



Native American Conquest: Florida Trails

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DeSoto's Florida Trail

Native American Conquest

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La Florida

Settlement

Ucita, DeSoto's landing village in Charlotte Harbor, can be located using four precise statements by DeSoto's Chroniclers. Juan Ortiz left us precise location information; the second is a description of the army's departure; the third, Inca's journal of the Thirty Lancers return to port; and last, the army's reported movement in that area.

Hirrihigua's people had captured Ortiz when he disembarked to read a note, but years later he was led away. Ortiz was shown an Indian bridge two leagues from the village and he crossed a river on that bridge - the same one used by Narvaez with Cabeza de Vaca - then fled six additional leagues to Mococo's Village. Biedma tells us that when the army departed Ucita, it marched west and then northwest. When the army departed Ucita, it did so on the same trail Ortiz used

from the Myakka River, the only river west of the harbor's head. The army would turn north-west before the Indian bridge and proceeded up the river's east bank on a "firmer" inland route: the bridge was probably too small for DeSoto's army and for the horsemen driving the livestock weeks earlier. DeSoto's trail would pass by Mococo's Village, eight leagues from Ucita. Narváez and Cabeza de Vaca, with a much smaller army and with no livestock to drive, had crossed the bridge from the opposite direction years before; they had landed at Englewood, less than three leagues south of the bay head at the bridge. In fact, the fields on the west bank of the Myakka River, six leagues above the river's bridge point were called "Old Spanish Fields" by Florida's pioneers and are labeled as such on John Lee Williams' Map of East Florida of 1827. Ortiz would find Chief Mococo's village there, two leagues from the seashore. The Thirty Lancers, led by Añasco, returned from north Florida five months after leaving Ucita when DeSoto decided to move his headquarters from Ucita to another harbor more accessible to the continent's interior. Inca relates the Lancer's journey with a precision that betrays his noted confusion of place names and total ignorance of provincial boundary. If we simply ignore Inca's speculation of the names of places which the

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Lancers encountered near mid-journey, however, we can learn a great deal about the Lancers' trip and, thereby, about DeSoto's trail. The Lancers rode for eleven days back down DeSoto's trail and described their daily movements and the obstacles they encountered along the way. On their last night before reaching Ucita they camped three leagues short of Mococo's village and eleven leagues short of Ucita, reinforcing the reported eight-league separation of those villages by Biedma. Just over one league from Ucita, the Lancers feared for the safety of the men left at port when no horse tracks were found in a clearing, but were pleased to find fresh tracks and ash from clothes being washed at a lagoon less than half-a-league from the village.

Recall, too, that the men spent their first night ashore near Ucita, two leagues from where they disembarked. That measure from Locust Point meets the half-league measure from the harbor's only lagoon at a site astride a creek at the northeast end of Tippecanoe Bay, just west of today's Murdock. The Myakka River is two leagues from that site, as Ortiz reported. The clearing the Thirty Lancers passed, without horse tracks and lying just over a league from the village, is a large creek bed on El Jobean, not far from where the horsemen camped for the

first time in Florida. The fishing enclosure hooks southward into Muddy Cove half-a-league south of Ucita and is clearly distinguishable as such. Hog Island, a canebrake where Hirrihigua's people hid from DeSoto but were later dispersed, is two leagues from Ucita, exactly as described.

Today, Ucita is a residential subdivision with paved roads and man-made canals running through it, seven feet above sea level but with few homes built on it. That site shows on the original Florida Township survey as dense scrub, several hundred acres of it, in a "third rate pine forest" of ten thousand acres or more (Field Notes of the Township Survey of 1849). DeSoto had felled the trees around Ucita to pasture his horses, and the men probably used the logs to build dwellings and storage buildings. Scrub oak grew over that area, and no other in that proximity, in the intervening three centuries preceding the Township Survey. The pines have all been harvested or burned over and the entire area is covered with scrub, pine and palmetto today. A creek that flowed through the village has been rerouted, but the bed is still intact for archaeological investigation; its banks are undisturbed. The Myakka River's (English written) name came from Chief Mococo. U-sep-pa Island (again,

in English), near the mouth of Charlotte Harbor, was named that by U-cit-a people when they resettled away from DeSoto and closer to their offshore fishing grounds.

Tippecanoe Bay, with two or three feet of water at low tide today, despite extensive accretion due to upland dredging, accommodated the off-loading of ships near the harbor anchorage by landing craft. Water depth in the main anchorage at the head of Charlotte Harbor is at least seventeen feet today, as it was on Bernard Romans' Chart of 1774. Likewise, the shallows of the channel south of Cape Haze are clearly shown (12 feet of water at mean tide), accounting for the fact that DeSoto was delayed until Spring Tide on May 31, 1539 to enter the harbor's anchorage. The sand bars at the harbor's entrance are also clearly shown on it, exactly as Rangel described them, as they are today. The main anchorage is four leagues from Ucita, on a straight line down the Myakka River. Ship's mastheads are visible for many leagues up that river, as reported by the scouts who found Ortiz. Chief Mococo had released Ortiz upon hearing of the Spanish presence. Ortiz had fled down the Myakka River toward Ucita and was spotted by DeSoto's scouts, who thought he and his escorts were hostile natives. Ortiz could only make the sign of the cross and

call out "Xivilla" when approached by the heavily armed scouts. The scouts shouted with joy and escorted their prize to DeSoto, but due to his excitement, it took Ortiz some time to remember how to speak his own native language fluently.

To the north and east of Ucita are extensive swamps that livestock could not cross, but the swamps are dried today by drainage canals and the borrow-pits used to build Interstate 75, which traverses them. DeSoto's army would depart Ucita to the west and northwest, across El Jobean over hard ground. Horsemen would drive the livestock. Narváez had probably walked his army northeast from Ucita, expecting to feed his horses and to find the Apalachen gold he had heard about. He would have passed through the marshes of the Peace River then crossed it just before reaching today's Arcadia, where he had found maize growing. All within his ten to twelve league journey. Narváez had continued north, inland of the Peace River, but had eventually been led by circumstance over the Great Swamp, the only fording place on a river that flows across all northbound routes from Ucita. DeSoto's people would report crossing the same swamp, on the same river, at

the same place and for the same reason eleven years later, as we shall see.

