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Letter of Hernando de Soto
at Tampa Bay to the Justice
and Board of Magistrates
in Santiago de Cuba

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Biographical Note- Hernando De Soto and the Expedition to the Southeastern USA

Hernando de Soto, (ca. 1500-1542) was a Spanish conquistador active in the exploration of Central America and conquest of Peru. His career began in 1519 in Central America with Pedrarias Dávila. On completing the campaign to conquer Peru and sack Cuzco, Soto returned to Spain a wealthy man. Spanish King Charles V sent him to conquer Florida in 1539; he died in 1542 during the expedition.

Soto Expedition to Florida, the American South and Texas, 1539-1543

The King of Spain gave Hernando de Soto the funds and resources to conquer and colonize the American continent. Not knowing the size of North America, the King gave Soto four years to conquer America and locate riches that would entice Spanish settlers and investors to follow. Six-hundred-forty volunteers joined the expedition that left Cuba in 1539. Among them were expert tradesmen that might help settle a new land. Carpenters, merchants, engineers, blacksmiths, priests, and farmers were among Soto's "army." They carried with them all manner of military equipment, as well as seeds, nails, horses, dogs, and pigs. The massive entourage spent four years walking four-thousand miles through the interior of North America but did not establish a settlement. The Soto expedition began in Cuba and moved on to cover territory in what today are the states of Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas. For its exact route during the four-year journey, see the reference map accessible from this document's home page.

From his campaigns against the Inca in Peru, Soto had earned a reputation for killing Indians as sport, and his North American expedition was among the most savage on record. Soto's army brutalized and enslaved Indians they encountered all across the southeast, killing thousands and spreading disease throughout the native populations. Many nations first observed on this trip were decimated by diseases introduced during their first contact with Europeans.

Overcome with fever in the third year of the trip, Soto died in May 1542 on the banks of the Mississippi River. Before dying, he conferred command of the expedition to Luys de Moscoso. Moscoso hid Soto's death from the local Indians because Soto had told them that he was immortal, but when Indian servants became curious about a fresh grave, Moscoso had unearthed the explorer's body, wrapped it in cloth, weighted it with sand, and sunk it in the river.

Once in control of the expedition, Moscoso tried to discover the fastest route home. Indian guides, however, led the Spanish into the wastes of east Texas in the hope that they would be lost and then starve. Moscoso managed to find his way back to the Mississippi where the expedition built seven small ships in six months. The remaining Spaniards and their animals then set sail downriver. As they progressed, groups of Indians in large canoes attacked them. When the Spanish sent boats with soldiers to repulse these attacks, the Indians ditched the Spaniards' boats, beat them with wooden clubs, and then drowned the armor-clad soldiers. The Indians then followed a bowshot behind the ships and patiently shot the Spaniards with arrows. Up to fifty canoes followed the Spaniards, attacking them day and night. The Spanish finally reached the mouth of the Mississippi River and headed west. They sailed into the Rio Panico, Mexico, on September 10, 1543, with only 300 men remaining from the original 640.

Letter from Soto to the Cuban Magistrates

This letter describes his departure from Cuba May 18, 1539, and his arrival in Florida in June. He recounts that when they arrived on the bay, the local Indians abandoned the region, permitting

establishment of an outpost. Soto learned that a Christian held by one of the neighboring chiefs might be a helpful translator, so he tracked this person down in the Florida interior. Once acquired, the Indian became a loyal translator of the various languages and dialects spoken by the tribes in northern Florida. The letter directs the Spanish to complete the erection of a fort on Tampa Bay at Espiritu Santo, and is dated July 9, 1539.

LETTER OF DE SOTO

LETTER OF HERNANDO DE SOTO AT
TAMPA BAY TO THE JUSTICE AND
BOARD OF MAGISTRATES IN SAN-
TIAGO DE CUBA.¹

VERY NOBLE GENTLEMEN:

THE being in a new country, not very distant indeed from that where you are, still with some sea between, a thousand years appear to me to have gone by since any thing has been heard from you; and although I left some letters written at Havana, to go off in three ways, it is indeed long since I have received one. However, since opportunity offers by which I may send an account of what it is always my duty to give, I will relate what passes, and I believe will be welcome to persons I know favourably, and are earnest for my success.

I took my departure from Havana with all my armament on Sunday, the XVIIIth of May, although I wrote that I should leave on the XXVth of the month. I anticipated the day, not to lose a favourable wind, which changed, nevertheless, for calms, upon our getting into the Gulf; still these were not so continuous as to prevent our casting anchor on this coast, as we did at the end of eight

¹Translated by Buckingham Smith.

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days, which was on Sunday, the festival of Espiritu Santo.

Having fallen four or five leagues below the port, without any one of my pilots being able to tell where we were, it became necessary that I should go in the brigantines and look for it. In doing so, and in entering the mouth of the port, we were detained three days; and likewise because we had no knowledge of the passage—a bay that runs up a dozen leagues or more from the sea—we were so long delayed that I was obliged to send my Lieutenant-General, Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa, in the brigantines, to take possession of a town at the end of the bay. I ordered all the men and horses to be landed on a beach, whence, with great difficulty, we went on Trinity Sunday to join Vasco Porcallo. The Indians of the coast, because of some fears of us, have abandoned all the country, so that for thirty leagues not a man of them has halted.

