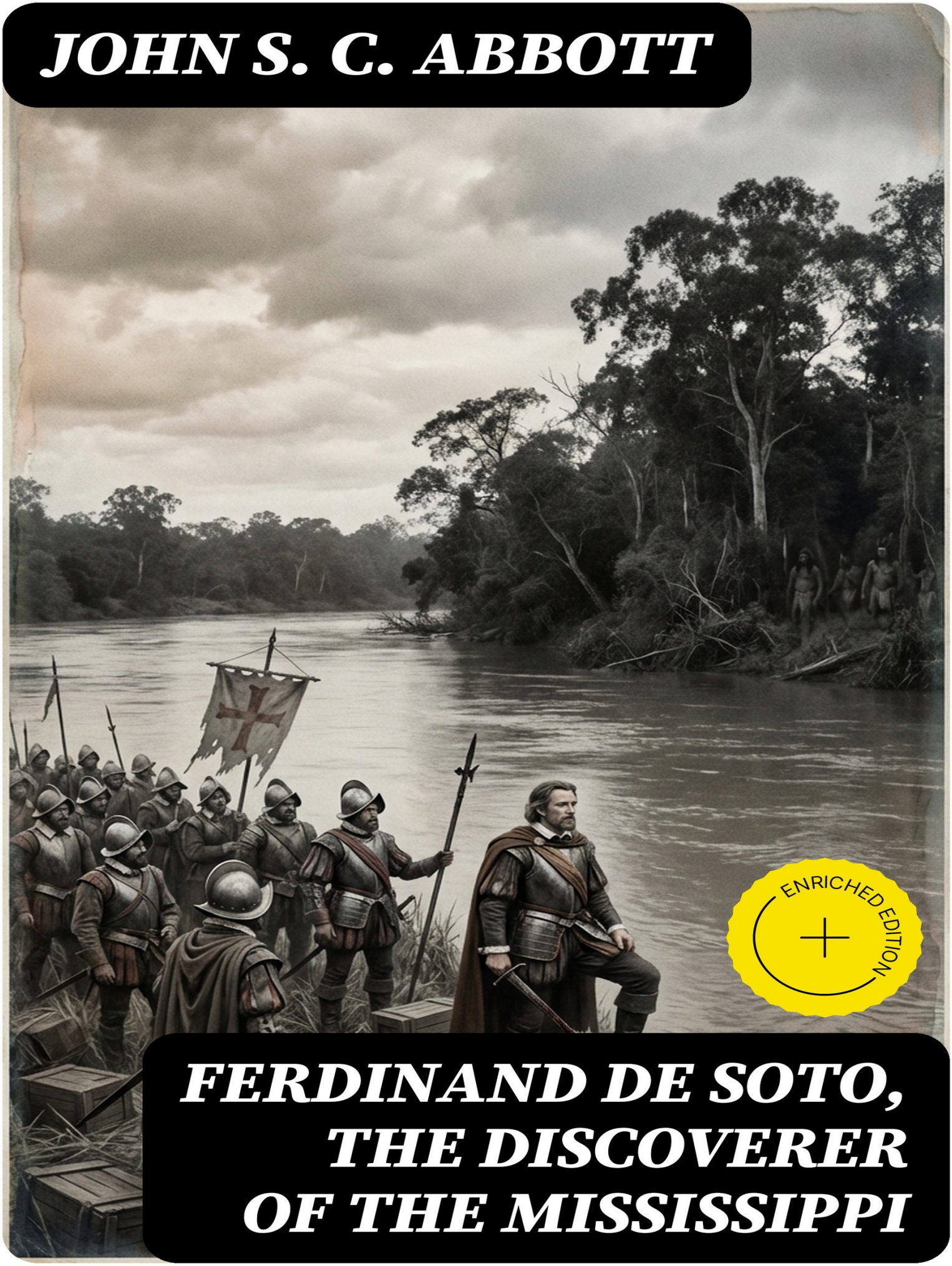
JOHN S. C. ABBOTT



ENRICHED EDITION

# FERDINAND DE SOTO, THE DISCOVERER OF THE MISSISSIPPI

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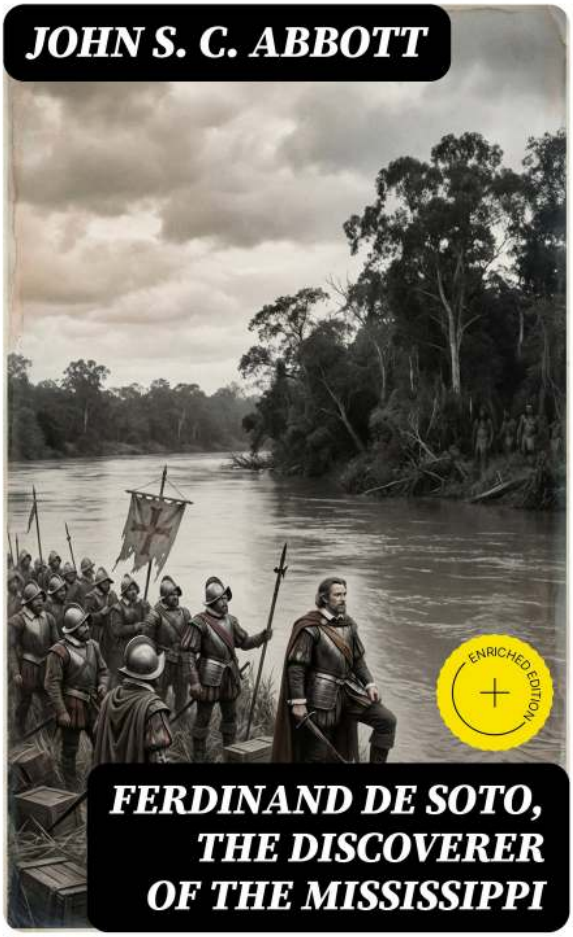


# FERDINAND DE SOTO, THE DISCOVERER OF THE MISSISSIPPI

**John S. C. Abbott**

# Ferdinand De Soto, The Discoverer of the Mississippi

**Enriched edition. American Pioneers and Patriots**

*Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Tyler Ashford*

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# Introduction

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This narrative traces the perilous boundary where exploration’s promise collides with conquest’s cost. John S. C. Abbott’s Ferdinand De Soto, The Discoverer of the Mississippi is a nineteenth-century American work of narrative history that follows the sixteenth-century campaigns of a Spanish expedition through the Caribbean and the vast woodlands and river systems of what is now the southeastern United States. Blending biography with historical chronicle, Abbott situates De Soto within the era of transatlantic ventures and imperial rivalry, using episodes from his career to frame the motives, risks, and moral ambiguities that attend ambitious journeys into largely unknown terrains for readers of his century.

Composed in a period when popular histories sought to instruct as well as entertain, the book reads as an accessible chronicle informed by the author’s interest in character and consequence. Abbott’s prose is direct and descriptive, attentive to place, and inclined to moral reflection typical of nineteenth-century historical writing in the United States. The narrative voice guides readers steadily across changing scenes and hazards without scholarly apparatus, favoring momentum and clarity over exhaustive citation. The result is a cohesive, scene-driven account that invites a general audience to consider how leadership, fortune, and faith steer events even when the ground itself remains unmapped.

At its core lies the ascent of a determined soldier of fortune who, after hard campaigns in the New World, organizes one of the most ambitious overland expeditions in early North American history. Abbott presents the gathering of ships, horses, and men; the hopes attached to royal sanction; and the moment of landfall on Florida’s shores as the opening of a vast geographical and moral trial. The premise is straightforward: a commander seeks glory and discovery while testing his companions’ endurance and his own judgment, and the continent answers with distance, weather, unfamiliar societies, and the stubborn opacity of its interior.

