

# Florida Historical Quarterly

---

Volume 44  
Number 1 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 44,  
Number 1 & 2

Article 6

---

1965

## Note About the Birthplace of Hernando de Soto

el Conde de Canilleros



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

de Canilleros, el Conde (1965) "Note About the Birthplace of Hernando de Soto," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 44: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol44/iss1/6>

## NOTE ABOUT THE BIRTHPLACE OF HERNANDO DE SOTO

by EL CONDE DE CANILLEROS  
*translated and edited by* URSULA LAMB

**D**ON MIGUEL MUNOZ DE SAN PEDRO, Conde de Canilleros y de San Miguel, member of the Spanish Royal Academy of History in Madrid, is the foremost authority writing on the lives of men from Extremadura province who linked the old world to the new. He comes to this interest by virtue of descent from an ancient house which has been present in the "American Enterprise" since the time of Columbus. The palace in which the Conde lives was built by his ancestor Diego de Ovando, brother of Spain's first royal governor in America, Frey Nicolas de Ovando, who was sent to Espanola by the Catholic kings in 1502. There are many other illustrious men of the conquest and colonial period in Hispanic America among his forebears, and he possesses a remarkable family archive. A catalogue of one part has recently been published by D. Antonio Rodriguez-Monino: *Catalogo de Memoriales presentados al Real Consejo de Indias, 1626-1630* (Madrid, 1953). See also Lino Gomez Canedo, *Los Archivos de la Historia de America, Periodo Colonial Espanol*. 2 vols. (Mexico D.F., 1961), I, "Archivos Familiares," 245.

A special concern of the Conde has been the promotion of the growing activity in the municipal archives and other deposits of papers and historical treasures in all of Extremadura. His publications are as numerous as they are varied, and he has brought light to many obscure recesses of the American past. A bibliography of his works would overburden this note on de Soto, but for its readers the following items might be of special interest: The biography of *Diego Garcia de Paredes*, Extremadura's classic hero (Espasa Calpe, *Grandes Biografias*, Madrid, 1946 and later eds.); the richly illustrated book called *Extremadura* (Madrid, 1961) which is the portrait of the province through its historic monuments, and his recent edition (the first in Spanish) of the ac-

count of the gentleman of Elvas, the companion of de Soto in Florida: *El Fidalgo de Elvas, Relacion* (Buenos Aires, 1952; Madrid, 1954). The Conde de Canilleros' scholarly assessment of the discrepancies concerning de Soto's birthplace appeared in the *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia*, Vol. CLI, Cuad. II (1962), 353-58.

\* \* \* \*

This note about Hernando de Soto's birthplace is due to the inquiries about him by a group of American visitors from Florida. The following statement is an evaluation of the data on this subject.

That Hernando de Soto might have been born in Villanueva de Barcarrota, as has been said, is an assumption based on the *Historia de la Florida* by the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega. In that work appears a casual note without documentary or bibliographical proof, saying merely that Hernando de Soto brought from Peru the sum of a hundred thousand ducats with which he could buy in his native town, which was Villanueva de Barcarrota, much more land. A similar note appears later in the text.

This is the only mention of Barcarrota as Hernando de Soto's birthplace and it is without a shred of documentary support. It was simply copied by Herrera and Solano de Figueroa. Nevertheless, as this statement remained uncorrected through subsequent centuries, it was finally accepted as correct. One writer copied it from another, and in the past century it received its official confirmation, so to speak, by default.

The main defender of this hypothesis in the past century was D. Luis Villanueva y Canedo, a native of Barcarrota and a Senator. He was a prominent person of great influence and dignity, as well as a serious amateur historian, devoted to the history of his native province. He became a correspondent of the Royal Historical Society and vice-president of the provincial monuments commission of Badajoz.

The first result of his local patriotism was the erection in 1866 in Barcarrota of a statue to Hernando de Soto; his second contribution was the publication of his *Estudio Biografico* about the Florida hero, published in 1892, in which he dedicated his efforts to establishing Barcarrota as the birthplace of de Soto.

An impartial study requires, first of all, an assessment of Garcilaso's statement, the only one which mentions Barcarrota. Garcilaso was, without doubt, a serious and truthful author whose works are of primary importance for his native Peru. As for Florida, although his contribution is valuable, one must remember that he based his book on references to other works, as he himself admitted when he mentioned a mysterious source whose name he does not give. Moreover, he writes at some chronological distance from the facts. Hernando de Soto died in 1541, and the work of the Inca was written in 1587, forty-five years later; it was published in 1605.

Another chronicler who participated in the expedition to Florida and who is therefore a more immediate source, was the Fidalgo de Elvas, whose *Relacion* was published in Portuguese at Evora in the year 1557, during the lifetime of its author. This work, which points elsewhere for the birthplace of the illustrious Adelantado says: "the captain de Soto was the son of a Squire of Jerez de Badajoz" which was the name of the city of Jerez de los Caballeros.

This fact, although known to scholars, did not gain currency in Spain, because the text of the *Relacion* remained untranslated until only recently when I brought out the Spanish text for the first time in Buenos Aires in 1952 (and a second edition in Madrid in 1954). There are therefore two pieces of different data, one an inference and one the report of a personal witness. These form all the extant bibliographical material since all subsequent statements are only copies.

There is, however, further and more explicit documentary material concerning de Soto which has been ignored for centuries until after the appearance of the work of D. Luis Villanueva in 1929, the year in which Solar and Rujula published their book: *El Adelantado Hernando de Soto*. These authors did not hesitate, in view of the documents, to preface their book with the following dedication: "To the very noble and loyal city Jerez de los Caballeros, cradle of the celebrated Adelantado Hernando de Soto."

