

Hernando DeSoto



In the later part of May and first of June 1540, DeSoto and his army of Spanish Conquistadors made their journey down the Chattooga River in what is now northwest Georgia. Passing through the vicinity of present day cities of LayFayette and Summerville, Georgia they entered the present state of Alabama by following the course of this small river to the mouth of Chattooga where it flows into the Coosa River near the present town of Cedar Buff, Alabama. They arrived at this point June 4, 1540 and camped for nearly a month on an island, later to be named McCoy's island. DeSoto's Historians called this island in the Coosa River "Chiaha".

The purpose for their long encampment at Chiaha (McCoy's Island) was two fold. One reason was to allow both horses and men to rest and recover from their long and difficult journey across the Appalachian Mountains, a journey they described as " a way over rough and lofty ridges." The other reason for their long stay in this area was because of an abundant supply of food at the fork of these two rivers on the plains of the beautiful Coosa Valley. At Chiaha, DeSoto continued to hear rumors of gold to be found to the north and west, in the hills and valleys of Lookout Mountain. His thirst for gold finally won and he sent a small group of men, under the leadership of two of his lieutenants, named Silva and Vilabo, on a side trip

exploration onto Lookout Mountain. These men left Chiaha in the latter part of June 1570 and made their way up on Lookout Mountain somewhere between the present towns of Blanche, Alabama and Menlo, Georgia and onward to DeSoto Falls near the present town of Mentone, Alabama.

They camped at DeSoto Falls at least two days and perhaps longer and searched the area for gold and precious stones. From DeSoto Falls this small group of brave men went west across Big Wills Valley at about the present town of Hengar, Alabama. From there they followed the east side of what is now called South Sauty Creek, through the area of Sylvania and arrived at what is now known as the Point Rock area of Buck's Pocket State Park. Silva and Vilabo, and their small group of companions must have reacted in

a special way to the beauty of the scene as they stood at this scenic vista on Point Rock and looked at the mighty canyon below. DeSoto's historian makes a note of their experiences by saying "they came to this place and found no gold but an area of lofty hills and stupendous rocks." In exploring the bluffs and cliffs of Buck's Pocket State Park one can find the yellow substance which brought DeSoto's men to that area. But it is not gold. It is an iron oxide and is found in abundance in the high cliffs of Buck's Pocket State Park.

There is no historical evidence that any one in DeSoto's expedition ever went farther west in North Alabama than the vista overlook at Buck's Pocket State Park, or that any of them ever caught a view of the mighty Tennessee River so near to this point. From this point in their journey this small group of DeSoto's men returned to Chiaha (McCoy's Island) near Cedar Bluff traveling by way of the present town of Sand Rock on Lookout Mountain. They arrived at their camp on McCoy's Island and found that DeSoto and the main body of his expedition had departed June 28, 1540 to continue their journey down the Coosa. DeSoto had left behind at Chiaha several men too sick to travel and these were joined by the small exploring party from Sand Mountain. They all set out by canoe on the Coosa River to rejoin the main expedition camped at Coosa which is situated at the mouth of what is now known as Talladega Creek in the present day Talladega County. This group arrived at Coosa on July 18, 1540 two days behind the arrival of DeSoto and the main body of his expedition July 16, 1540.