The reading experience moves from coastal embarkation to deep-forest marches and broad waterways, emphasizing logistics, negotiation, and the shifting alliances required to proceed at all. Abbott sketches Indigenous polities as consequential actors whose choices shape the expedition’s course, and he tracks the effects of hunger, rumor, and imperfect maps on decision-making. Without lingering on technical minutiae, he evokes terrain, climate, and uncertainty, allowing episodes to build into a sustained sense of precarious progress. The tone remains formal yet vivid, balancing measured sympathy for daring with clear acknowledgment of the violence and coercion that often accompanied such ventures.

Several themes recur with force: the magnetism and peril of ambition, the fragile contract between leaders and followers, and the costly misunderstandings that arise when cultures meet under arms. Abbott also explores the limits of knowledge in a world pieced together by hearsay and

hurried reconnaissance, where success depends on reading landscapes and intentions that resist ready interpretation. Alongside courage and discipline, the book records error, pride, and improvisation, asking readers to weigh the human character of exploration as much as its geographic results. In this telling, discovery is not a moment but a hard, cumulative negotiation with place.

For contemporary readers, the book offers two kinds of value: a portrait of a pivotal sixteenth-century expedition and a reflection of nineteenth-century American historical sensibilities. It prompts reconsideration of the language of discovery in a continent long inhabited, and it frames a clear case study for discussing colonial violence, imperial economics, and the making of national myths. The narrative encourages questions about how memory is curated, which voices are centered, and how endurance and harm intertwine. As debates over commemoration and historical literacy continue, Abbott’s volume supplies context and a concrete storyline for informed, critical engagement.

Approached with curiosity and care, Ferdinand De Soto, The Discoverer of the Mississippi rewards readers who appreciate narrative history that is both propulsive and reflective. Abbott offers a sustained journey through conflict, decision, and terrain, giving enough texture to illuminate motives without exhausting the pace. The book’s restraint regarding technical detail and its willingness to pose ethical questions make it suitable for general study and discussion. Without revealing later turns, it prepares the mind for the consequences that follow great undertakings, and it

preserves a vivid impression of the stakes that attend exploration at the margins of empire.

# Synopsis

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John S. C. Abbott’s Ferdinand De Soto, The Discoverer of the Mississippi presents a chronological life of the Spanish conquistador within the wider currents of sixteenth-century exploration. Beginning with the imperial ambitions that propelled voyages across the Atlantic, Abbott sets out to show how ambition, piety, and policy converged in campaigns that reshaped two continents. Framed as a historical narrative, the book follows De Soto from his origins to the expedition that carried his name across the North American southeast, emphasizing the logistical challenges, cultural encounters, and persistent uncertainties that defined the journey, while situating each episode within the competitive rivalries of European powers.

Abbott sketches De Soto’s formative years in Spain and his early ventures in the Caribbean basin, tracing a trajectory from obscure fortune-seeker to seasoned captain. Service in Central American campaigns hardens his methods and broadens his horizons, placing him among soldiers who blended cavalry tactics with maritime reach. Through these experiences, he acquires wealth, reputation, and hard-won familiarity with the hazards of tropical warfare and colonial administration. The narrative underscores both the opportunities and predations of frontier societies, portraying a leader who learns to navigate royal favor, fractious commanders, and volatile alliances, and who

refines the discipline that will later sustain a far more arduous enterprise.

De Soto’s participation in the Andean campaigns brings him into contact with vast riches and the uncertainties of conquest in unfamiliar highlands. Returning to Spain with the prestige of success, he secures a royal commission authorizing him to govern and explore, with explicit expectations of expanding dominion and revenue. Abbott details the meticulous preparations: recruitment of veterans, acquisition of horses and supplies, and maritime staging through the Caribbean. Establishing a base in Cuba before crossing to the Florida coast, the expedition lands with grand aims yet limited intelligence, inaugurating a march that will test morale, command, and logistics across swamps, forests, and populous chiefdoms.