DeSoto stayed at Ucita for six weeks. He wrote a letter to Cuba, transport vessels were off-loaded and sent on their way, patrols were dispatched, and DeSoto's two brigs were safely secured at anchor. French Corsairs plied the new world waters, so DeSoto left armed sailors on the brigs. When all was settled, DeSoto left at least seventy men and twenty horsemen at port to guard the stores. His army could not find captives to carry the stores inland, and DeSoto was kind to Mococo's people. The army herded pigs, instead, so the men could eat when all else failed.

Into Florida

DeSoto's army left Ucita (in Charlotte Harbor) headed for Ocale Province, where they planned to spend the winter in its "abundance of gold, silver and many pearls", as scouts reported captives had proclaimed. DeSoto marched west from Ucita, but did not cross the Myakka River on the Indian bridge or attempt to ford the river there, although tides were favorable as we realize today from accurate lunar reports. The horsemen had learned why not to ford it six weeks earlier: the

bottom is still black sticky mud today. DeSoto marched up the firm east bank of the river instead, headed northwest. That trail would cross the Myakka River's north-east bend seven leagues from Ucita and a little more than league below Mococo's west bank village. They camped on the river's bank opposite Mococo's Village their first night out, having traveled about six leagues that day. The trail they took is the only trail shown from Charlotte Harbor on the John Lee Williams Map of Eastern Florida of 1827: it bypasses the massive swamp west of the river's big bend where Ortiz first sighted Mococo's workers just below their village years earlier. That swamp is drained by Cow Pen Slough today.

The next morning, the army crossed a bridge they built over the Myakka River just below Mococo's Village, then stopped to visit the chief. The chief shed tears at the army's departure, knowing full well that the surrounding villagers would eventually retaliate for his kindness to the invaders. The army rounded Lower Myakka Lake that afternoon by turning north-east near Mococo's Village, then crossed Howard Creek and camped on the shore of Myakka Lake about a league beyond the creek; making about five leagues their second

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day (the Lancers would also camp there on their last night on the trail; eleven leagues from Ucita and three leagues from Mococo, as reported above). Howard Creek, just below that camp, looks like a river with high and steep banks so the army also bridged it. On the army's next morning at that camp the horses were spooked by a rabbit and ran back down the trail for more than a league before terrified troops could reassert control over them. The horses had run back to the tree line at Howard Creek but not over the bridge, then stopped, as horses do when they pass fresh scents. DeSoto's people christened Myakka Lake accordingly - the Lake of the Rabbit, and the army had crossed two bridges upon leaving Ucita, all as Rangel reported.

With Paracoxi Village as their intermediate destination, the army continued to the northeast for three more days. They camped the first night at what they called the lake of St. John, which is still there but is not even named on maps today. It lies due east of Sarasota. The next day the army traveled over a desert plain where DeSoto's servant reportedly "died" of thirst. Horses drank what could be transported and, one can observe even today, there are no lakes, springs, sinkholes or creeks in that region, a most unusual place. The third day they came to

what they called the plain of Guacoco, Florida's largest field of heavy sub-surface phosphate deposit, nature's fertilizer. That plain covered at least 130,000 acres of phosphate fields, the only one like it in all of Florida; the Indians called that entire province by the name of the village quartered there: Paracoxi. The army gathered maize in quantity for the first time, having traveled over thirteen leagues from Myakka Lake in three days. They camped just south of Paracoxi Village.

DeSoto's apparent ambition to push his army rapidly overland, at six leagues the first day and five the second, proved to be more than they could handle. They made just over four-and-a-half leagues each of their last three days on the trail. That pace would hold for the next year, even with captives acquired from Paracoxi's fields to lighten their load. That marching schedule, five days on the road and two at rest for the entire army, would hold as a rule, too, with few exceptions for the next year's marches.

Inca says that Paracoxi Village was twenty-five leagues north north east of Ucita, which is the distance and direction they had traveled in Florida. Biedma says that Paracoxi Village was up to twenty leagues from the

coast, measured from the "coast" near the mouth of Tampa Bay. Surrounded by surface mines today, Paracoxi Village was located just south-east of today's Brewster, near IMC Agrico's giant South Pierce phosphate plant, one of the largest in Florida. Upon DeSoto's arrival, his scouts reported that a wide body of water, just three leagues beyond, had such deep mud on either side that it was impassable for the army; referring to the Peace River at today's Fort Meade, at that distance east of the village. But they also reported that they had found a very good crossing of that swamp, which the army could reach in just two days, and pass over it easily; that would have been at today's Lake Hancock spillway, which looks like part of Peace River's swamp but is shallow and fordable. The Peace River joins the southbound spillway at today's Bartow, six leagues northeast of Paracoxi Village. DeSoto proceeded north and slightly west from Paracoxi Village by following the course of today's railroad to bypass the jungle over that giant phosphate field, a moonscape of mines today. Desoto's men had rested for several days, pillaging through Paracoxi for about a league, where they gathered as much maize as they could eat and carry. They gathered natives there, too, as the village was heavily populated. Their first night out was spent

five leagues north of Paracoxi Village and just beyond what they called Acela, today's Mulberry. The men, however, had departed Paracoxi Village's northern fields and made that trip at their normal marching rate.

