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NARVAEZ AND DE SOTO

THEIR LANDING PLACES AND THE TOWN OF
ESPIRITO SANTO

But little is known of Ponce de Leon's two voyages to Florida. It is said that the first time he landed somewhere between the present Jacksonville and New Smyrna. We have no knowledge as to where he was defeated by the Indians when he came the second time.

After Ponce de Leon came Narvaez in 1528. We have quite a full account of his expedition, written by his Treasurer, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca. From this history we are able to definitely know where Narvaez found a landing place.

Nunez' story has been four times translated into English. Mrs. Fanny Bandelier of New York City, made the last translation from a copy of the original publication printed in 1542, that is now in the Lenox Library of that city. The book was published in 1904, as one of the Trail Makers Series of American Explorers.

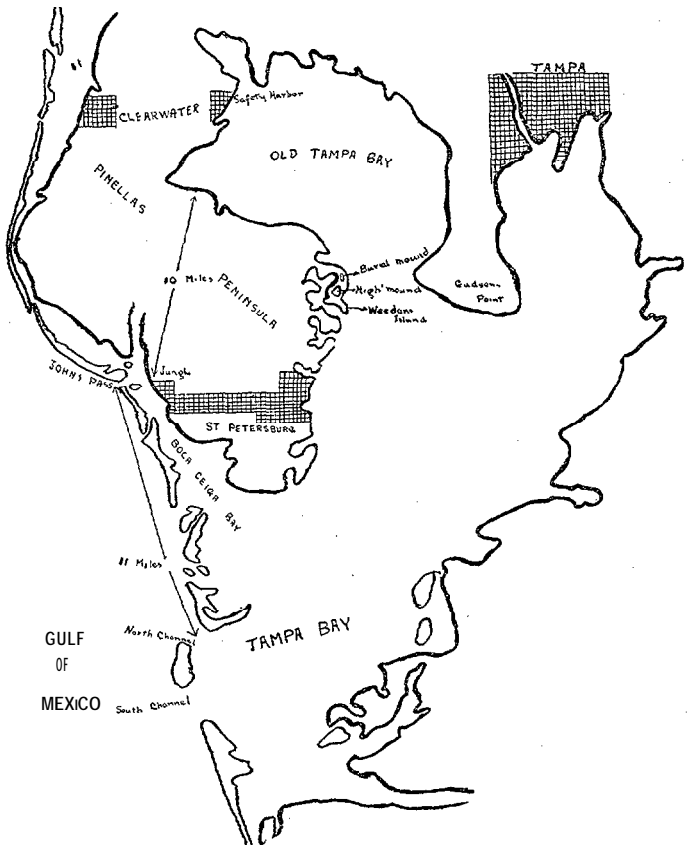
The historian described the start from Spain, the troubles of the winter spent in the West Indies; and follows with the journey to our shore. I shall quote a few passages from the story, relative to their landing place.

"We coasted the way of Florida and on Holy Thursday, cast anchor at the mouth of a bay at the head of which we saw certain houses or habitations of Indians."

The outline map of Tampa Bay and vicinity, printed herewith, follows the shore lines as given by the chart of Tampa Bay published by the United States Coast Survey. The pilot of the expedition, Miruelo, had, evidently, some knowledge of this bay but failed to notice the channels by which it is entered, and passing by it, entered into Boca Ceiga Bay through John's Pass. This bay is here about a mile and a half wide. Just within the bay is an island on which is a shell mound. On the eastern shore of the bay opposite the Pass are large shell

mounds. On account of the dense tropical growth there it is locally known, in St. Petersburg, as the "Jungle". Standing on the dock at the Jungle one can look across the bay and through John's Pass see the Gulf of Mexico.

I continue the author's story, "On that same day the Clerk Alonzo Enriquez went to an island in the Bay and called the Indians who came to him and were with him a good while and by way of exchange gave him fish and venison. The day following, which was Good Friday [April 15, 1528] the Governor landed with as many men



TAMPA BAY AND ADJACENT GULF SHORES

as his small boats would hold and as we arrived at the huts or houses we had seen we found them deserted, the Indians having fled in the night in their canoes.

“After another day the Governor resolved to penetrate inland to explore the country and see what it contained. We went with him, the Commissary, the Inspector and myself, with forty men and six horses. We took the direction of the north and at the hours of vespers reached a very large bay which appeared to sweep very far inland. After remaining there that night we returned to the place where the vessels were.”

One of the ships had failed to arrive. One of the smaller vessels was sent to look for this ship, to look for the harbor which they had missed and if not found to go to Havanna for supplies. It is probable that Juan Ortiz was on this boat and that it returned after Narvaez and his force had left for the north. Ortiz and three others from the vessel were taken prisoners by the Indians.

Continuing the account the author writes, “We again penetrated inland the same persons as before, with some more men. We followed the shore of the Bay and after a march of four leagues captured four Indians, and they led us to their village at the end of the Bay nearby.”

The Spanish league in use at that time is two and six-tenths of our miles. Using the scale on the Gulf Coast Survey's chart we find that it is ten miles from the Jungle to the west end of the Bay which is north of the Jungle.

Old Tampa Bay at which they arrived after crossing the Pinellas Peninsula is twelve miles in its greatest length and they were not able to see the eastern shore. There is a shell mound a little north of the west end of the Bay.

