

The Expedition of Hernando de Soto in Sixteenth-Century Arkansas

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De Soto's Route to the Mississippi River

Hernando de Soto was one of many Europeans to gain wealth and fame when he took part in the Spanish conquest of Central and South America in the early sixteenth century. In 1539 he used part of his fortune from his military service in Peru to outfit an expeditionary force of around 600 people, horses, war dogs, and pigs, and sailed from Cuba to the west coast of Florida. Landing in May, members of the expedition spent the next four years traveling through what is now the southeastern United States, searching in vain for gold and other riches like those found in Central and South America.

The first detailed study of de Soto's route was commissioned by Congress in 1939 in recognition of the 400th anniversary of the army's landing. The report on the study, compiled and written by John R. Swanton of the Smithsonian Institution, relied largely on the four surviving accounts of the expedition, on study of the terrain over which the army marched, and on the meager archeological information that was available at that time. Since 1939, others have attempted to verify the route in various places, especially in Florida and Alabama. Efforts proved most successful in Florida, where the likely site of the expedition's 1539–1540 winter encampment was located in 1988.

University of Georgia ethnohistorian Charles Hudson has led restudy of the de Soto route for many years, using recently obtained archeological information and new translations of the documents. Since Hudson's proposed route is often quite different from that proposed by Swanton in 1939, archeologists across the Southeast have renewed their efforts to find the sites of the Indian towns and other places

along the route that were described in the expedition chronicles.

All researchers agree, however, that the Spanish army reached the Mississippi River in the spring of 1541, two years after landing in Florida. The chronicles indicate that after building rafts, the expedition crossed over into what is now Arkansas on June 18, 1541.

Hernando de Soto in Arkansas

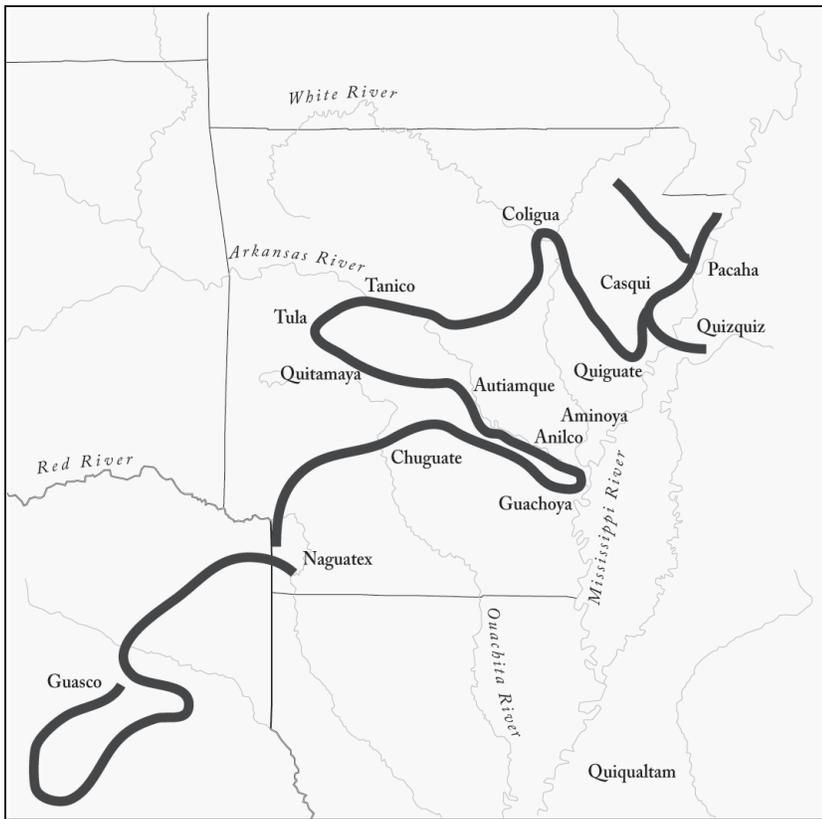
The Hudson route and the Swanton route are far more divergent west of the Mississippi River than east of it. The map included here shows Hudson's proposed route, which agrees with recent archeological and ethnohistorical studies in Arkansas. Hudson believes that the "River of Cayas" referred to in the chronicles was the Arkansas River, while Swanton assumed it was the Ouachita River. By Hudson's reconstruction of the route, the army spent two years in Arkansas, longer than in any other state. He argues that the army did not enter Louisiana, and that de Soto died in Arkansas (at Guachoya), not in Louisiana as Swanton's report indicated.

There have been many rumors of finds of possible sixteenth century artifacts in Arkansas, but only a few of these are actually available for study. Most prove to date from later times, but a small number are very likely from the de Soto expedition. A brass bell from the Carden Bottoms area of west-central Arkansas is a type known as a Clarksdale bell, a distinctive type that is known to have been brought by



Brass bell from the Parkin site.