The next day they turned east and hiked three leagues, crossed the wide and shallow spillway with ease, then camped half-a-league beyond on a plain called Tocaste near a large lake. That plain is Bartow Airport today; the lake is Lake Hancock (located due east of Tampa and south-west of Orlando). Between the two is a large hill that stands fifty feet over the lake and plain; the view from it is spectacular. At Tocaste, DeSoto was informed of the impassability of the country further on; the Green Swamp north and east of there was too large to move an army over (it still covers hundreds of thousands of acres). So, with one division, DeSoto recrossed the spillway and explored the abandoned west side of Lake Hancock for another passage to the north, searching for Ocale. He rode through the marshes near today's Auburndale and found the lakes and swamps to its north impassable for the army and its livestock. Most of the land he rode in that area has been strip-mined in the last century. The villages he passed are borrow pits and man-made lakes today.

On the third day of DeSoto's search, he was led by a guide to a broad road leading away from this swamp to a passage through another which was free of mud at its entrance and exit. The Great Swamp would lead DeSoto to Ocale, a place reported by Elvas to lie west of Paracoxi Province). With flat sand approaches, the Great Swamp was located at today's Hillsborough River State Park. All northbound trails from points below Tampa Bay once converged at this fording place. The nearest man-made bridge is a league-and-a-half upstream at today's Highway 301 at Fort Foster. That bridge was first constructed at the behest of the U.S. Army in 1828; the road over that bridge would lead north through hostile Seminole Indian country.

DeSoto dispatched riders on the full moon with orders for the army to advance and cross that swamp. The riders had to backtrack, unseen for safety, through an inhabited region. They reported seeing many Indians that night performing pagan ceremony around giant fires. Once the riders were reinforced by the army at the spillway to ward-off morning attackers, all recrossed it; most camped again just north of Mulberry; a few rode the full twelve leagues to the Great Swamp to reinforce

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DeSoto. In the next two days the rest of the army would march the remaining eight leagues to the Great Swamp, passing well south of Lakeland. The Indians fled when the army advanced. By the time the army arrived at the Great Swamp, DeSoto had crossed it and ridden six additional leagues into Ocale Province. The place where DeSoto camped is called Dade City today and lies "about twenty leagues from Paracoxi Village on a line running more or less north and south". DeSoto had ridden a trail from just above the Hillsborough River to Dade City which Florida pioneers would call "The Fort King Road". Florida's Second Seminole War would erupt on that road above Dade City.

DeSoto's army spent five days struggling to cross the Great Swamp and emerging from it into "Uqueten" Village, today's Branchton. They would hike up the same road that DeSoto followed into Ocale. The men pillaged maize fields near "Acura Village", today's Zephyrhills, but they camped in Dade City; today's headquarters of Florida's citrus juice concentrate industry. Narváez had crossed the Great Swamp, at the same place and for the same reason eleven years before DeSoto. He had encountered several hundred Indians while crossing the swamp with "great difficulty", but was led to their

village half-a-league away (today's Branchton). Narváez had found large quantities of maize close by - at today's Zephyrhills. When Vaca was dispatched to find a harbor reported to be nearby (Tampa Bay), he had encountered wetlands filled with oysters and a river he could not cross. The Hillsborough River re-broadens just below its branches at the Great Swamp; raccoons eat the oysters there today. That once extensive swamp on very flat land near today's Rock Hammock would be substantially drained in this century by Tampa's Bypass Canal into McKay Bay. When scouts re-crossed the swamp and spent a day proceeded down the river's south bank tree line, they found a shallow bay the next morning. They had found McKay Bay on May 20, 1528, at which Spring Low Tide occurs on the morning of the new moon, precisely when they examined it. They could wade across it. If they had seen the deep water of Tampa Bay from McKay Bay it would have looked like the Gulf of Mexico from their vantage point just east of today's Ybor City. They had returned that day with news that the "harbor" was too shallow for ships, and Narváez had preceded north looking for his ships along the shallow Gulf shoreline.

Ridges and Flat Woods

Once DeSoto's men all crossed the Great Swamp and encamped around the small village of Ocale, DeSoto sent scouting parties out in all directions - they found villages and fields but no treasure. The captives from Paracoxi who had lied about Ocale were fed to the greyhounds. Fresh captives who had witnessed the feeding were believed, however, when they said maize and gold rich lands were just one week to the north. With that information, DeSoto advanced with one battalion toward Apalache. That place was to be found by "traveling always toward New Spain, keeping ten to twelve leagues from the coast."

Florida's Gulf coast is very shallow from that proximity northwestward. The "coast" Biedma was referring to was the four-braza deep-sea lane, as illustrated by the transport captains at landfall. On average, the coast is located about seventeen miles off-shore but varies from fifteen to twenty, putting DeSoto's road about ten miles inland from today's shore line. In leagues, the coast varies from six to eight off-shore, averaging seven; ten to twelve leagues inland is eleven on average, subtract seven from that leaves the trail, on average, four leagues

inland of the shoreline. Months later when the Thirty Lancers returned back down DeSoto's trail, it took them exactly one week to get from Apalache to the Great Swamp, the southern boundary of Ocale Province.

Like Narváez before him, DeSoto would proceed northward from Dade City, down the Withlacoochee River and through today's Withlacoochee State Forest, a game preserve, described then as being abundant in "fallow deer... red deer like large bulls... very large bears and panthers", all on high and dry land. Then his trail would go over Florida's rock phosphate ridge and "as it had maize in abundance, they gave it the name Villafarta", meaning "fertile place" in Spanish. Then his trail would cross a river, enter another province and pass through "many forests (with) streams that flowed through it, and very level". These were Florida's "flat woods", as our "Cracker" pioneers would call them, between the Withlacoochee and St. Marks Rivers. All of these pine trees would be "harvested" in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by "naval stores" companies which would first drain them of sap, to distill for turpentine and caulk residues, then build railroads through that sandy flat country to remove the massive felled timbers.