At my arrival here I received news of there being a Christian in the possession of a Cacique, and I sent Baltazar de Gallegos, with XL men of the horse, and as many of the foot, to endeavour to get him. He found the man a day's journey from this place, with eight or ten Indians, whom he brought into my power. We rejoiced no little over him,

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for he speaks the language; and although he had forgotten his own, it directly returned to him. His name is Juan Ortíz, an hidalgo, native of Sevilla.

In consequence of this occurrence, I went myself for the Cacique, and came back with him in peace. I then sent Baltazar de Gallegos, with eighty lancers, and a hundred foot-soldiers, to enter the country. He has found fields of maize, beans, and pumpkins, with other fruits, and provision in such quantity as would suffice to subsist a very large army without its knowing a want. Having been allowed, without interruption, to reach the town of a Cacique named Urripacoxit, master of the one we are in, also of many other towns, some Indians were sent to him to treat for peace. This, he writes, having been accomplished, the Cacique failed to keep certain promises, whereupon he seized about XVII persons, among whom are some of the principal men; for in this way, it appears to him, he can best secure a performance. Among those he detains are some old men of authority, as great as can be among such people, who have information of the country farther on. They say that three days' journey from where they are, going by some towns and huts, all well inhabited, and having many maize-fields, is a large town called Acuera, where

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with much convenience we might winter; and that afterwards, farther on, at the distance of two days' journey, there is another town, called Ocale. It is so large, and they so extol it, that I dare not repeat all that is said. There is to be found in it a great plenty of all the things mentioned; and fowls, a multitude of turkeys, kept in pens, and herds of tame deer that are tended. What this means I do not understand, unless it be the cattle, of which we brought the knowledge with us. They say there are many trades among that people, and much intercourse, an abundance of gold and silver, and many pearls. May it please God that this may be so; for of what these Indians say I believe nothing but what I see, and must well see; although they know, and have it for a saying, that if they lie to me it will cost them their lives. This interpreter puts a new life into us, in affording the means of our understanding these people, for without him I know not what would become of us. Glory be to God, who by His goodness has directed all, so that it appears as if He had taken this enterprise in His especial keeping, that it may be for His service, as I have supplicated, and do dedicate it to Him.

I sent eighty soldiers by sea in boats, and my General by land with XL. horsemen, to fall upon a throng of some thousand Indians,

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or more, whom Juan de Añasco had discovered. The General got back last night, and states that they fled from him; and although he pursued them, they could not be overtaken, for the many obstructions in the way. On our coming together we will march to join Baltazar de Gallegos, that we may go thence to pass the winter at the Ocale, where, if what is said to be true, we shall have nothing to desire. Heaven be pleased that something may come of this that shall be for the service of our Divine Master, and whereby I may be enabled to serve Your Worships, and each of you, as I desire, and is your due.

Notwithstanding my continual occupation here, I am not forgetful of the love I owe to objects at a distance; and since I may not be there in person, I believe that where you, Gentlemen, are, there is little in which my presence can be necessary. This duty weighs upon me more than every other, and for the attentions you will bestow, as befits your goodness, I shall be under great obligations. I enjoin it upon you, to make the utmost exertions to maintain the repose and well-being of the public, with the proper administration of justice, always reposing in the Licentiate, that every thing may be so done in accordance with law, that God and the King may be served, myself gratified, and every one be

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content and pleased with the performance of his trust, in such a manner as you, Gentlemen, have ever considered for my honour, not less than your own, although I still feel that I have the weight thereof, and bear the responsibility.

As respects the bastion which I left begun, if labouring on it have been neglected, or perhaps discontinued, with the idea that the fabric is not now needed, you, Gentlemen, will favour me by having it finished, since every day brings change; and although no occasion should arise for its employment, the erection is provident for the well-being and safety of the town: an act that will yield me increased satisfaction, through your very noble personages.

That our Lord may guard and increase your prosperity is my wish and your deserving.

In this town and Port of Espiritu Santo, in the Province of Florida, July the IX., in the year 1539.

The servant of you, Gentlemen,
EL ADELANTADO DON HERNANDO DE SOTO.

This document, which exists in copy only, written in a firm, clear hand, is to be found in the *Archivo de Indias*, and doubtless is that which accompanied the letter of the Licentiate Bartolomé Ortiz, dated at Santiago, the eighth day of Novem-

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ber, 1539, addressed to the Emperor and Council of the Indias. In it he says:

“ Directly as the Governor left here I fell sick in bed, and remained so three months, on which account I could not finish the bastion and bulwark he commenced. * * * It may be a month since the Governor of this Island wrote from the Port of Espiritu Santo to the Board of this City, stating his arrival in Florida, and its occurrences, a copy of which I send. He strongly urges the completion of the bastion at this port, but the magistrates oppose it; and, contrary to my commands, have ordered the assessment to cease, which is necessary for this purpose, and the following up of the wild Indians. * * * ”

Notwithstanding the character in which the letter of the Adelantado is copied, the transcript seems to be faulty in omissions, and affords several evident mistakes of words.

PROPOSED ROUTE OF THE DE SOTO EXPEDITION

Based on the Charles Hudson Map of 1997

deSoto till death
 Moscoso to Texas
 Moscoso to Mexico

