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Letter of De Soto to the Secular Cabildo of Santiago de Cuba

Hernando DeSoto



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LETTER WRITTEN TO THE SECULAR
CABILDO OF SANTIAGO DE CUBA BY
HERNANDO DE SOTO.
ESPIRITU SANTO,
FLORIDA, JULY 9, 1539.

Very noble Sir:

Being in a new land, although not very far from that land, albeit with a bit of sea between, it seems to me that I have not heard from your worships for a thousand years; for in truth, also, I have not seen a letter for a long time. Although I left letters for you written in Havana, [to go] by three different routes; yet since a way has now offered by which to give an account [of what I have done]—a thing which I always have to do—I will relate here what it seems proper to me [to tell]. I believe that my letter will be pleasing to you, as to persons whom I know and it is always known that you have good will [to me]. I left Havana with all my fleet on Sunday, May 18. Although I wrote that [I would leave] on the 25th of that month, I forestalled that day in order not to lose a favorable opportunity we had. When we were entering the gulf, the weather changed into a calm for us, yet not so continuous a calm that it kept us from coming to anchor on this coast within a week's time, namely, on Sun-

Note—This translation of De Soto's letter, doubtless the first letter ever written with a Florida date line, has been made for the Quarterly by James A. Robertson, managing editor of *Hispanic American Historical Review* and editor of the series of volumes on Florida's history published by the Florida State Historical Society. These include a facsimile of the first edition of the Elvas *Narrative* with a new translation of that early classic by Dr. Robertson himself. As De Soto's letter bears so important a relation to our knowledge of the beginning of his exploration here in Florida, Dr. Robertson has made a literal translation for students instead of one of the more free style of those heretofore published. As the only available copy of the original appears to be imperfect, he believes that the full meaning of the letter may not have been caught in every respect. *Ed.*

day, the feast of the Holy Spirit. Having fallen four or five leagues below the port, without any of my pilots knowing where the port lay, it was thereupon determined that I should go in the brigantines to look for it. We took three days to do this and to enter the mouth of the port. Also, since we had no knowledge of the channel—a bay which extends for twelve or more leagues to the sea*—we were so greatly delayed that I had to send Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa, my lieutenant general, with the brigantines to seize a town which lay at the head of the bay. I ordered all the men and horses to land on a beach, whence with great difficulty we went on to meet Vasco Porcallo on Sunday of the Most Holy Trinity. The Indians of the land, because of certain fears they conceived of us, abandoned all the land, for in a distance of thirty leagues no man stayed behind. On my arrival here, I heard of a Christian who was held by a cacique. I sent there Baltasar de Gallegos with forty horsemen and a like number of foot soldiers in order to try to get him. Gallegos found him a day's journey away from here together with eight or ten Indians whom he brought to my hands. We rejoiced not a little on seeing him because he knew the language [of the Indians]. He had lost our language, although he soon regained it. His name is Juan Ortiz [and he is] a native of Seville and a nobleman. After this I went in person to this cacique and brought him back in peace. Thereafter, I sent Baltasar de Gallegos inland with fifty lances and one hundred foot soldiers. There he has found many cornfields, beans, pumpkins, and other fruits and food in such abundance that there

*See the conjecture of Dr. John R. Swanton in his article in this issue of the *Quarterly* - a conjecture which should have the thoughtful consideration of the reader. These are matters to which Dr. Swanton has given much thought. Indeed, there is no greater authority on this expedition and on this letter than he. *J.A.R.*

is enough for a very large army without the suffering of any need. A cacique named Urripacoxit, lord of this other peaceful cacique and of many other caciques, having come up, he [Gallegos] sent¹ some Indians to him to negotiate a peace. He [Gallegos] writes me that they had agreed on a peace, but that, because after they had come to peace terms, he [Urripacoxit] had failed him [Gallegos] in certain promises, he [Gallegos] seized him [Urripacoxit] and detained about seventeen Indians (among whom were some chief men), since this method seemed to him most certain [of results]. Among those whom he detained are some old men of authority—as much as there can be among such people—and who have information of the land farther on. They say that three days' journey thence, going by way of certain towns and huts, all well populated and having many cornfields, there is a large town called Acuera, where we might very well winter, and that afterward, two days' journey beyond, is another town called Ocale. They say this town is so big and so valued by them that I shall not dare to say anything of it. Here in it, they say, are to be found in great abundance all the things that are in all the abovementioned towns. There are hens, turkeys in many pens, tame deer which are kept in herds. How this may be I do not understand, unless they are the cows [of] which we had information. They say that there are many traders among them and much trade and abundance of gold and silver and many pearls. Would to God that it be so, for I do not believe of these Indians only what I see, and even well seen, although they know and consider it for a fact that if they lie to me, it must be at the cost of their life. How this interpreter [Ortiz] gives us life [by mak-

1. The typewritten transcript from which this translation is made reads "envie" (I sent). The text seems to require "envio" (he sent).

ing it possible for us] to have intercourse with them. Without him, I know not what would befall us. Glory be to God who has directed everything through His goodness, in such wise that it seems He has a special care that this [enterprise] be for His service, as I have besought Him and have promised Him. Eighty foot soldiers are gone by sea in a few boats and my general with forty horsemen has gone overland to meet some thousand or more Indians whom Juan de Anasco discovered. The general came back last night [saying] that the Indians had fled from him and that although he had pursued them he could not overtake them because of the many obstacles in the way. When we are all united, as I say, we shall go to meet Baltasar de Gallegos in order to go thence, as I say, altogether to winter at Ocale, where according to reports (if they be true) we have nothing more to desire. Would to God that something may come of it that may be for the service of God, our Lord, and wherewith I may serve your worships and each of you in particular as I desire and as I should do. Because of all my occupations here, I am not forgetful of the love I owe to things there [in Santiago de Cuba] and my obligation, and because I can not visit it [Santiago de Cuba] in person, I believe that where your worships [are] there will be little in which my presence will be needed. I will esteem it a very great favor that with all the other duties I have I may have this over and above with greater obligation even to perform it than your worships, as one who has regard for the quiet and welfare of the town and its good administration, always considering it commended to the licentiate and the affairs of justice in such manner that God and the king may be well served and I receive favor and all [of us] great happiness and satisfaction in ourselves for having performed our duty in every-

thing, as your worships are always wont to do. Therefore out of respect to me no less than is your custom you will have regard to this, with which I shall consider myself greatly obligated. With respect to the bastion which I left begun, if perchance neglect because it is not at present necessary should have been the cause of its not being completed, your worships will do me the favor of completing it², since daily other considerations occur. And even if they do not occur, it is a good provision³ and a great benefit and good to that city, and a matter in which I will receive very great favor. May our Lord preserve and increase the very noble persons of your worships as I desire and your worships merit. In this town and port of Espiritu Santo of the Florida Province, July 9, 1539.

Your worships' servant,

ADELANTADO HERNANDO DE SOTO.

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2. The Spanish scholar, Juan Bautista Munoz, who transcribed this letter from another copy observes that at this point in the copy he made use of, occurs a blank space indicating the omission of some words the original copyist could not decipher. Munoz conjectures that the words omitted may have been "en poner". This will give the sense of the translation.
 3. The word in the original is "provision" and it is so translated. It is suggested that perhaps the proper word is "prevision" (foresight).

NOTE:-The transcript from which this translation was made is found in the Rich collection of manuscripts in the New York Public Library. Ed.