Most of DeSoto's trail from Dade City was a railroad until recently. DeSoto's trail went through Rital, Istachatta, Fort Cooper (just south-east of Inverness), Hernando and south Dunnellon (southwest of Ocala). DeSoto's people would call them, respectively, Ytara, Potano, Utinama, Mala Paz (Bad Peace) and Cholupaha. He camped at each of these places at four league intervals; Inca says they traveled nineteen leagues in doing so. The rock phosphate ridge that DeSoto came to twelve leagues north of Dade City became well known to the U. S. Army. On it they fought the biggest battles of the Seminole Wars at today's "Cove of the Withlacoochee." The Seminole Indians called that place Char-lo-pop-ka; DeSoto's captives called it Cho-lu-pa-ha; today it is called Tsala A-pop-ka; probably the same name. Only Inca called that place Ocale, the name the others assigned to the entire province.

DeSoto's division built a wooden bridge near Cholupaha to cross the River of Discords between "precipices on either side as high as the length of two pikes and as perpendicular as two walls" (a "pike" was 18 feet long). That bridge was built on the Withlacoochee River at Dunnellon, with the only vertical banks that high on the

river (as reported on the Township survey of 1845 before the river was dammed and mined). DeSoto called it the River of Discords because his favorite greyhound, Bruto, was killed chasing Indians in it.

DeSoto left Dunnellon, following the same Indian trails Narváez and Vaca had used, bound for Caliquen Village, sixteen leagues up the way as reported by captives.

DeSoto's men passed the first eight leagues in two days, but half way through the third day, probably while they were struggling to ford the Waccasassa River and Otter Creek, DeSoto and his guard proceeded to Caliquen Village. That village was just west of today's Chiefland, yesteryear's Janney, once the headquarters of Peninsular Naval Stores Company. It is a ghost town today, just over a league south of the Suwannee River. The "flat woods" are all gone. A small cemetery marks the spot where Caliquen village once stood and a long, crescent shaped hill just south of it is where Chief Caliquen lived overlooking the "valley." Biedma called this village Aqua-calecuen. Rangel called it Aqua-caleyquen. Cabeza de Vaca, with Narvaez, had called the chief Dul-chanchellin. Only Inca called it Ochile, which would confuse him and many trail seekers later on.

DeSoto captured the chief in a dawn raid, and then returned back down the trail to find his division three leagues back. They had advanced in his daylong absence, probably another four leagues or so, making the distance between the Withlacoochee River and Caliquen Village about fifteen leagues. Because Caliquen Village was so large, extending northward over a league to the Suwannee River, and its chief held captive, DeSoto sent for the remainder of his army from Ocale before attempting to proceed. Riders were dispatched on the full moon. Meanwhile, DeSoto was reassured of Apalache's abundance at Caliquen, but was sternly warned about Chief Caliquen's warring brother Vitachuco, whose village was on the road to Apalache. Captives from that province reminded DeSoto of the plight of Narváez for the first time there, in detail.

Over the next several weeks the remainder of the army advanced from Ocale and DeSoto positioned them around Caliquen as they arrived. The army had buried its heavy implements before advancing, however, believing in imminent return to winter in Ocale. Once the army was rested and more captives were taken, the army crossed the Suwannee River, camped, then preceded for one week to Chief Vitachuco's Village. That

route segment would be the army's longest slog through swampland.

Vitachuco, Coming and Going

The Thirty Lancers would pass through Vitachuco Village on their way back down the trail, and report finding the bodies of many dead Indians, killed at DeSoto's direction, still strewn over Vitachuco's fields. The Lancers would proceed eight leagues beyond Vitachuco Village to camp late that night, then ride eighteen leagues the next night (under a nearly Full Moon) and camp five leagues short of a giant river; for a total distance of thirty-one leagues from Vitachuco Village to the river (81 miles). They would struggle to ford that river the next day, but in doing so would leave a perfect description of today's Lower Clay Landing on the Suwannee River, their most precise description of any place in Florida (that crossing place is exactly the same today, trails, banks and all). To warm and dry themselves, they would spend the remainder of that day and early evening between bonfires in Caliquen Village. Inca had called that village Ochile when the army went up the trail, then confused it with the similarly-titled Ocale, the province on the south bank of the

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Withlacoochee River just below the Suwannee River, when he reported the Lancers returned down the trail. Be that as it may, the Lancers camped in Caliquen Village just below Lower Clay Landing, not where Inca infers.

DeSoto's army had left Caliquen Village and blazed the Indian trail that the Thirty Lancers followed back. The army camped just over one league north of the Suwannee River their first night out, having spent the day bridging and crossing the river at Lower Clay Landing. At their normal pace of four-and-a-half leagues per day, they would have camped next at today's Cross City, which they called Uriutina, a "town of pleasant view and with much food". Then they followed the route of today's railroad, which was built over Indian trails, and camped at Hines, then between Tennille and Salem. The fourth night at Athena, then at Hampton Springs, and then at the Econfina River which they called Many Waters, camping at each of these places at just over four league intervals. Finally, they forded a very bad swamp and went into Vitachuco Village, four leagues from the Econfina River and thirty-one leagues from the Suwannee River. That course, ten to twelve leagues from the coast and always toward New Spain, as Biedma

reported, departs today's railroad and Highway 19 just south of Perry and effectively straightens the paths of today's roads. The trail led through Hampton Springs instead of Perry then across Vitachuco's plain and then into Tallahassee. The Thirty Lancers would pass back down that same trail and camp eight leagues below Vitachuco Village at today's Hampton Springs, then at Cross City eighteen leagues from there, then cross the Suwannee River at Lower Clay Landing five leagues from Cross City, as they reported those distances.

Vitachuco Village lies just above today's Nutall Rise, near a plain between the Wacissa and Aucilla Rivers, eight leagues from Hampton Springs. Miles of abandoned railroad weave through the fields just east of the plain, attesting to the magnificence of the once great stand, which the Chroniclers described - those tracks were built through those swamps to harvest those gigantic trees. Inca says, "near the pueblo (village) was a large plain. On one side was a high and dense forest that covered a large tract of land, and on the other was two lakes. The first was small, and would measure about one league in circumference; it was clear of growth and mud, but was so deep that three or four steps from the shore one could not touch bottom. The second, which was

further away from the pueblo, was very large, more than half a league in breadth and so long that it looked like a large river, its extent being unknown. The Indians stationed their squadron between the forest and these two lakes, the lakes being on their right and the forest on their left".