Chevron bead from Parkin.

Map showing the “Hudson Route.”

the de Soto expedition. These bells were used as gifts or for barter with the local peoples. Halberd heads have been found at several locations in the state, but some of these have proved to be from more recent times. A halberd was a weapon with a metal head affixed to a wooden staff, that could be used like a spear or long-handled axe. They were losing popularity at the time of the de Soto expedition, but we know from the accounts that several soldiers were armed with them.

The best physical evidence of the de Soto expedition has come from the Parkin site in Cross County. Excavations at this 17-acre Indian village site in northeast Arkansas have uncovered a complete Clarksdale bell, fragments of two others, two lead shot from Spanish firearms, a seven-layer glass bead, and a bronze coin. With the exception of the coin, there is little doubt that all of these artifacts came from the expedition. The lead shot (one is .61 caliber, the other is

too damaged to tell) were used in the matchlock firearms carried by some of the expedition members.

By the time they reached Arkansas, the Spaniards probably had run out of gunpowder, so they may have been trading or giving away ammunition. The glass bead is an especially compelling piece of evidence. It is a multicolored faceted chevron bead, a distinctive variety that we are certain was carried by the de Soto expedition for giving to the local people. The coin has been hammered and abraded so much that no designs are visible. Although it could be a Spanish coin, its weight indicates it is probably an Indian Head Cent, which were also made of bronze. It was found in an area that had been disturbed in modern times.

Archeologists and historians believe that Parkin is most likely the town of Casqui mentioned in the de Soto expedition narratives. One of the activities described for this location was the raising of a large wooden cross atop the mound where the chief's house

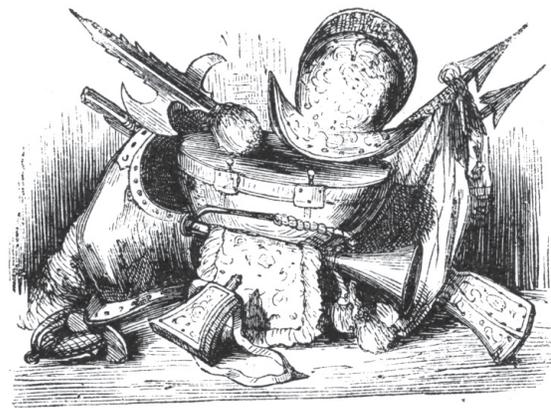


stood. Archeologists in 1966 may have actually found parts of this cross. In recognition of the site's importance, it was included in what is now Parkin Archeological State Park.

Several Arkansas Archeological Survey archeologists have studied the Arkansas part of Charles Hudson's proposed de Soto route. They have found that, unlike the Swanton route, it is very consistent with the locations of sixteenth century Native American sites. The Hudson route goes from population center to population center, no doubt because the army, which lived mostly off supplies and labor of the local people, had to go where there was enough food. By 1541, the army had been reduced to about 300 or so soldiers, 40 to 60 horses, and an indeterminate number of pigs. The food situation was made even more critical by as many as 500 enslaved native people who were forced to serve as bearers, servants, and concubines.

The expedition spent the winter of 1541–1542 at a large, prosperous town called Autiamque, which Hudson has suggested was located on the south side of the Arkansas River between Little Rock and Pine Bluff. After Hernando de Soto's death at Guachoya in southeast Arkansas on May 21, 1542, command of the expedition fell to his lieutenant, Luis de Moscoso. The

survivors decided to abandon the search for riches and to march overland to Mexico. Traveling through southwest Arkansas and into Texas, they found less and less food and water, and fewer people. Eventually, they turned back, retracing their route to southeast Arkansas. They spent the winter of 1542–1543 at the settlement of Aminoya, which may have been located north of the confluence of the White and Arkansas Rivers. There they built boats, and in 1543 they set sail down the Mississippi River to the Gulf and eventually to Mexico. They were attacked almost continually while traveling on the Mississippi River. Four years after landing in Florida, the first major European expedition into the interior South had failed.



For Further Reading

Note: There are four complete accounts of the de Soto expedition and a fragment of a fifth. Three of the accounts were written by members of the expedition who survived: Rodrigo Rangel (sometimes spelled Ranjel), de Soto's personal secretary; Luys Hernández de Biedma, the Spanish King's representative; and a Portuguese mercenary soldier known only as "Gentleman from Elvas." A fourth account, by Garcilaso de la Vega, was much longer and more flowery than the others. It was written decades later, based on interviews with survivors, and disagrees with the other narratives in many ways. It is clearly unreliable as an accurate account of the expedition. The fifth, partial account does not pertain to Arkansas.

New translations of the accounts and other useful information on the expedition are included in this two-volume set:

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