As the army pushes inland, Abbott emphasizes the dual strategy of diplomacy and coercion. The force relies on guides, interpreters, and the seizure of provisions, while seeking signs of stable polities and rumored wealth. A rescued castaway becomes an indispensable intermediary, enabling negotiations yet also exposing deep mistrust on all sides. Chapters trace encounters with powerful towns, shifting alliances, and calculated displays of force meant to secure passage. The narrative stresses how geography and climate complicate every movement, how horses and armor awe yet exhaust the column, and how captains debate pace, direction, and the balance between restraint and reprisal.

Confrontations intensify as the expedition enters regions defended by well-organized leaders, climaxing in a

devastating battle that inflicts heavy losses and shatters expectations of an easy triumph. Abbott describes the prolonged recovery and the decision to continue deeper into the continent rather than retreat. Pushing north and west, the army reaches a colossal river unknown to European observers in this interior, an obstacle and opportunity that forces innovation in crossing and supply. The crossing becomes a turning point, expanding the geographic horizon of the venture and revealing a corridor of trade, populous settlements, and resilient resistance that redefines the expedition’s aims.

Beyond the great river, the march grows more arduous. Abbott recounts dwindling resources, disease, and attrition as the force traverses vast plains and woodlands in search of sustenance and a route to safety or renown. Leadership strains under the weight of conflicting imperatives, and strategy oscillates between further exploration and the need to extract the army intact. The narrative follows the eventual consolidation around escape by water, the construction of vessels, and a hazardous descent toward coastal strongholds. Through these episodes, the book highlights resilience amid diminishing options and the difficult calculus of preserving honor, command, and lives in an unforgiving theater.

Abbott closes by assessing what this expedition disclosed about North America’s interior and about the dynamics of conquest. The journey yields a wider European awareness of the Mississippi basin and of complex societies that long preceded foreign intrusion, even as it exposes the brutal costs of imperial ambition for all involved. Without

romanticizing the outcome, the book frames De Soto’s career as a study in determination, misjudgment, and contingency, inviting reflection on how exploration both enlarges maps and narrows choices. Its enduring resonance lies in charting a formative crossing that reshaped historical imagination, while leaving readers to weigh discovery against its human toll.

# Historical Context

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In the early sixteenth century, Iberian expansion transformed Atlantic worlds. Under the Crown of Castile, institutions like the Casa de Contratación (Seville, 1503) and the Council of the Indies (1524) regulated conquest, trade, and governance. Royal capitulations empowered adelantados to explore and settle, while encomienda shaped extraction of labor and tribute. Florida, a broad designation since Ponce de León's voyage of 1513, beckoned as Spain sought wealth, strategic harbors, and Christian converts. Missionary orders accompanied soldiers, and legal debates over indigenous rights simmered. This administrative-military framework, rooted in monarchy and church, formed the backdrop for Hernando (styled "Ferdinand" in some nineteenth-century English titles) de Soto's enterprise.

Hernando de Soto, born around 1500–1501 in Extremadura, advanced through campaigns in Central America under Pedrarias Dávila, gaining experience and wealth in Panama and Nicaragua. He later served as a captain in the conquest of the Inca Empire alongside Francisco Pizarro, which enhanced his fortune and reputation. Returning to Spain, he secured from Charles V the title of adelantado of Florida and appointment as governor of Cuba, with authority to conquer and colonize. In 1538–1539 he assembled a large, well-armed expedition, sailing via Cuba toward the North American southeast,

publicly promising settlements, evangelization, and discovery of precious metals.

The southeastern continent that de Soto entered was home to complex Mississippian chiefdoms, sustained by maize agriculture, extensive trade networks, and mound-centered towns. Polities such as Cofitachequi and powerful war leaders like those later associated with Mabila confronted the Spaniards with diplomacy, coercion, and resistance. European-introduced diseases and raiding destabilized populations, even as communities adapted to new threats. Moving season by season through the Gulf and Atlantic coastal plains and interior uplands, the expedition fought, negotiated, and endured scarcity. In 1541, according to the primary narratives, de Soto’s force reached the Mississippi River, the first documented crossing by Europeans.