The "lakes" are parts of the Wacissa River; the first lies at the northwest end of Vitachuco's plain and measures one league in circumference, as reported. The second "lake" is much wider and extends for miles to the south from the southwest edge of the plain. It disappears in the surrounding swamps to the west and south, and looks exactly the way Inca described it. Both "lakes" are very deep near their banks because the river flows through them and underground between them.

Vitachuco's plain lies one league north-west of the Aucilla River's natural bridge, another partially underground river near Nutall Rise, which explains why the army and the Lancers did not report a river crossing there. Rangel reported a large swamp, today's Cow Creek Swamp at the southeast edge of the plain, however, when the army entered the village. Vitachuco Village is completely surrounded by massive swamps

and is almost impenetrable even today. It provided Vitachuco's people shelter in a very hostile environment. Rangel says their Apalachen neighbors were "most valiant... great spirit and boldness", the fiercest in Florida. DeSoto fought Vitachuco's people near the "lakes" when they attacked the army. The natives fled to the "lakes," shooting back for most of that day and night, but were surrounded and captured by DeSoto's army. Several days later, at camp, they were publicly executed for reasons never entirely understood.

Elvas and Rangel with DeSoto, and Vaca with Narváez' had all reported "flute players" near a West Central Florida road which Vaca says "was difficult to travel but wonderful to look upon.... In it were vast forests, the trees being astonishingly high." I believe they were all in the flat woods when they made similar reports, and both Narváez and DeSoto used the same trail leading to Vitachuco, a village which Narváez found and called "Apalachen". Vitachuco Village might have been in Apalache Province at that time, given the warring nature of that province and the European diseases (population movers) most likely delivered by Narváez. "The Lakes", says Vaca, "are much larger here, as we sallied they fled to the lakes nearby... shooting from the

lakes which was safety to themselves that we could not retaliate", which is similar to the incident observed by DeSoto's army. Narváez, apparently, did not have a sufficient army to surround the Indians. Then, Vaca says, the natives told them that the land and villages inland were very poor, but that by "journeying south nine days was a town called Aute...(with) much maize, beans and pumpkins and being near the sea they had fish." Biedma says these Indians told many great lies about the country further inland, and, I think, Narváez had believed them; Narváez had no Juan Ortiz to sort them out. If Narváez had been at Vitachuco, and departed to the south, as Vaca indicates, he would have encountered country exactly as he described. That is,

"The first day we got through those lakes and passages without seeing anyone, on the second day we came to a lake difficult of crossing... (But got through)... at the end of a league we arrived at another of the same character, but worse, as it was half a league in extent."

Vaca's trail below Vitachuco Village, at DeSoto's marching rate of four-and-a-half leagues per day, would have passed one side of the large "lake" adjoining Vitachuco's plain and then gone over Gum Swamp the

first day. Then over the East River Pool and the St. Marks River near its mouth the next day. Narváez crossed these "lakes" instead of avoiding them because both the pool and the river's flats look like lakes and are almost impossible to hike around even today. They are at the distances from the village and of the dimensions Vaca described. Pioneer trails also crossed both of them at exactly the same places (inside of today's St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge; East River Pool has a causeway today where Vaca said he crossed it, but the St. Marks River's flats have been dredged for shipping).

Maybe Narváez did march south out of Vitachuco in search of Aute; the last reported village he would visit in his life. If he did, then a clear picture will come into focus when we examine his trail to Aute later in this paper. I believe DeSoto massacred Vitachuco's people, and enslaved their women and children for what they had done to Narváez. The chroniclers never mention this reasoning, perhaps for the shame of it, or maybe because it was so obvious to them. The wholesale slaying of natives would be repeated only once on DeSoto's three-year campaign, when Chief Tuscalusa would betray him.

Panhandle Monsters

In late September, with a well-fed army supported by captives from three provinces (Paracoxi, Ocale and Vitachuco), DeSoto set out once more toward his planned winter encampment at Apalache. The trip would take two weeks but the men would rest several days along the way. From Vitachuco, it is only ten leagues to Tallahassee, across the St. Marks River. The army stopped to bridge that river near today's Cody on their first night out, four leagues from Vitachuco. The chief of a nearby village, Uzachil, who had sent flute players to amuse the men further back the trail, sent dressed deer for the army's fare while they built a bridge of logs the next day. The army, therefore, named the St. Marks River "The River of the Deer."

After completing the bridge the following day, "The army crossed the river, (and) marched two leagues through a country without timber," probably up the St. Marks River's west bank, arriving at a place where they "found large fields of maize, beans and calabashes". They called that large town Hapallayga; today it is called Chaires Crossings. It lies at the east end of Lake Lafayette Valley; the railroad runs through the valley today. That night (under a full moon), DeSoto rode four more leagues

into Uzachil and took today's Tallahassee, which lies exactly that distance up that fertile valley at its west end. The villagers, however, had fled into the woods. The army caught up and captured many of them while pillaging the surrounding fields for the next two days. More captives were shackled around the neck and chained to the others. They gathered and carried food for the horses.

The next day, when the army was ordered to advance, some crossed a forest; but Bourne translates Rangel's Spanish word "monte", which he used here, as "mountain" instead of "forest," which is also proper translation. At this place in his narrative, Inca describes "a high point" of earth "three pikes high" [54 feet] where the Indians lived. Topography would indicate that both were describing the "mountain" under the Florida State Capitol Building (or one within a mile or so of it, as there are no others in that section of Florida). The village of Uzachil was headquartered there, but the good chief was not to be found. The army spent that night at a pinewood, almost five leagues west of today's Capitol Building by following the course of today's railroad and the Old Spanish Trail to Midway, where they camped. The next night they camped at "Agile" four-and-a-half

leagues up the road, at today's Quincy. John L. Williams called that proximity Tiphulga Indian Reservation as late as 1827 on a Map of the Western Part of Florida. An unhappy female captive there grabbed one of DeSoto's troops in his genitals; he survived, but just barely. The next day, DeSoto, in the vanguard, came to the Apalache Swamp, the Apalachicola River, twelve leagues beyond Uzachil's boundary, the Ochlockonee River. Most of the army would camp two leagues from the Apalache Swamp, then catch up and struggle to cross it for the next several days while camping near it.

