

Just How Far Did Soto Go?

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Spaniard Hernando de Soto, veteran of service in Panama, Nicaragua, and Peru and Governor of Cuba, landed in Tampa Bay, Florida, on May 30, 1539, with an army of about 625 men and more than 200 horses (Figure 1). He and his men spent the next four years making their way across the southeastern United States, living off the land and enslaving Indians to carry their baggage and gear. Soto died on the banks of the Mississippi River on May 21, 1542, and his men spent the next year trying to find their way overland through Texas to Mexico. Having failed in that effort, they returned to the Mississippi River, built seven barges, and made their way down the river to the Gulf of Mexico and then across the Gulf to Panuco, Mexico. Only about one-half of the men with Soto at his Florida landing survived the rigors of the expedition.

In the nearly 500 years since the Soto expedition, there have been many efforts to track the route the Spaniards followed. The four extant accounts that provide details relating to the expedition are incomplete and sometimes provide contradictory information, making reconstruction of the route followed a difficult challenge.



Figure 1: Hernando de Soto, pictured in the early 17th century. (Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas)

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FINAL REPORT OF THE UNITED STATES DE SOTO EXPEDITION COMMISSION

LETTER
FROM
THE CHAIRMAN
UNITED STATES DE SOTO EXPEDITION COMMISSION
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Figure 2: Title page, United States De Soto Expedition Commission Report.

In February 1936, the U.S. Congress created the United States De Soto Expedition Commission to provide a definitive mapping of the route followed by Soto and his men. That Commission, headed by Dr. John R. Swanton of the Smithsonian Institution, met three times in 1936, and it submitted a draft of its final

report to Congress in April 1937 (Figure 2). Most of the actual work on the report and its contents was done by John Swanton. The United States De Soto Expedition Commission report, published in 1939, and its route map were widely accepted for the next 40 years.

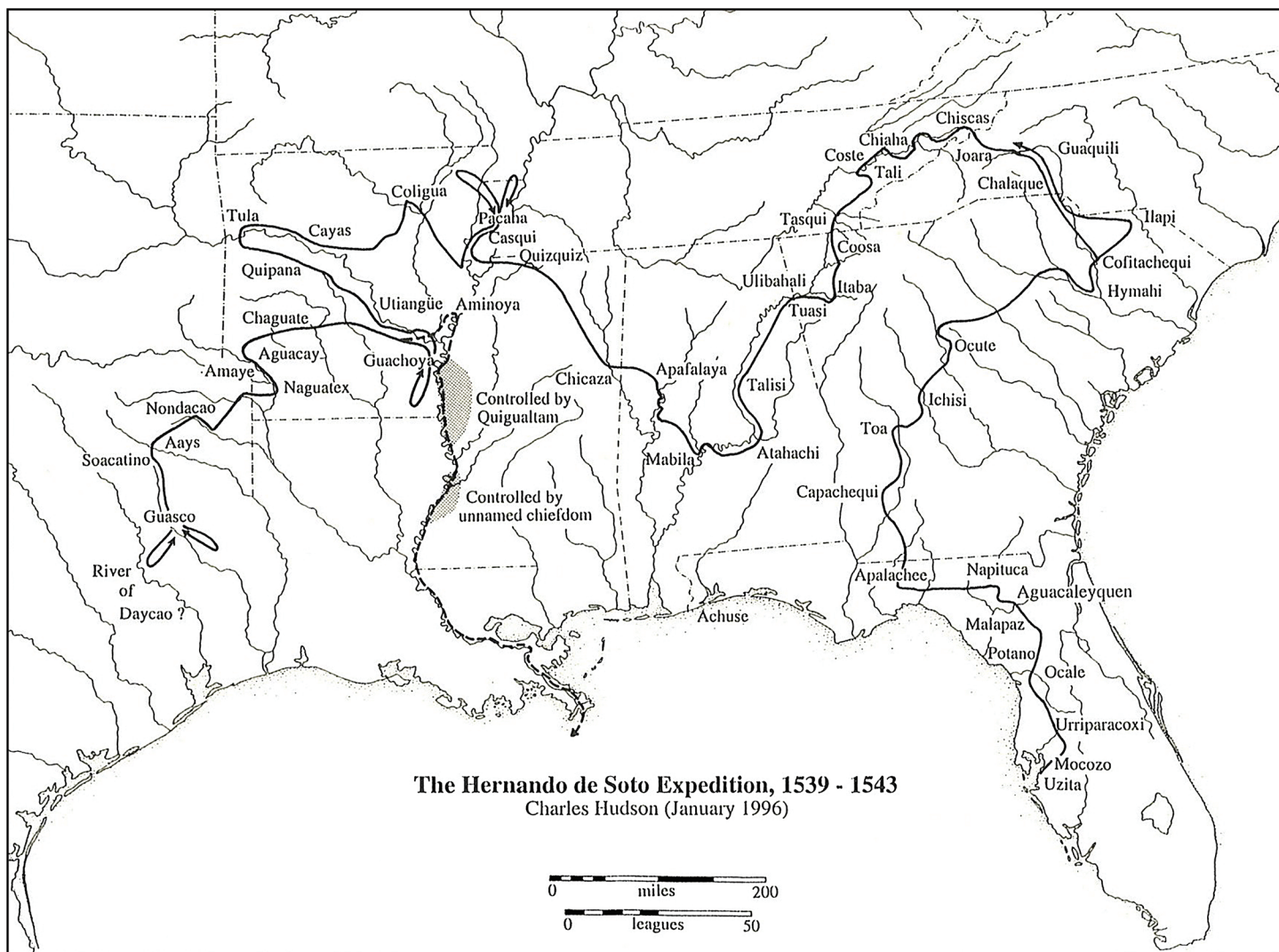


Figure 3: Charles Hudson's map (1997a p. 320) of the Soto route, 1539-1543.