Narvaez called a council of his officers on May first and it was decided that they would move north overland to the supposed port which they believed they had not found. The ships were sent north to meet the soldiers

at the harbor. As to what befell Narvaez on this journey is no part of this story. Suffice it to say that eight years later Nunez and three companions reached Mexico from whence the historian went to Spain and there wrote the book.

I have one other quotation to make. He writes it as a postscript after he had completed and signed his name to the account of his travels. It is as follows, "Since in the foregoing narrative I have related the journey, the arrival and the departure from the country and return to this realm, I now wish to tell what happened to the ships and to the people on them. After our return we learned of everything that occurred to them. The vessels set sail and went on but did not find the port in the direction they were proceeding so turned back where, five leagues [thirteen miles] further down from our landing place they struck the harbor. It stretched inland for seven or eight leagues and was the one we had already discovered. The water is six fathoms deep at its mouth and five fathoms near the shore. Its distance from it to Havanna is one hundred leagues, on a line from north to south."

It is eleven miles from John's Pass to the north channel of Tampa Bay and fourteen miles to the south channel. The chart shows fully as much water as he relates.

Narvaez anchored at the mouth of and near the head of a small bay across which he could see houses. He went to the north about eleven miles to a large bay, there crossing a peninsula. No place other than the one given can be found on the shores of Florida that will match this very clear history of the earliest known landing place of white men on the shores of our country.

Eleven years later came DeSoto with authority to conquer and settle Florida. He named the bay, Espirito Santo, a name it retained until after the United States built Fort Brooke at its eastern extremity. On the shore

of that portion of the bay, called Old Tampa Bay, he made the first settlement that was made on the soil of the present United States. He gave the town the same name as the bay, Espirito Santo. "It was so called from the first", wrote Ranjal.

There are four accounts of the coming of DeSoto. Three of them by men who were with him on the expedition. These three are grouped in a two volume work by Bourne. The story of Rodrigo Ranjal, DeSoto's Secretary, is there given in English for the first time.

The fourth account was written about fifty years after the expedition, by Garcilaso de la Vega. It is included in Shipp's history of DeSoto.

Considering these four writings as a whole, and reconciling their differences as far as we are able, we learn that DeSoto sailed into shallow water and anchored his vessels a league from the shore. Five days later, on the thirtieth of May, he landed his troops. DeSoto, on the same day in one of the smaller vessels, sailed five miles farther and took possession of an Indian town of seven or eight houses, from which the inhabitants had fled. In the town was a high mound "built by hand for defense". At the other end of the town was another mound on which there was a temple.

The following day the soldiers started overland for the town. The march required more than a day "by reason of the great inlets that extended out from the bay".

Several places have been named as DeSoto's landing place. One author says Gadsen's Point, another Tampa, and another thinks Safety Harbor was the location.

We know that it was near Narvaez landing place. The Chief Hirrighua who captured Ortiz and who was so cruelly misused by Narvaez was asked to visit DeSoto. He refused to do so, saying that all he wanted of the Spaniards was their heads. When Ortiz escaped from this chief, in one night's travel he reached the town of

Chief Mucoco, with whom he lived for eight years. When DeSoto asked Ortiz if he knew of any place where gold could be obtained he replied that he had never been ten leagues away. It follows that he had never been to the south side of the bay and we are limited to the north side in our search.

Five miles north of St. Petersburg there is a peninsula that is known locally as Weedon's Island. On it is a high mound that covers nearly an acre. Its broad summit is forty feet above the water of the bay. A cut was made into this mound the past winter and it was found that at least the upper twenty feet is artificial, being made of alternate layers of shells and soil. It is "a high mound built by hand". About forty rods farther from the bay is another elevation that was found to be a burial mound. From it, the past winter, representatives of the Smithsonian Institution exhumed over four hundred more or less perfect skeletons.

The three bayous between this peninsula and St. Petersburg fill the requirements of "great inlets extending out from the Bay". In the rear of these bayous are seven lakes, and the land is low and in places marshy. It is easy to see that it would be difficult to move an army over this ground as no road had been built. I can find no other location on the shore of Tampa Bay that will agree with the facts as given by the historians.

On the arrival of the soldiers at the town the trees nearby were cut down and the soldiers built houses. The ships were floated up by the tide as the bay is shallow and the channel too narrow for sailing by inexperienced pilots. The supplies were placed in the Indians' houses and the larger vessels were sent to Havana to be sold. Gardens were planted and attempts were made to make friends of the Indians.

DeSoto remained at Espirito Santo for six weeks. He started the middle of July on an exploring trip to the north, leaving a force of about one hundred at the village

under an officer named Caleron and leaving also sufficient provision for two years. By November he had reached a good harbor in a fertile country, probably at Apalachicola Bay.

There was no good reason for continuing the settlement at Espirito Santo. Nothing had been found there that would be of any use to the Spaniards excepting game and fish. Of the five nearby Indian tribes, four were in a fierce opposition. DeSoto decided to abandon the town. He sent a message to Caleron to send the ships north, to give the friendly Chief Mucoco such supplies as could not be moved and to march north to join him. Thus ended the town of Espirito Santo which antedated by twenty-three years the coming of the French to Fort Caroline, by twenty-six years the settlement of St. Augustine and by forty-six years the English settlement at Roanoke Island.

Dr. L. R. Weedon of Tampa was the first to suggest that DeSoto landed on the peninsula. He purchased the property as a place for recreation for his sons and friends, reaching it by a launch from Port Tampa.

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