The Woodruff dam spans between high banks where DeSoto first sighted the Apalachicola River's mammoth gorge: at today's Chattahoochee. Inca says the banks were half-a-league apart, as they are today, just below the confluence of the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers. With extensive swamps on either side, the river flows around an island at the outlet of North Mosquito Creek on the east bank of the river less than a league below today's dam. Elvas says the river was wider than a crossbow shot there, as it is today despite the upstream dam. Old Florida trails converged at this crossing place on Florida's Original Township Survey and the railroad crosses it there today. Perhaps DeSoto's narrow footpath

through the forest in the river's gorge led to that place. The east bank where DeSoto camped on a plain and the west bank, where he built a stockade, are exactly the same today. It took the army several days to bridge and cross this river. Indian resistance was intense. This mammoth river was the provincial boundary of Apalache; the fourth Indian province DeSoto would "invade" in Florida. Once all had crossed, DeSoto's army left the stockade and proceeded two leagues up the west bank to camp at a village called Ivitachuco, which had been set ablaze just prior to their arrival: today's Sneads. Then the army passed through rich fields to Calahuchi Village, camping just north of today's Cypress. The next day, having lost their only good guide, they came to a deep ravine that was difficult to pass two leagues down the road. They met very heavy resistance from the Apalachens at that ravine, the worst they saw anywhere.

That ravine, with banks over eighty feet above Spring Creek today even though it is dammed below, looks exactly the way it was described then. Spring Creek rises from Blue Spring and flows southwestward into the Chipola River. Pioneer maps show the trail from the crossing place on the Apalachicola River passing north of

Blue Spring just seven leagues from the river, then the trail continues westward to cross the natural bridge of the Chipola River two leagues from the spring. But DeSoto had lost his only good guide "carrying as guide an old Indian woman who got them lost..." Once the fighting was over and the army had all crossed the ravine, they "marched two leagues more through a country without cultivated fields or settlements" then camped. They had marched up and over the high east bank "peninsula" of the Chipola River at Spring Creek then camped at today's Florida Caverns State Park. The Chipola River's branches are beside the park and are clearly illustrated on pioneer maps and labeled "natural bridge" along the Old Spanish Trail; the trail DeSoto had followed from Tallahassee until got misdirected.

The next morning, when the army resumed its march, by fording the Chipola River's "natural bridge" on the Old Spanish Trail, DeSoto proceeded two leagues in advance with the horsemen and a hundred foot soldiers into the principal village of Apalache: Iviahica. All had fled into the woods. Iviahica Village was located just west of today's Marianna, eleven leagues from the Apalachicola River's swamp. DeSoto established his winter headquarters at Iviahica. DeSoto's "monsters" in

Florida's "panhandle" would prove to be the Apalache Swamp and the Great Ravine; our "monster in the panhandle" would prove to be the enduring myth that Tallahassee was the location of Iviahica Apalache. Tallahassee was just another stop along DeSoto's way, which explains the small quantity of archaeological evidence of his presence being found there. As for Tampa Bay, DeSoto was never there.

Paradise

Iviahica Apalache's fields are deep, rich, red mineral sediments nestled between rolling, sandy hills and spring-fed streams. Vegetables grow in profusion there. One look in the fields tells the story of a thousand-year occupation. The fields are strewn with fragments of cultures, which settled and farmed there from time to time. The black farmers who live on Union Road, which cuts through what used to be Iviahica, are a beautiful, hard working and proud people; most of whose ancestors were born there. The setting is rural Alabama; livestock are pastured on several southern-style plantations. Pigs, chickens, beans, squash, corn and insects are abundant. Churches and small cemeteries dot the forested landscape. A village named Webbville is depicted there on pioneer maps where the Old Spanish Trail bends

north into Alabama and the Pensacola Road forks off to the southwest (see the John L. Williams Map of Florida of 1837).

Inca says that Juan de Añasco was dispatched from that place to find the sea just before he was sent back down DeSoto's trail leading the Thirty Lancers. Añasco needed to mark the trees along that seashore in order to find Iviahica Apalache on his return from Ucita in DeSoto's ships. He first rode south to Aute, twelve leagues from Iviahica, today's Econfina. He reported crossing only two small rivers along the way, easy to cross; they are called Econfina and Sweetwater Creeks today. He camped along the way at Compass Lake, the halfway point. Just over two leagues beyond Aute, after crossing a creek up to his horse's pasterns, Añasco came to the head of a bay - today's North Bay, just above St. Andrew Bay. The creek Añasco forded is called Bear Creek today and it, too, is the same with shallow water and a hard bottom. By skirting the bay, Añasco found the place where Narváez built his boats, on the north shore of today's Bayou George.

Añasco found crosses carved in the trees, carcasses of dead horses, and the forge Narváez had built to smelt

nails from stirrups to build his boats. Then, in order to mark the trees for his own return, Añasco followed along the shore of the bay to the sea, which was three leagues away. The Gulf of Mexico is one league south of the harbor's point, today's Panama City, then two leagues out the strait formed by the breaker island where he marked the trees, for a total distance of three leagues to the sea, as he reported. Vaca says Narváez called that strait San Miguel when he sailed through it. Today the breaker island has been cut below Panama City to form a pass for ships, thereby avoiding the shallows at the mouth of the strait which Añasco would report months later on his return from Ucita in DeSoto's ships.