Knowledge of the expedition rests on a handful of contemporaneous and near-contemporaneous accounts. The so-called Gentleman of Elvas, an anonymous Portuguese participant, published a narrative in 1557. Rodrigo Ranjel, de Soto’s secretary, kept a journal later summarized by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. Luys Hernández de Biedma, the royal factor, submitted a relation to the Council of the Indies. Garcilaso de la Vega compiled La Florida del Inca (1605), blending testimony with literary framing. These sources diverge in details of routes, names, and events, leaving significant uncertainties. Nineteenth-century historians relied on them, often through translations and critical editions.

John S. C. Abbott (1805–1877), a New England Congregationalist minister turned popular historian, wrote widely read biographies and narrative histories for general and youthful audiences. His works, including studies of Napoleon and European monarchs, favored vivid episodes, moral reflection, and clear storytelling over archival minutiae. In portraying de Soto, Abbott drew on available chronicles and compilations to situate the conquistador within Spain’s imperial machinery and North America’s early contact zones. He wrote for an American readership increasingly curious about the Mississippi Valley’s past, producing an accessible account that connected continental geography with the dramatic figures and motives of sixteenth-century conquest.

Mid-nineteenth-century American print culture expanded rapidly through subscription publishing, school and Sunday-school libraries, and illustrated books. Exploration narratives attracted readers amid national territorial growth and scientific surveys that recharted the interior. The Mississippi River, central to commerce and strategy in the United States, carried exceptional symbolic weight, reinforced by steamboat trade and, later, Civil War campaigns. Popular histories revisited earlier European encounters to explain the river’s place in a continental story. Abbott’s biography participated in this interest by tracing how Spanish expeditions first entered the region remembered by U.S. readers, linking imperial ventures to landscapes familiar in contemporary maps and news.

Abbott worked within a historiographical moment newly enriched by edited sources. The London-based Hakluyt

Society (founded 1846) issued scholarly translations of early travel accounts, while American scholars collected Spanish documents. In 1866, Buckingham Smith published Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto, translating principal chronicles into English and providing notes that framed debates over route and ethnography. Ethnological and archaeological inquiries, through institutions and learned societies, were reassessing Southeastern chiefdoms and mound sites. Such tools helped popular writers present more precise, though still contested, reconstructions of de Soto's movements and encounters, even as uncertainties kept interpretive choices visible to readers.

Ferdinand De Soto, The Discoverer of the Mississippi reflects its era's blend of moral appraisal and romanticized endurance, while channeling the period's reliance on canonical chronicles and fresh translations. It frames conquest within monarchy, faith, and law, yet underscores the costs of ambition and coercion in cross-cultural contact. The title's emphasis on "discovery" mirrors nineteenth-century usage even as indigenous presence predates European arrival by millennia. By translating scholarly disputes into a clear narrative for general readers, Abbott's work both endorsed prevailing Anglo-American interpretations of the Spanish conquest and invited reflection on power, providence, and the contested origins of a continental river.

# Ferdinand De Soto, The Discoverer of the Mississippi

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NEW YORK:
DODD & MEAD, No. 762 BROADWAY.
1873.

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# PREFACE.

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Mr. Theodore Irving, in his valuable history of the "Conquest of Florida," speaking of the astonishing achievements of the Spanish Cavaliers, in the dawn of the sixteenth century says:

> "Of all the enterprises undertaken in this spirit of daring adventure, none has surpassed, for hardihood

and variety of incident, that of the renowned Hernando de Soto, and his band of cavaliers. It was poetry put in action[2q]. It was the knight-errantry of the old world carried into the depths of the American wilderness. Indeed the personal adventures, the feats of individual prowess, the picturesque description of steel-clad cavaliers, with lance and helm and prancing steed, glittering through the wildernesses of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and the prairies of the Far West, would seem to us mere fictions of romance, did they not come to us recorded in matter of fact narratives of contemporaries, and corroborated by minute and daily memoranda of eye-witnesses."

