

JOURNEYS

Through

PARADISE

Pioneering Naturalists in the Southeast

GAIL FISHMAN



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CHAPTER I

First Contact



And indeed, most of the Plantations in *Carolina* naturally enjoy a noble Prospect of large and spacious Rivers, pleasant Savanna's, and fine Meadows, with their green Liveries, interwoven with beautiful Flowers, of most glorious Colours, which the several Seasons afford; hedg'd in with pleasant Groves of the ever-famous Tulip-tree, the stately Laurel, and Bays, equalizing the Oak in Bigness and Growth; Myrtles, Jessamines, Wood-bines, Honeysuckles, and several other fragrant Vines and Ever-greens, whose aspiring Branches shadow and interweave themselves with the loftiest Timbers, yielding a pleasant Prospect, Shade and Smell, proper Habitations for the Sweet-singing Birds, that melodiously entertain such as travel thro' the Woods of *Carolina*.

—John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, 1709

TWENTY-ONE YEARS after Columbus bumped into the New World, Juan Ponce de León ground his longboats against the sandy beaches of a recumbent land. Other Spanish ships had preceded him, but Ponce de León claimed the territory, which extended past present-day Georgia to the low country now called South Carolina, for Spain in 1513. He called it Florida. Spain then began supplanting native cultures of the new land with its own.

Estimates vary, but at least two million indigenous people, comprising approximately six hundred tribes speaking about five hundred distinct languages, populated North America at the time of European contact. They had established their own religions, governments, and codes of conduct. Southeastern tribes gathered plants from surrounding forests for food, medicine, and dyes. In some cultures each family maintained its own farm plot and in others communal fields were planted. Their villages were connected by tracks winding around mountains and through vast forests, such as the Occaneechi Path, the Natchez Trace, and the Great Warrior Path, used for social visits, trade, and warfare.

A few million people spread across the continent had a minimal impact on the land. Rivers and streams provided a gracious plenty of sweet, clean water for crops, drinking, and transportation, and a variety of game animals roamed the Southeast. *Our Country and Its Resources*, published by Scientific American in 1917, estimated that America's original forests contained more than five trillion board feet of lumber spread over eight hundred million acres.

Florida's peninsula had been above sea level for about twenty thousand years when Native Americans first moved in; pollen records of that period indicate that north-central Florida's pine, sandhill, and broadleaf forests were much like they are today. Sand pine scrub clutched the loose sands of the central ridge and nosed into South Florida. About five thousand years ago, sea levels rose a bit and pushed the water table higher. Florida's southernmost scrub gave way to cypress swamps and sawgrass marshes, and the Everglades began forming. When the first Europeans touched shore, Florida's interior had become a mixture of xeric (dry) or mesic (sometimes wet) pinelands and wetlands. *Spartina* marshes guarded the northern coasts, mangrove swamps protected the subtropical southern half of the state, and, in between, sandy beaches offered open access to the seas.

The Appalachian Mountains bristled with tall, green pines, and

mixed forests marched over the rolling Piedmont Plateau and faded into the flat Atlantic Coastal Plain sparkling with lakes, Carolina bays, and cypress swamps. Rivers twined through wide salt marshes rippling with *Spartina* and black needlerush grasses to empty tons of fresh water into the briny ocean. Broad beaches, backed by humped sand dunes, shifted with tides and currents. Breezes cooled by the water's surface blew toward the coastal plain and punched against warmer air overlying the land, resulting in thunderstorms rent by jagged threads of lightning that kindled dry grasses. Flames crackled over the land until stalled by wetlands or burned over areas. Animals fled before the blazes and returned in a few weeks to feast on tender green shoots growing in luxuriant response to nutritious energy released by the conflagration.

It was a magnificent land and those who came from plundered European countrysides saw that America possessed an abundance of natural wealth: tall, straight pines for ship's masts, fine-grained live oaks for spars and ribs, minerals, bounteous rivers, game animals, and room. The sheer size of the thinly settled land and abundant numbers and varieties of flora and fauna suggested limitless resources.

With certainty that a fantastic land lay over the sea, other countries launched independent voyages. Explorers sailed across virtually uncharted waters guided by maps based on conjecture and imagination. If they sailed far enough, it was almost impossible to miss the Americas and each nation vied to claim as much of the New World as possible. That the lands were already inhabited was a minor inconvenience.

Ships returned to Portugal, Spain, France, Holland, and England with stories that gained embellishments in each narration. Costly gems, sumptuous spices, and glittering gold lay beyond the horizon, bringing the claimant personal glory and pecuniary rewards. Finding shorter trade routes or new lands assured recognition for the sponsor. Politics and religion played underlying roles in world expansion as European powers established settlements.