I expressed the same opinion in my two editions of *El Fidalgo de Elvas* and in my book *Extremadura*, where after a description of the statue to Hernando de Soto I add this commentary: "Due

to an error this monument was erected to a famous man presumed to be a son of the town, but the fact is that the documents do not permit repetition of the statement that this hero, one of the gods of Extremaduran mythology, was born here, but rather that he was born in Jerez de los Caballeros."

Let us see what the documents have to say about this question. The first is the record of the Adelantado's admission to the Order of Santiago, which is preserved in the National Historical Archive, classified as number 7.855. It is dated "Santiago 1538, El Adelantado Hernando de Soto, native of Jerez."

The royal *Cedula* of the Emperor Charles V, given at Valladolid on the 28th of March, 1538, commanding that proof of nobility be given, states that such proof would be found "in the city of Badajoz, where the said Adelantado Hernando de Soto is said to have been born."

His birthplace in Badajoz is vouched for by witnesses who say, that the father was from Jerez de los Caballeros and the mother from Badajoz, and that the couple had residences in both places. I should like to mention in this context that the authentic and complete name of Hernando was Mendez de Soto, although he never used the Mendez.

On the 13th and 14th of April, 1538, before the priest of Colon, in the domain of the *Maestrazgo* of Santiago, Don Juan de Mexia, nine witnesses were heard and their testimony registered. All of them stated that they were personally acquainted with Hernando de Soto and had known his parents before their death. Three deponents, Alvaro Romo, Alonso Gonzalez and Alonso de Medina, said that they knew them well and that they had "seen and met them and conversed with them." (*de vista y trata e conversacion*). This is therefore valuable testimony given by well informed persons living in the same locality. Suero Vasquez de Moscoso, a regidor of Badajoz makes the following statement: "that he knew the said Adelantado Don Hernando de Soto and that he was born in the town of Jerez."

Another witness, Hernando de Leon, while testifying to his acquaintance with de Soto said: "I knew the father and the mother of the said adelantado whose names were respectively, Francisco Mendez and Leonor Arias, and I knew that they lived in this city of Badajoz and in the city of Jerez," and he added

that he did not know anything about de Soto's paternal grandparents, except that he had heard it said that they came from Jerez. Hernando Romo insisted that "the father was born in the city of Jerez," a fact confirmed by Alonso Gonzalez, Alonso Romo, Alonso de Medina and Ruy Sanchez de Aronja. The last named, who was seventy years old, corroborated this testimony by saying that he knew this "because this witness is himself from Xerez and lives now in the city of Badajoz."

Another document to be considered, which is kept in the Archivo General de Indias (Papeles de Justicia, 750) is the record of a dowry (*dote y arras*) brought by Dona Isabel de Bobadilla in Valladolid Nov. 14th, 1536, before the secretary Domingo de Santa Maria. The said lady was then the widow of the governor of Panama, Pedrarias Davila, and mother of the other Dona Isabel de Bobadilla who contracted marriage with Hernando de Soto, who was a sister of the wife of Vasco Nunez de Balboa, another famous son of Jerez de los Caballeros. For our subject this document is much less important than the previous one but I must not omit the following passage: "you, the captain Hernando de Soto, who are now at this court, born in and resident of the city of Badajoz. . . ." In view of the contents of the document of the Order of Santiago there can be no doubt that in the passage just cited de Soto's origin was simply deduced from his present place of residence.

Finally we have another decisive document, also kept in the Archive of the Indies in the same place: the will given by de Soto in San Cristobal de la Habana before secretary Francisco Cepero on May 13th, 1539. Its opening provision reads as follows:

"First, I order that if God removes me from this present life -if it were by sea - I command that my body should be so kept that it could be carried ashore where our Lord should be served to let them make port, and if there should be a church, or a church were to be built, that there it should be deposited until such time as arrangements could be made to send it to Spain, to the city of Jerez near Badajoz, where it should be buried in the sepulchre where my mother is buried; and I order that in the said church of San Miguel there be bought with funds from my property a site for a chapel to be built, dedicated to our Lady of the Conception."

There follow a number of provisions about the endowment of the chapel, and its chaplaincy, with details concerning the objects to be bought, masses to be said, and the choice of patrons and chaplains. De Soto's interest in this chapel in Jerez resulted in such clauses as:

"Item: I order that the bodies of my father and mother, whether in Badajoz or elsewhere away from this chapel, shall be fetched thence and carried to this said chapel, where they shall be buried where my body has been or is to be laid to rest."

Further he endowed with dowries the orphan girls of his line, and should there be none, orphan girls, the poorest in the town of Jerez near Badajoz, with details which are repeated twice. From this will his predilection for the city of Jerez is perfectly clear.

These are all the bibliographical and documentary data in existence: One chronicler, Garcilaso, mentions the town of Barcarrota; another El Fidalgo de Elvas, mentions Jerez; the documents unanimously refer to the latter city as well as to Badajoz, and do not mention Barcarrota at all.

The conclusion is plain: The birth of Hernando de Soto in Jerez de los Caballeros is beyond doubt.<sup>1</sup> Because of local patriotism someone might - though unsuccessfully - speak up in defense of Badajoz. But, what cannot be said under any circumstances, is that the cradle of de Soto was Barcarrota, a locality with which the Adelantado never had the slightest connection, either by birth or descent, or did any of his family ever live there.

---

<sup>1</sup> A recently examined document in the *Archivo General de Indias* clinches the argument in favour of Jerez de los Caballeros as the birthplace of Hernando de Soto. In the *informacion* of services given by Lopez Velez at Sevilla in May of 1536, Hernando de Soto in person testifies over his signature and Rubric that he was: born in Jerez, or to quote: "natural de Xerez cerca de Badajoz."