These are the wild and wondrous adventures which I wish here to record[1q]. I have spared no pains in obtaining the most accurate information which the records of those days have transmitted to us. It is as wrong to traduce the dead as the living. If one should be careful not to write a line which dying he would wish to blot, he should also endeavor to write of the departed in so candid and paternal a spirit, while severely just to the truth of history, as to be safe from reproach. One who is aiding to form public opinion respecting another, who has left the world, should remember that he may yet meet the departed in the spirit land. And he may perhaps be greeted with the words, "Your condemnation was too severe. You did not make due allowance for the times in which I lived. You have held up my name to unmerited reproach."

Careful investigation has revealed De Soto to me as by no means so bad a man as I had supposed him to have

been. And I think that the candid reader will admit that there was much, in his heroic but melancholy career, which calls for charitable construction and sympathy.

The authorities upon which I have mainly relied for my statements, are given in the body of the work. There is no country on the globe, whose early history is so full of interest and instruction as our own. The writer feels grateful to the press, in general, for the kindly spirit in which it has spoken of the attempt, in this series, to interest the popular reader in those remarkable incidents which have led to the establishment of this majestic republic.

# CHAPTER I.

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## Childhood and Youth.

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Birthplace of Ferdinand De Soto.—Spanish Colony at Darien[1].—Don Pedro de Avila[2], Governor of Darien.—Vasco Nuñez[3].—Famine.—Love in the Spanish Castle.—Character of Isabella.—Embarrassment of De Soto.—Isabella's Parting Counsel.

In the interior of Spain, about one hundred and thirty miles southwest of Madrid, there is the small walled town of Xeres. It is remote from all great routes of travel, and contains about nine thousand inhabitants, living very frugally, and in a state of primitive simplicity. There are several rude castles of the ancient nobility here, and numerous gloomy, monastic institutions. In one of these dilapidated castles, there was born, in the year 1500, a boy, who received the name of Ferdinand de Soto. His parents were Spanish nobles, perhaps the most haughty class of nobility which has ever existed. It was, however, a decayed family, so impoverished as to find it difficult to maintain the position of gentility. The parents were not able to give their son a liberal education. Their rank did not allow them to introduce him to any of the pursuits of industry; and so far as can now be learned, the years of his early youth were spent in idleness.

Ferdinand was an unusually handsome boy. He grew up tall, well formed, and with remarkable muscular strength and agility. He greatly excelled in fencing, horseback riding, and all those manly exercises which were then deemed far more essential for a Spanish gentleman than literary culture. He was fearless, energetic, self-reliant; and it was manifest that he was endowed with mental powers of much native strength.

When quite a lad he attracted the attention of a wealthy Spanish nobleman, Don Pedro de Avila, who sent him to one of the Spanish universities, probably that of Saragossa, and maintained him there for six years. Literary culture was not then in high repute; but it was deemed a matter of very great moment that a nobleman of Spain should excel in horsemanship, in fencing, and in wielding every weapon of attack or defence.

Ferdinand became quite renowned for his lofty bearing, and for all chivalric accomplishments. At the tournaments, and similar displays of martial prowess then in vogue, he was prominent, exciting the envy of competitive cavaliers, and winning the admiration of the ladies.

