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DE SOTO'S UCITA AND THE TERRA CEIA SITE

by **RIPLEY P. BULLEN**

Any Indian site to qualify as De Soto's Ucita must possess geographical attributes which agree with those assignable to that site by close reading of the De Soto narratives. This paper examines only the claim of the well-known, large Indian site at Terra Ceia, on the east side of McGill Bay. For this purpose Shaws Point on Tampa Bay is assumed to be the landing place of De Soto's expedition, although that identification has been questioned by some.

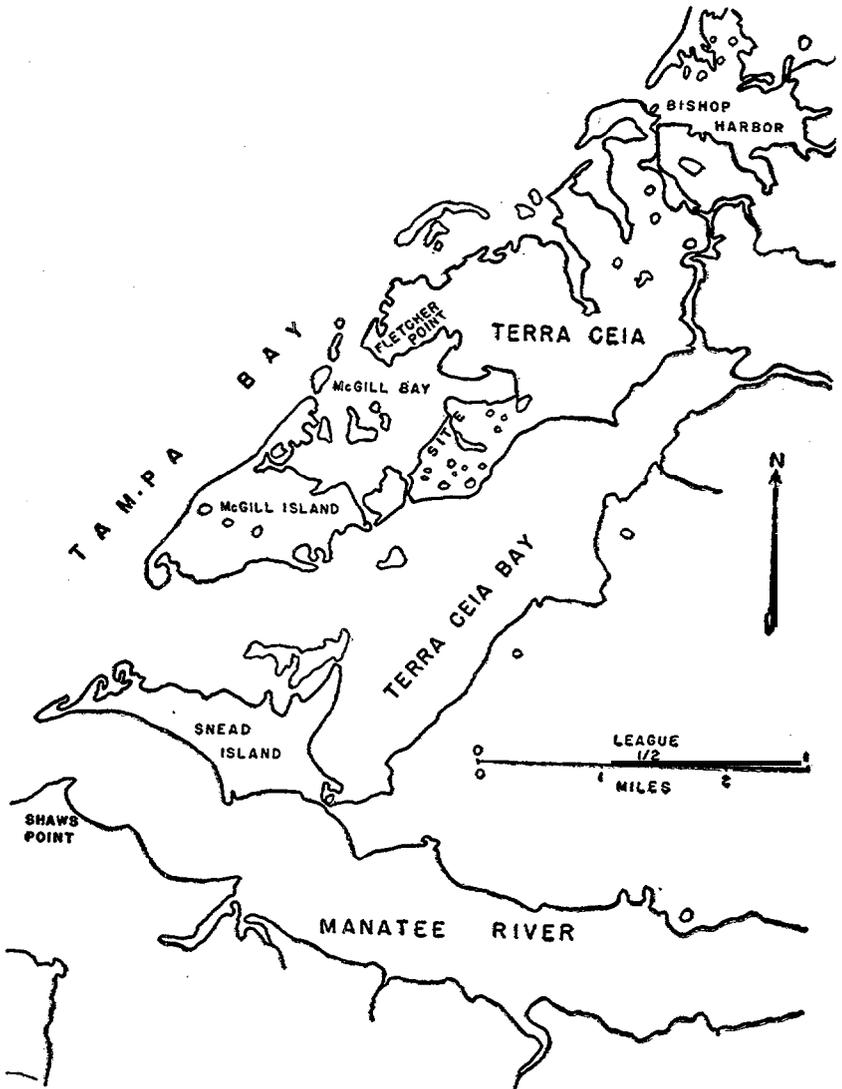
Primary sources on the De Soto expedition consist of the relations of Biedma, Rangel, Elvas, and a letter written by De Soto from Ucita.¹ These are authoritative accounts as they were written by participants in the expedition. A second-hand account written by Garcilaso de la Vega, a Peruvian, from information given him years afterwards by one of De Soto's men and considered of less reliability, will not be as fully relied on.²