If Narváez had been at Vitachuco and had departed to the south, as suggested earlier, he would have passed over Gum Swamp, East River Pool and the St. Marks River. Then, having been turned west by the Gulf of Mexico, he would have passed a plain (just north of today's Medart), more swamps (the Sopchoppy, Ochlockonee, and New River swamps), and a big stream which he called Magdalena; the Apalachicola River, all as Vaca reported. Just before entering Aute, Narváez came onto planted fields where the enemy fell upon his army. Narváez survived and camped at Aute, today's

Econfina, where the fields to its southeast are still cultivated today. That nine-day trip from "Apalache" to Aute, at a marching rate of four-and-a-half leagues per day, would have totaled just over forty leagues, but the distance along the trails from what DeSoto called Vitachuco to today's Econfina is forty five leagues. If Narváez marched at a rate of five leagues per day, however, he could have traveled that distance along the trails from Vitachuco to Econfina. Narváez could march at that faster rate because he had no livestock to drive.

Vaca reports that during their 280-league trip through Florida, Narváez never saw a mountain. Apparently he bypassed Florida's pride and joy, Tallahassee. DeSoto's people reported that they were the first whites ever seen near the Apalache Swamp, which confirms that Narváez had taken a different route to the bay. Vaca's reported distance traveled through Florida to the bay, 280 leagues, would indicate its estimate along the trails and various diversions, and not along paced and charted lines as was DeSoto's habit.

Narváez camped for several days in Aute (today's Econfina), where Vaca was dispatched on horseback to find an escape route from that hostile country. He rode

down the same trail Añasco would ride to Bayou George. There he found a place favorable for building boats, with cedar, pine, oak, palmetto, shell fish coves and a fresh water stream, but no rocks (see the Township survey of 1831, Bayou George is depicted and described in the Field Notes exactly as Vaca described it). That trail from Aute, about six leagues round trip to the bayou, was ridden many times by Narváez' people to fetch sick men and food from Aute during the time it took them to build the boats.

Since the water in Bayou George is shallow, Narváez had to time his departure on favorable tides. According to modern lunar reports, that is exactly what he did: Narváez completed his boats so they could be launched and maneuvered out of the bay on Spring Tides. That, I believe, was his first wise move in conquest but, no doubt, his last. The timing of the Narváez Florida expedition is, perhaps, the most neglected event in Florida's history, despite the fact that his was the first to travel through Florida. Scholars have ignored several critical activity dates, from the time Narváez landed, in relation to Easter Sunday, to his departure from Florida in shallow draft vessels on the Spring Tide. Narváez would vanish, and his defeat would bolster the

credibility of the Natives who sent him to his demise. Historians would give their lies, recorded by missionaries near Tallahassee years later, credence for centuries.

When Biedma, the King's agent, was at Aute, he pronounced the sea to be nine leagues distant. It is that distance, on a straight line, to the sea from today's Econfina. Notice that Biedma did not say to the "coast" this time. A navigable harbor, such as St. Andrews Bay, was, by definition, a coast. They called that harbor the Bay of Aute. When he was there, Biedma says they had walked one hundred and ten leagues from Ucita. It is exactly that distance, on a straight line across the Gulf of Mexico, from Ucita to the Bay of Aute, the way Añasco was instructed to return in DeSoto's ships; Biedma knew that was the "paced and charted" range they had displaced to the bay since leaving Ucita! DeSoto's cartographers must have been much more talented than his later day trail seekers surmised.

Once Añasco returned from Ucita, Captain Maldonado was dispatched westward along the coast in DeSoto's brigs to find an entrance to the sea at which to meet DeSoto the following year or, barring that, the year after

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that. He found an entrance to the sea, a major river, sixty leagues down the coast at Mobile Bay: the Alabama River. From Iviahica, DeSoto would hike America for almost a year and over a thousand miles before releasing the captives brought from there by Maldonado. Their release point is known to have been above Mobile Bay somewhere on the Alabama River; the captives could, therefore, follow the river back home. DeSoto's precise cartography accounts for that.

DeSoto's "seacoast" route from Ucita, as it was called by the soldiers, shows only two shortcuts available to Añasco when he rode back down it with the Thirty Lancers - 150 leagues of it from Iviahica, as Inca reported. It measures exactly 148 leagues on U.S. Department of Interior Geological Survey 7.5 Minute Series Topographic Maps today. Añasco's object was to avoid potentially hostile villages that DeSoto had deliberately passed through for food and captives on his way up. Añasco's first bypass was just west of today's Dunnellon, where the Lancers took a more southerly course over the Withlacoochee River's flats to the Great Swamp, avoiding the villages on the phosphate ridge near the "Cove" of the Withlacoochee River; cutting off about one league. The Lancers took several females

captive from the outlying fields along that way, and those women would end up in Havana. Añasco's second shortcut bypassed Paracoxi Village to the west. There are no swamps or rivers to preclude that cut-off. In that neighborhood DeSoto had been misled to Tocaste on his way up, adding at least eight leagues to his trip. Añasco proceeded southeast from the Great Swamp, then south from today's Mulberry, saving perhaps another league.

To avoid Mococo's Village, not knowing if Spain still held favor there, Añasco forded the Myakka River between the Myakka Lakes northeast of Mococo Village. In the middle of Myakka Lake State Park, between the two Myakka Lakes, there is a bridge and causeway just south of Myakka Lake where the Lancers forded the river. They captured more Indians there who were engaged in a ceremony of fish baking in the woods, Mococo's people, at moonrise on harvest moon.