England's ships had skirted the New World's shores in the middle 1500s, yet it waited decades before attempting a permanent settlement, annoying expansionists eager to Christianize heathen Indians before Spain converted them to Catholicism. Englishman John Sparke wrote in 1589 that Florida would be a perfect place to raise cattle; hides were a valuable commodity.¹ If England were to become a dominant nation, it would have to expand beyond its island's borders and end its dependence

upon other countries for goods it could not produce. In addition, the new land was a place to dispose of the unwanted residue of its overcrowded cities.

Spain sent ship after ship to the New World. Spanish law required that each sailor plant orange seeds at every stop, sowing a one-drug pharmacy across the ocean. They were seeds of bitter orange, intended to prevent scurvy, once the scourge of all seamen. Ponce de León probably planted the first oranges in Florida. Hernando de Soto's men likely planted young orange trees across Florida in 1539.

After landing near Tampa Bay and pitching camp, de Soto sent out eight horsemen to explore the country. Before their horses, weakened by the voyage, became mired in bogs, the Spaniards discovered six Indians and killed two, demonstrating that they meant business. The next day, Sunday, soldiers set out to capture the Indian town, but the people escaped through marshy woods. De Soto was an ambitious man, intent upon gathering riches for himself, his men, and his country and converting Indians to Catholicism by force if necessary.

If his actions against the native people of North America seem cruel, remember that battles of that era were loud and brutal, up close and personal. From all accounts, however, de Soto often sent his men to kill unarmed villagers, leaving bloody wounded as a warning; a tactic that worked well. As well trained and expert shots as the native armies were, they were no match for mounted, armored men with advanced weapons.

Tormented by humidity, rapacious insects, hot summers and cold winters, and hunger, his army marched across the present-day states of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, western North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, and Arkansas. De Soto was dead by the time the remnants escaped through Texas and Mexico. The men worked their way over mountains and rivers, through forests, swamps, deep sands, and slick clay searching for treasure. He didn't find any, but his troops were probably the first Europeans to see the Mississippi River.

De Soto's men traveled in a period that archaeologists have named "Mississippian." This culture began around A.D. 800, and a growing dependence on corn as a major food staple by the early 1500s resulted in a region populated by tightly knit communities governed by chiefs said to be descended from the sun. Similar among the people were their beliefs about how the world was created and why things happened as they did. In order to protect their land, each chiefdom contained a warrior group.

Although many of the nations spoke a derivative of a particular language group, each spoke a different dialect. For instance, Cherokee and Tuscarora stemmed from the Iroquois language, but neither could understand the other.

As de Soto's army snaked through the land, the soldiers captured people from different chiefdoms. Most important were those who could speak and understand another language. Many a conversation passed down a line of people speaking a variety of languages before an answer was obtained. Long marches through uncharted country took a toll on the troops. They feared hunting alone and went out in large hunting parties, which provided safety from angry Indians but scared away game. The soldiers stole food from the Indians, assuring that some would starve during the lean winter months. Nonetheless, de Soto's army also shriveled; by the time they reached Arkansas, it was in a sorry state.

The soldiers followed the Arkansas River to the Mississippi through a valley pocked with swamps and Mississippian towns. As the men approached, villagers ran away, carrying their corn if they could. A few miles below where the Arkansas joins the Mississippi, de Soto reached a small town called Guachoya, located near present-day Arkansas City. The chief was willing to share his large store of corn and beans, but just across the river a more powerful chief ruling a large town named Quigualtum sent his war canoes to inquire about the Spanish.

De Soto was not a fool and knew that his force was vastly weakened, not only in strength and numbers but in spirit. He had to reach the Gulf of Mexico and believed it was a short distance away, but the chief of Guachoya claimed to know nothing of the great water. De Soto sent one of his men to scout ahead, but he also reported no sign of the Gulf.

Despondent over failing to find enormous wealth, his men, horses, and food supplies dwindling, de Soto despaired of reaching the sea across densely forested swamps. The rigors of travel and leadership coupled with a poor diet weakened him and he fell ill. We cannot know what ran through his mind at this time. Perhaps he knew he was going to die, leaving his men without a leader, far from safety and surrounded by hostile Indians. De Soto lashed out in a final display of desperate anger and ordered a vicious attack on a nearby sleeping village called Nilco, proving that the Spanish were still a superior force.

It was mid-May of 1542. The army had been searching for treasure for three long years and now their forty-two-year-old leader lay dying.