies and porters if the Spaniards would meet them on their terms. Neither was honest, and battles ensued.

APALACHEE

On October 1, 1539, the army finally reached the Aucilla River, the eastern boundary of Apalachee. Indians contested their river crossing for awhile, but were driven away by Spanish crossbows and harquebusiers (matchlock guns that shot lead balls). The Spanish army must have intimidated the Apalachee, as every village in the province was abandoned and sometimes burned when the Spanish approached. The reputed valor of the Apalachee, however, was verified by their relentless attacks and faithful allegiance even in the face of death.

In spite of the hostile Indians, the Spaniards decided to spend the winter in the captitol of Apalachee, Anhaica, near presentday Tallahassee. Anhaica was surrounded by fields of maize, beans and squash, and its storehouses were well stocked with supplies sufficient to feed the army and its livestock during the cold months.



AN INCESSANT QUEST FOR GOLD

No gold, sliver, or other valuables were discovered during the Spaniards five months in Apalachee. The army left the fertile Tallahassee hills on March 4, 1540 and marched northeast through Georgia into South Carolina and North Carolina. They turned west in May, 1540, and then southwest, crossing portions of Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi. After wintering in Chicasa (near Tupelo, Miss.), they discovered the Mississippi River on May 8, 1541, and built barges to cross it near Clarksdale, Miss., on June 8. De Soto then led his army into Arkansas, Missouri and perhaps Oklahoma. Wintering at Utianque in the Ouchita Mountains of Arkansas, the Spaniards grew weary from their numerous wounds, exposure to cold rains and snow, sickness and disease, and the sparcity of food and clothing. Several died that winter, including their interpreter, Juan Ortiz. The rest despaired and longed to return to their homeland.

Consequently, de Soto led them through southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana back to the Mississippi River, which they reached in April, 1542. Shortly afterwards, on May 21, 1542, Hernando de Soto died from an unidentified disease and was secretly interred in the Mississippi River to avoid upsetting the Indians who believed he was an immortal god.

Reluctant to sail in home-made boats, the army again searched west for purported Spanish settlements, sending reconnoitering parties into western Louisiana and eastern Texas. Discovering only unpopulated desert, the army returned to the Mississippi river in December 1542, and resorted to building seven brigatine boats. They embarked on July 2, 1543, sailing down the Mississippi and along the Gulf coast. When they arrived on September 14, 1543, at a Spanish settlement in Mexico, only 311 remained of the 622 soldiers and others who began the expedition in Florida in May 1539.