Ocmulgee Mounds

National Park Service
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Ocmulgee Mounds NHP

Hernando de Soto's Expedition through the Southeast



DE SOTO IN FLORIDA

In 1539, Hernando de Soto, a veteran of Spanish conquest in Peru, landed on the Florida coast with a fleet of vessels, a contingent of 600 men, 300 horses, a herd of pigs, some mules, bloodhounds, many weapons, and a large store of supplies. His goal was to conquer and settle the territory of the Gulf States as well as find gold to enrich himself and his king.



(HERNANDO DE SOTO)

De Soto had no interpreter or guide, but he soon found a Spaniard living with a local tribe of Indians. His name was Juan Ortiz, a native of Seville who had belonged to the 1528 expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez. Ortiz and three other men became the captives of a chief named Ucita who intended to kill them in retaliation for offenses Narváez had committed. Ortiz survived by the intervention of the chief's daughter, who later aided his escape to a more hospitable village.

While other Spaniards traded with the Indians, de Soto stole what he wanted, including precious stores of corn. He abducted Indian women for his soldiers and forced native men to haul his supplies. He humiliated chiefs by kidnapping them as guarantee for safe passage through their territory. As a final symbol of conquest, he planted Christian crosses in village plazas or atop the Indians' sacred mounds. The army spent the winter near Tallahassee, Florida, then set off on a journey that marked the first entry of Europeans into the interior of the present-day southeastern United States.

INVASION AND DEVASTATION

As de Soto's army entered the current region of southern Georgia, it was forced to cross a major river, likely the Flint. Spring rains had swollen the waterway to dangerous levels, but de Soto saw no alternative route. The army built a barge that they pulled back and forth across the river using a chain strung between the two shores. Twice the chain broke and the barge bounded out of control. Somehow, everyone crossed, and the expedition headed north. Near the end of March, they reached the vicinity of present-day Macon, Georgia, possibly near the Lamar site.

One native guide, named Perico, told the Spanish to travel four days east to find gold. Local Indians warned de Soto that to the east he would risk starvation on a large patch of uninhabited land. De Soto, lured by the promise of finding gold, chose to follow Perico's advice.

Just as they had been warned, they found no people, food, or gold. The terrain was so desolate they derided it as the "the desert of Ocute." On the fifth day, they reached the Savannah River, swollen from spring rains, making crossing treacherous. Mounted soldiers rode across, the water lapping at the horse stirrups and saddlebags. The foot soldiers linked arms in a human chain 30 to 40 feet long and slowly pulled themselves across the raging river. Exhausted but safe on the other side, they faced another crisis. They were running out of food. De Soto ordered everyone to move faster, increasing their

INVASION AND DEVASTATION (CONTINUED)

pace from 17 to 30 miles a day. They encountered more flooded rivers and often had to halt to build barges in order to cross. In late April the soldiers reached the location of present-day Columbia, South Carolina. They were hopelessly lost. An Indian war chief, Patofa, and his warriors accompanied the Spanish, but they were little help as guides. Their goal was to find and fight their enemies from a chiefdom called Cofitachequi – a place they had never been. The Indians were as lost as the Spanish. On April 25, a scout led the army to the village of Aymay on the outskirts of the immense Cofitachequi chiefdom that controlled most of what today is the eastern half of South Carolina, as well as parts of North Carolina. The war chief, Patofa, and his followers raided several villages, looted and desecrated temples, and killed and scalped their captives. Their lust for battle satisfied, the Indians left for home.

JEWELS OF THE SOUTH

De Soto made his way to the chiefdom headquarters, reportedly near Camden, South Carolina. He camped on one side of a river and summoned the woman chief, named the Lady of Cofitachequi by the Spanish. She invited the strangers to her village where she presented de Soto with gifts of animal pelts, blankets, pearls, salt, venison, and other food, in a cordial welcoming ceremony.

De Soto demanded gold and silver but was shown only copper and mica. As a result, he and his soldiers stormed to the top of a sacred mound and ransacked the temple. They found ornate chests containing the bones of honored ancestors as well as animal skins, furs, and pearls. The Spanish stole everything valuable they could carry, then kidnapped the Lady of Cofitachequi and headed north. They climbed through the mountains of North Carolina, where the Lady of Cofitachequi managed to escape with some of the stolen pearls.

De Soto's expedition moved west, exploring parts of north Georgia and eastern Tennessee. The Spaniard's chroniclers refer to a people they called the chiscas or chichimecs. Some historians believe these may have been the Yuchi who were likely located on the Hiwassee River in Polk County, Tennessee.

The de Soto expedition moved southwest across Alabama and managed to avoid attack until they reached Mabila – a village surrounded by a palisade with a series of towers. When the Spanish approached, archers hidden in the towers let loose a furious onslaught of arrows. The Spanish were spared from disaster by their quilted armor, and by their use of horses. The power and swiftness of the animals allowed the Spanish to regroup and rush the garrison. The battle raged for hours, and in the end the Indian forces were crushed, losing 2,500 to 5,000 men. Forty Spanish soldiers died and almost everyone was injured. They also lost 50 horses, all the remaining pearls stolen from the Cofitachequi, and much of their food and supplies, including spare clothing.

The crippled expedition continued west, but now faced almost continuous harassment from the Indians, who attacked swiftly in the night then retreated into the landscape they knew so well. De Soto grew despondent as his futile search for gold dragged on and his resources dwindled. On the western side of the Mississippi River, he caught a fever and died. His soldiers, fearing desecration by the Indians, plunged his body into the river's gloomy depths.

CONCLUSION

In the expedition's aftermath, many southeastern towns were left with little, if any, food. Old world diseases, such as smallpox and influenza, decimated their populations. Contact with a foreign culture caused disruptions, which altered the Indian's way of life forever. The narratives recorded by the survivors of the expedition provide intriguing glimpses of Late Mississippian life in the southeast and the initial clash of two very different cultures. These accounts are few and slanted; still, they are the earliest snapshots of a doomed way of life.