Before considering these sources in detail it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with the location and geographical features involved at Terra Ceia. As shown on the accompanying map, the main Terra Ceia site is located on the western side of the southwestern arm of Terra Ceia Island. Its area is indicated by "SITE?" along the eastern shore of McGill Bay. Circles to the east and south of the site represent ponds. The southwestern tip of the island, the western half of Fletcher Point, and most of the land between the northeastern part of Terra Ceia Bay and Bishop Harbor is low, wet, and covered with mangroves. The island is also low in elevation and at various places dykes

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1. Bourne, E. G., "Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto." Reprinted in *American Explorers*. 2 vols. Allerton Book Co., New York, 1922.
 2. Lewis, B. B., and W. H. Wilkinson, translators, *La Florida of the Inca* by Garcilaso de la Vega. Typed manuscript in Florida Park Service files.

have been built to prevent flooding of fields by water from Tampa Bay in times of storms.

It is evident from the narratives that Juan de Anasco had previously located a harbor for De Soto's landing and captured



four Indians to serve him as guides. ³ References to "the village" ⁴ suggest Ucita had also been picked out in advance by Anasco to be the expedition's first headquarters. Certainly it was De Soto's immediate objective upon arriving in Florida.

The map indicates it is very doubtful that Anasco could have seen the Terra Ceia site if coasting along the southeastern side of Tampa Bay, although he might have seen smoke from the village fires. McGill Bay is more than a mile wide and is separated by three islands from Tampa Bay. At this point shallow water, with a depth of only three feet below mean low water, extends into Tampa Bay at least a half mile. ⁵ As McGill Bay cannot be entered by a boat drawing more than four feet of water (and then tortuously) and is itself shallower, it is reasonable to believe Anasco did not enter it. An explorer looking for a harbor would easily find the Indian site at Shaws Point, other Indian villages on both sides of the Manatee River, and other sites on Tampa Bay, but hardly the one at Terra Ceia. Hence this site does not, apparently, meet the requirement of preknowledge which De Soto seemed to have.

Ranjel writes that after the landing, "The General and some foot soldiers went in the brigantines to see the village; and a gentleman named Gomez Arias returned in one of them and gave a good report of the country." ⁶ If the landing was made at Shaws Point, as has been assumed for this paper, this would mean sailing or rowing from that point westward around Snead Island, northeasterly around McGill Island, and then across McGill Bay. To do this successfully and to return easily, as the narrative implies, would indicate a detailed knowledge of these waters which neither De Soto nor Arias may be presumed to have had. Also, the gentleman's "good report of the country" would hardly seem applicable after such a trip.

3. Bourne, 1922, vol. II, p. 53; Garcilaso would place these Indians as subjects of the chief of Ucita.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-5.

5. U.S.C. & G.S., chart 586.

6. Bourne, 1922, vol. II, p. 55.

Ranjel also writes, "Since the ships with their loads could not, on account of the shoals, proceed to where the village lay, they anchored about four leagues farther back."⁷ Also, "During all that week the ships gradually approached the village."⁸ Elvas says, "Two hundred and thirteen horses were set on shore, to unburden the ships, that they should draw less water; the seamen only remaining on board, who going up every day a little with the tide, the end of eight days brought them near to the town."⁹ Also that the first "camp was pitched on the seaside, nigh the bay, which goes up close to the town."¹⁰ De Soto also writes "to take possession of a town at the end of the bay."¹¹

The above statements by Ranjel, Elvas, and De Soto all clearly imply the village was located further up the bay from the landing place (*i.e.* on the same body of water) and, in two cases, that the ships finally came to anchorage "close" to the town. Again, a glance at the map will disclose that the Terra Ceia site does not meet these requirements. There is no suggestion in the narratives that, after a first landing, the ships went west and then north around Snead Island to Terra Ceia Bay. If they did, they must have drawn less than eight feet at high tide. Also they would have encountered a "hard" bottom while the narratives refer to a "soft" bottom.