You cannot drive as short a course between Ucita and Aute on today's highways; they pass through the cities, the same ones DeSoto passed through. DeSoto had timed the Thirty Lancers departure from Iviahica for Full Moon at their biggest obstacle, the Great Swamp, with harvest moon on either side to enable their long night

passages through that neighborhood. Once at Ucita, where the "rescued" men shouted with joy almost in unison about the gold the army must have found by then, the troops had only one week to march and catch the next full moon at Caliquen, the most populated and dangerous village on their journey to northwest Florida. The men spent that week celebrating with and distributing hardware to Chief Mococo and his people. The army had been introduced to lighter and more effective Indian arrow shielding - long, thick quilted jackets. Excess armor was, therefore, given to Mococo's people and would end up scattered around their village site and be found by Florida's pioneers, who called that place "Old Spanish Fields". On their trip up DeSoto's trail, the men would suffer the loss of several of their own and seven horses, some at the Apalache Swamp, others at the Ravine. All were jubilant to reunite with DeSoto's great army in search of gold and treasures.

At Ucita, Añasco had only one week to catch the next Spring Tide, on the new moon, to pass over Charlotte Harbor's channel shallows. He used the time to careen and load the brigs. That timing was no accident, it was calculated. Only today can we realize DeSoto's genius. DeSoto's trail from Ucita to the bay where Narváez built

his boats was only 173 leagues long (148 leagues traveled by the lancers from Iviahica to Ucita, plus two leagues cut off by Añasco's shortcuts, plus the eight leagues DeSoto marched back and forth below Lake Hancock, plus twelve leagues from Iviahica to Aute, then three more to the bay). Vaca's estimate of 280 leagues traveled by Narváez to the bay probably included scouting for food, plus the distance from his landing site to Ucita, then the greater distance to the Great Swamp on his trail up the east side of the Peace River through Arcadia's rich but scattered phosphate fields. Narváez never got to meet Chief Mococo or his fine people; Mococo's Village was six leagues north of the route Narváez chose to take to Apalache.

The Great Unknown

The trail DeSoto used to leave Florida is still there today and is the most apparent segment of his entire route. It starts at Aute (near Panama City), where a good number of troops spent that winter. DeSoto's exit, however, started at Iviahica (Marianna) with Rangel, his personal secretary. His trail passed through large vegetable fields, along Union Road where the fields are still cultivated today, where the army was ordered to harvest and pack for the long journey ahead.

DeSoto's destination was a land rich in pearls, gold and silver - toward the sun's rising. DeSoto's intelligence of that place came from a young captive, taken at Vitachuco. DeSoto planned to raid that place and return to Maldonado's port (Mobile Bay) the next winter and then settle with additional supplies and personnel brought from Havana. DeSoto had sent scouts out from Iviahica during the winter, but hostile Apalachens once out of range of reinforcement limited their reconnaissance. DeSoto would be the first white man into the next province, an unexplored territory.

Rangel tells us that DeSoto departed on Wednesday, March 3, 1540, and spent that night at the river Gaucuco, then arrived at a great river Capachequi early the following Friday. It took him two days plus part of a third to get to the great river. Elvas says it took his people four days to get there, while Biedma says he marched northward five days to get to the great river. Inca, who does not even mention a starting date or a great river as the others had, says his informant traveled three days to the north, camped on a high peninsula for three days, then marched two days to the provincial boundary. These four different statements

deserve particular attention because they say so much about an army that has been so misunderstood for so long.

Less than four leagues north of Iviahica is a peninsula pointing south at the confluence of two creeks: Marshall and Cowart's Creeks, which merge to become the Chipola River. That peninsula's very high ground, with many fertile fields beyond its trees and swamp on either side, is exactly as Inca described it today, with very deep mud around the point of a high peninsula. That place is called "Sills" on U.S.G.S. maps today (see "Sills Fla.-Ala." quad). Maybe Desoto called its river Gaucuco (today's Chipola River), the first river he would come to after leaving Iviahica. To the northeast of Sills is the river basin's northern "natural bridge", located on today's Alabama-Florida border. That fording place and the trail to it are detailed on the border survey map of 1853 and are still there today.

Desoto marched from Iviahica to Sills the first day, crossing Marshall Creek. The next day he forded the river's branches on Cowart's Creek and rode into Alabama, where he camped just short of the Chattahooche River. He arrived at that great river on

the morning of the third day out of Iviahica. Elvas left Iviahica with DeSoto, but spent an extra day marching at a lesser rate while gathering food and herding pigs. He arrived at the great river the fourth day. Biedma departed from Aute, marched northward for three days to Sills (sixteen leagues), then into today's Alabama to camp, then to the great river - five days on the trail. This lends credence to Biedma's being at Aute when he made the observations mentioned earlier. Inca's informant also departed from Aute, but did so two days before Biedma, arriving at Sills the third day out and gathered food there for the next three days. Then he departed for Alabama, camped, and arrived at the provincial boundary on his eighth day out of Aute and six days after the others started their march. If this scenario is correct, the troops arrived at the great river, the provincial boundary, in this order: DeSoto's group on the third day, Elvas's the fourth day, Biedma's the fifth day, and the Inca's informant on the sixth day.

The great river was the mighty Chattahoochee. It was so large and swift that DeSoto's army had to cross it, in turn, on one large wooden raft. It took five days pulling chains for the entire army to cross. The horses were pulled across by ropes; some of them half-drowned

during the effort. DeSoto had planned the army's arrival times at the great river for good reason; not one man would be idle for as much as a day during the process of moving his army into an unknown continent. That was DeSoto's genius. The chroniclers alluded to it and to their admiration of him throughout their journey. We, however, have misunderstood them and DeSoto all along. He has been America's "Great Unknown" for centuries.

Epilogue

Perhaps the biggest irony of our misunderstanding DeSoto for so long is that we believed the lies of the Indians that Biedma warned us about. He told us, at Vitachuco's Village, that those people told many great lies about the country further inland. Their descendants had told post-DeSoto Spanish Missionaries in Vitachuco Province many great lies about DeSoto and his army wintering in Tallahassee. Narváez had believed their lies and was led to Aute and death. We believed their lies and were led to Tallahassee and ignorance. That tribe's enemy was DeSoto, its credibility and honor came from defeating a foolish Narváez. Those Indians tricked us all except DeSoto; he had Juan Ortiz to sort it out.

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