

## Hernando de Soto Arrives and Explores Florida

Hernando de Soto was given the title Governor of Cuba by the king of Spain, Carlos V, in 1536. He was also given “La Florida,” the area previously given to Pánfilo de Narváez.

De Soto chose to use Cuba as a home base for his supplies and for planning his expeditions. He spent his fortune recruiting, arming, and transporting his own army. When he left Spain in 1538, he was heavily in debt. He believed, however, that he would regain his fortune by finding gold in “La Florida.”

### The Expedition to La Florida

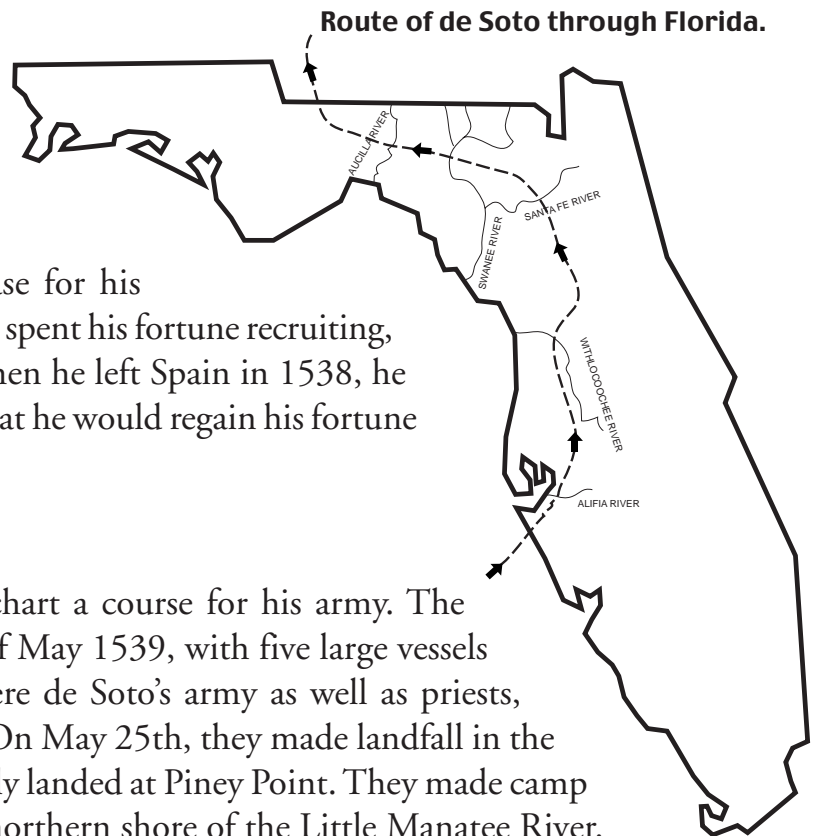
De Soto sent guides ahead to locate and chart a course for his army. The expedition set sail for Florida on the 18th of May 1539, with five large vessels and four smaller ones. On these vessels were de Soto’s army as well as priests, women, horses, mules, war dogs, and pigs. On May 25th, they made landfall in the Tampa Bay area. De Soto’s expedition initially landed at Piney Point. They made camp at Uzita, which was a native village on the northern shore of the Little Manatee River.

Amazingly, a cavalry patrol found a Spanish survivor from an earlier expedition. He had been searching for gold along with Narváez eleven years earlier. The Spanish survivor’s name was Juan Ortiz and he had been living as an Indian. Ortiz’s rescue was a great find for de Soto since Ortiz could communicate in Spanish and many of the native languages. He could also function as a guide for the area. As de Soto’s expedition moved inland, however, they met different native groups whose languages were unfamiliar to Ortiz.

### The March Inland

The march inland began July 15, 1539, and entered previously unexplored areas of Florida’s forests, rivers, bogs, and sand hills. In the vicinity of Zephyrhills and Lumberton, they found no water and several people on the journey almost died of thirst. When they finally came to the Alafia River, they constructed a bridge and crossed successfully.

Hernando de Soto and his men trudged through the wetland areas at the Cove of the Withlacoochee River. One of de Soto’s challenges was crossing the Withlacoochee River because it had such strong currents. The army stretched a rope from one side to the other and managed to cross successfully.



On July 29th, de Soto occupied the Timucuan Indian province of Ocali (near present-day Ocala). There, de Soto left the main part of his army and led a smaller group through present-day Levy and Alachua counties. When they reached the Santa Fe River, they crossed it and camped at a village named Aguacaleyquen. Hernando de Soto then sent a small group of men back to lead his main group northward to be reunited with them.

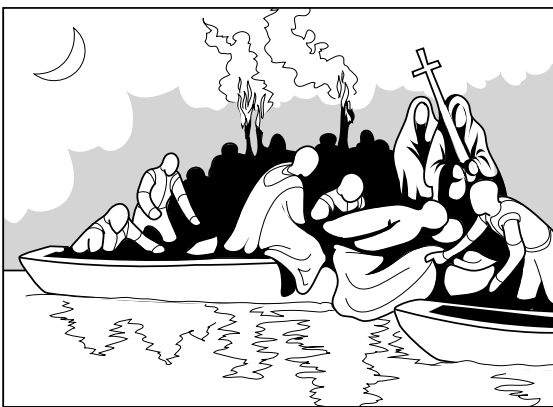
### At War with the Natives

De Soto violated the king's ordinance to treat the natives well and convert them to Catholicism. He let it be known that he would not let anyone stand in his way. De Soto enslaved, mutilated, and executed the natives, often without provocation.

De Soto had one open-field battle at Napituca near Live Oak. De Soto and his men were positioned in the surrounding woods in anticipation of an ambush. When the natives arrived, they charged. Some of the Indians were captured as slaves. Others were shot. De Soto held some chiefs as prisoners for a short time.

After this encounter, the Spaniards traveled west and came to the River of Deer (now known as the Suwannee River). In the beginning of October, de Soto and his men crossed the Aucilla River with difficulty. Upon crossing it, they entered the Apalachee's main area. The natives destroyed their crops and burned their villages as they drew back, so that de Soto and his men could not use them.

The Spaniards were now under constant attack by the natives, who would kill the Spanish dispatch riders. In addition, brave native hostages used as guides often led army troops directly into ambushes, even though it most certainly meant death for them as well as the Spaniards.



**When de Soto died, his men buried him in the Mississippi River.**

As de Soto continued to head west, he came upon Anhaica, the main town of the Apalachee. It was here that he made camp for the winter. He also sent a small group of men southward to Tampa Bay to lead his ships and remaining supplies to him at Anhaica. The remains of iron crossbows, iron nails, and dated copper coins have been found at this site.

### De Soto Heads North

De Soto and his army decided to head north out of Florida into Georgia. Later, he explored areas of North and South Carolina, as well as Tennessee and Alabama. By the early 1540s, he headed across the Mississippi River to look for gold and silver in what is now Arkansas. In 1542, he became ill and died of a fever.