Don Pedro became very proud of his foster son, received him to his family, and treated him as though he were his own child. The Spanish court had at that time established a very important colony at the province of Darien, on the Isthmus of Panama. This isthmus, connecting North and South America, is about three hundred miles long and from forty to sixty broad. A stupendous range of mountains runs along its centre, apparently reared as an eternal barrier between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. From several of the

summits of this ridge the waters of the two oceans can at the same time be distinctly seen. Here the Spanish court, in pursuit of its energetic but cruel conquest of America, had established one of its most merciless colonies. There was gold among the mountains. The natives had many golden ornaments. They had no conception of the value of the precious ore in civilized lands. Readily they would exchange quite large masses of gold for a few glass beads. The great object of the Spaniards in the conquest of Darien was to obtain gold. They inferred that if the ignorant natives, without any acquaintance with the arts, had obtained so much, there must be immense quantities which careful searching and skilful mining would reveal.

The wanton cruelties practised by the Spaniards upon the unoffending natives of these climes seem to have been as senseless as they were fiendlike. It is often difficult to find any motive for their atrocities. These crimes are thoroughly authenticated, and yet they often seem like the outbursts of demoniac malignity. Anything like a faithful recital of them would torture the sensibilities of our readers almost beyond endurance. Mothers and maidens were hunted and torn down by bloodhounds; infant children were cut in pieces, and their quivering limbs thrown to the famished dogs.

The large wealth and the rank of Don Pedro de Avila gave him much influence at the Spanish court. He succeeded in obtaining the much-coveted appointment of Governor of Darien. His authority was virtually absolute over the property, the liberty, and the lives of a realm, whose extended limits were not distinctly defined.

Don Pedro occupied quite an imposing castle, his ancestral mansion, in the vicinity of Badajoz. Here the poor boy Ferdinand, though descended from families of the highest rank, was an entire dependent upon his benefactor. The haughty Don Pedro treated him kindly. Still he regarded him, in consequence of his poverty, almost as a favored menial. He fed him, clothed him, patronized him.

It was in the year 1514 that Don Pedro entered upon his office of Governor of Darien. The insatiate thirst for gold caused crowds to flock to his banners. A large fleet was soon equipped, and more than two thousand persons embarked at St. Lucar for the golden land. The most of these were soldiers; men of sensuality, ferocity, and thirst for plunder. Not a few noblemen joined the enterprise; some to add to their already vast possessions, and others hoping to retrieve their impoverished fortunes.

A considerable number of priests accompanied the expedition, and it is very certain that some of these at least were actuated by a sincere desire to do good to the natives, and to win them to the religion of Jesus:—that religion which demands that we should do to others as we would that others should do to us, and whose principles, the governor, the nobles, and the soldiers, were ruthlessly trampling beneath their feet. Don Pedro, when measured by the standard of Christianity, was proud, perfidious and tyrannical. The course he pursued upon his arrival in the country was impolitic and almost insane.

His predecessor in the governorship was Vasco Nuñez. He had been on the whole a prudent, able and comparatively merciful governor. He had entered into trade with the

seized the Inca; it is the documented site of Atahualpa’s capture in November 1532 in contemporary chronicles.

**13** The Inca ruler (more commonly spelled Atahualpa) who was captured by Francisco Pizarro during the Spanish conquest of Peru and executed in 1533; his capture marked a decisive moment in the fall of the Inca Empire.

**14** A Spanish friar described in the text as the chaplain who attempted to baptize and convert indigenous prisoners; historical accounts often identify him with Fray Vicente (Vicente de Valverde), a cleric who accompanied Pizarro's expedition.

**15** Diego de Almagro, a Spanish conquistador and contemporary of Pizarro who led reinforcements and was a prominent, sometimes rival, figure in the conquest of Peru.

**16** Named here as a distinguished Peruvian noble seized by the Spaniards and held as a hostage; he is described as a high-ranking courtier whose fate was used to intimidate the native population.

**17** The name De Soto gave to the harbor where his expedition landed in Florida; this is the historical Spanish name used in the narrative for the site now known as Tampa Bay.

**18** The Spanish port (Sanlúcar de Barrameda) from which De Soto's expedition sailed; a major embarkation point in 16th-century Spain for voyages to the Americas.

