

HERNANDO DE SOTO



Hernando De Soto was born in Spain in 1500. As a young boy he loved adventure. He heard stories of secret cities in North America that had large amounts of gold and silver. These stories were from another Spanish explorer named de Vaca. One of de Vaca's stories was of the *Seven Cities of Cibola*. De Soto was overcome with greed because of these rumored riches.

In 1531, De Soto traveled to Peru with Francisco Pizarro. He was part of Pizarro's conquest of the Inca Empire. He remained in Peru for two years.

In 1533, the King of Spain appointed De Soto to be the governor of Cuba. He was given the right to conquer and settle territory in the southeastern part of North America. This area was from Florida north to the Chesapeake Bay and south to northeastern Mexico.

De Soto landed on the western coast of Florida in 1539 with 600 men and 200 horses. He crossed the Appalachian Mountains, reached the Mississippi River, and then headed for the Ozark Mountains further west. He hoped to find gold and silver. Six months later he had found no riches. He turned back and sailed down the Mississippi to its mouth, the Gulf of Mexico.

During the four years De Soto and his men searched for gold and silver, he brutally killed many Native Americans from different tribes in the area—the Cherokee, Seminole, Creek, Appalachian, and Choctaw. De Soto often captured native leaders. Sometimes he kept them as hostages until he and his men made it safely through the territory. Other times he would cut off prisoners' right hands and noses and send them back to their tribes as a warning. De Soto and his men entered into violent battles with the natives. Sometimes he and his men massacred them and burnt their villages. Diseases brought by the Spaniards killed many villages of Native Americans, too.

In May 1542 De Soto became ill with a fever and died. He was first buried secretly on the shores of the Mississippi River. However, his men were afraid that the Native Americans would discover his grave. His men dug him up, weighted his body with sand, and buried him in the Mississippi River. He died without ever finding treasure in his new territory. Only about 300 of the original 600 men in de Soto's expedition survived.