The Commission used the best maps and the limited archaeological knowledge available at the time to track Soto and his men, but over time it became clear that there were problems with their route reconstruction. In the mid-1970s, while researching and writing his seminal volume, *The Southeastern Indians*, Charles Hudson realized that the Indians of the southeast had undergone tremendous changes in the 16th century when Spanish expeditions and colonies became increasingly common. He felt that one way to understand these changes was to map the Soto route and place the Indian societies that the Spaniards encountered on the landscape in their proper locations.

Hudson began work on the Soto route in 1977, and DePratter was among his earliest collaborators. In the two decades that followed, Hudson used modern

maps and worked with archaeologists and others across the southeast to create his version of the Soto expedition route (Figure 3). Major differences between the De Soto Commission map and Hudson's more recent version include rerouting the expedition farther into South Carolina and North Carolina based on the path of the Juan Pardo expeditions (1566-1568), shortening the route through Alabama, and eliminating the part of the route others, including Swanton, had tracked through Louisiana.

The United States De Soto Expedition Commission report (1939: p. 301, Appendix A), placed the total distance traveled by Soto and his men on land at 2,987 miles. The Commission did not include forays and side trips made by smaller contingents of men along the way. Because the reconstructed route maps by the

Commission and Hudson are dramatically different in places, we decided to see how the compiled mileages varied by state. Like the Commission, we did not calculate the distances traveled on forays by smaller parties to Ilapi in South Carolina, to the north from Pacaha in Arkansas, or to the south of Guasco in Texas. We realize that Hudson's map reflects his preferred route as he knew it in 1997, and there have been adjustments here and there since it was published. Archaeologists are currently working on sites all along Hudson's route, and that work will ultimately lead to adjustments and refinements in Hudson's work. Nevertheless, we are confident that Hudson has provided a good base map to guide future work.

In order to obtain estimates of the total distance traveled in each state, we overlaid Hudson's more detailed route maps

(Hudson 1997b) on modern maps and then used the “Ruler” tool in Adobe Photoshop to accurately measure each twist and turn along the way. The map images were enlarged to allow as precise measurements as possible. We believe that our distance figures are quite accurate along the entire route.

Table 1 shows the distances traveled overland by state according to Swanton’s Commission and our measurements based on Hudson’s maps (Figure 4). Major differences exist because Hudson took Soto north into South Carolina and North Carolina, whereas the Commission did not. Swanton took the expedition much farther south into Alabama than Hudson did, and Hudson has Soto tracking across Arkansas multiple times and avoiding Louisiana altogether. As can be seen in Table 1, the total travel distances for the two routes are quite similar with 2,987 for Swanton and his Commission and 3,387 for Hudson, but there are large differences in distances traveled within individual states.

After constructing their barges at Aminoya, the surviving Spaniards floated an estimated 408 miles (straight line distance not measuring countless meanders) down the Mississippi River, and then another 680 miles across the Gulf of Mexico to Panuco, Mexico. By our measure that makes the total distance Soto and his successor and men traveled from Tampa Bay, Florida, to Panuco, 4,475 miles by land, river, and sea.

When Soto landed in Florida, he did not have a map of the southeastern United States, and he truly had no idea where he was headed. He followed Indian trails and used guides he picked up along the way to get him from one Indian society to another. He and his men saw a land of complex societies that were already beginning to enter a period of decline and reorganization. The Soto expedition accounts provide our best and most complete glimpse of these southeastern Indian societies that would soon disappear.



Figure 4: Dr. Charles M. Hudson, 1932-2013. (Photo courtesy of the University of Georgia)

References

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1976 <i>The Southeastern Indians</i>. Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press.</p> <p>Hudson, Charles
1997a The Historical Significance of the Soto Route. In <i>The Hernando de Expedition</i>, edited by Patricia Galloway, pp. 313-326. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.</p> | <p>Hudson, Charles
1997b <i>Knights of Spain, Warriors of the Sun</i>. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.</p> <p>United States De Soto Expedition Commission
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	Swanton	Hudson
Florida	335*	343
Georgia	320	430
South Carolina	150	221
North Carolina	80	107
Tennessee	87	200
Alabama	505	351
Mississippi	170	176
Arkansas	480	1189
Louisiana	590	---
Texas	270	370
Totals	2987	3387

*Distances in miles.

Table 1: Comparison of distances covered by Soto expedition according to Swanton table and Hudson map. (Table by Charles Hudson)