**19** A 19th-century American writer cited here for his history of the De Soto expedition; his narrative compiled earlier eyewitness material and was widely read by later historians, though some of its interpretations are treated cautiously by modern scholars.

**20** An anonymous 16th-century account presented as an eyewitness narrative of De Soto's expedition; it is one of the principal contemporary sources alongside Garcilaso's history, and historians note discrepancies between these accounts.

**21** A Native town named in accounts of De Soto's march, which 19th-century writers place near the head of the Hillsborough River (Tampa Bay area); its exact archaeological location remains uncertain.

**22** A mestizo chronicler (born 1539), son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca noblewoman, who wrote influential early histories of the Americas including an account of Hernando de Soto based on interviews with expedition veterans.

**23** Refers to Washington Irving (1783–1859), an American author and historian whose popular 19th-century histories and biographies included accounts of Spanish exploration in the Americas, often cited by later writers.

**24** Soldiers armed with the arquebus, an early muzzle-loading firearm used in the 15th–17th centuries; arquebuses were effective but slow to reload compared with a skilled archer's bow.

**25** Pánfilo de Narváez, a Spanish explorer who led an ill-fated expedition to Florida (1527–1528) whose force was largely lost or dispersed and whose failure was well known to later expeditions.

**26** Bartolomé de las Casas (c.1484–1566), a Dominican friar who became Bishop of Chiapas and is noted for his 16th-century advocacy on behalf of indigenous peoples and his critiques of Spanish treatment of Native Americans.

**27** A type of small, two-masted sailing vessel commonly used in the 16th century for coastal navigation and transport of men, supplies, or artillery during exploration and military operations.

**28** Cofachiqui was the name given in 16th-century Spanish accounts to a Native American province or chiefdom encountered by Hernando de Soto; historians and archaeologists debate its precise location but place it in the region of the present Georgia–South Carolina border and describe it as fertile and densely populated.

**29** A palanquin is a covered litter or chair carried by bearers used to transport high-status individuals; in this narrative the princess is described as riding in a palanquin borne by attendants.

**30** Chiaha is the name of a Native American town recorded in De Soto's route, described as near the confluence of the Oostanaula and Etowa rivers (forming the Coosa) and often associated with the vicinity of present-day Rome, Georgia, though exact identification remains uncertain.

**31** Cacique is a Spanish colonial term, originally from Taíno, used by Europeans to denote an indigenous chief or political leader in the Americas; Spanish narratives routinely use it to refer to local rulers encountered on expeditions.

**32** An early European spelling for a native settlement in the Mobile region; chroniclers used names like Mobila to refer to towns near present-day Mobile, Alabama, though precise archaeological identification can vary among sources.

**33** An historical name used by Spanish chroniclers for the harbor now known as Pensacola Bay (northwest Florida); such toponyms reflect 16th-century Iberian recordings and may appear in variant spellings.

**34** An interpreter who accompanied De Soto’s expedition and appears in contemporary narratives; the HTML describes him intervening to save Spanish soldiers and acting as a messenger between the Spaniards and local chiefs.

**35** Refers here both to a village and to the Chickasaw people, a Native American nation historically located in parts of what are now Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee; the text places the village on the Yazoo (in present Mississippi).

**36** A traditional Latin Christian hymn meaning 'We praise thee, O God,' often used in solemn liturgies and public thanksgiving; the phrase indicates a formal religious ceremony conducted by the Spanish priests.

**37** The text’s ‘moccasons’ (variant spelling) refers to moccasins—soft leather footwear made by Indigenous peoples, here fashioned from deerskin and adopted by the Spaniards for comfort.

**38** ‘Quigualtanqui’ is given in the book as the name of a powerful native chief on the eastern bank who is said to have formed a league against the Spaniards; the exact identity and spellings of such native names vary among contemporary accounts.

**39** Dodd & Mead was a New York–based book publisher and bookseller active in the 19th century; the firm issued