Again, Ranjel writes, "On Trinity Sunday, June 1, 1539, this army marched by land toward the village . . . and they lost their bearings somewhat. . . . Thereupon the Governor went ahead with some horsemen, but since they were unfamiliar with the land they wearied the horses following deer and floundering in the streams and swamps for twelve leagues till they found themselves opposite the village on the other side of the

7. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 55-6.

9. Bourne, 1922, vol. I, p. 22.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Bourne, 1922, vol. II, p. 160.

roadstead of the harbour, which they could not pass around."¹²

It will be noted from the map that the Terra Ceia site could not have been seen from the eastern side of Terra Ceia Bay because of the mile-wide bay and the intervening half mile of woods on the opposite side. The only place De Soto could have seen that site across water would be from Fletcher Point. That he could have set out from near Shaws Point, gone around the Manatee River, and happened to successfully stumble through the swamps connecting Terra Ceia Bay and Bishop Harbor to eventually reach the only place from which he could have seen the site across water, Fletcher Point, is scarcely possible. And if he had done this, he could have passed around McGill Bay which, incidentally, could never qualify as "the roadstead of the harbour."

It should be noted the text does not imply a trip of twelve leagues was necessary to reach Ucita by land, merely that was the distance De Soto wandered. He did not expect to have to go such a distance to reach Ucita. Clearly he went around both the village and the roadstead.

Elvas describes Ucita as a "town of seven or eight houses, built of timber, and covered with palm-leaves. The Chief's house stood near the beach, upon a very high mount made by hand for defense; at the other end of the town was a temple. . . . The Governor lodged in the house of the Chief . . . in other houses, midway in the town, was lodged the Chief Castellan, Baltasar de Gallegos, where were set apart the provisions brought in the vessels. The rest of the dwellings, with the temple, were thrown down, and every mess of three or four soldiers made a cabin, where they lodged. The ground about was very fenny,¹³ and encumbered with dense thicket and high

12. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

13. Robertson, J. A., in his "A True Relation of the Fidalgo of Elvas, 1557." *Publications of the Florida State Historical Society*, Number II, vol. 2, p. 34. DeLand. 1933, does not include "very fenny and" in his translation.

trees. The Governor ordered the woods to be felled the distance of a crossbow-shot around the place, that the horses might run, and the Christians have the advantage, should the Indians make an attack at night." ¹⁴

This description may be applied to the Terra Ceia site only if one assumes the Spanish omitted mentioning two burial mounds and a narrow causeway extending 400 feet in a straight line between one of these mounds and the "mount" upon which De Soto was housed.

The site's suitability as the headquarters of an army is even more questionable. It consisted essentially of a long, high, and broad shell ridge or midden which might, conceivably, be large enough to accommodate De Soto's 570 soldiers, allowing for some crowding. However, as has been mentioned, the ground around the shell ridge is low and dotted with ponds. Extra high tides, such as accompany severe storms, sometimes pass through the shell ridge and inundate the land behind. Space for the expedition's horses and hogs would have been limited.

Ucita is referred to several times in the narratives as a "port." Elvas says, "The Cacique of Mococo came to the port" ¹⁵ and De Soto "left thirty cavalry and seventy infantry at the port, with provisions for two years." ¹⁶ Ranjel writes, "and there were of them forty horse and sixty foot left in guard of the village and the stuff and the harbour and of the brigantines and boats that were left." ¹⁷ De Biedma also states the rearguard was "left in charge of the port." ¹⁸ McGill Bay is scarcely a "harbour" or "port." If Terra Ceia Bay, in spite of its shallow entrance, ¹⁹

14. Bourne, 1922, vol. I, p. 23.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

17. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 63.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

19. The entrance to Terra Ceia Bay now has a depth of six feet at mean low water. Recent records indicate an advance of sea upon land at a rate of about a foot a hundred years at both Cedar Keys and Key West (letter of July 1, 1949 from J. H. Hamley, U.S.C. & G.S.). It is likely this channel was shallower in 1539 than now.

should be assumed to be the "port," the site would seem to be in the wrong location to give protection.

In addition we have the negative evidence from archaeology. Although bona fide De Soto relics have not been found anywhere, except for possible individual specimens, Ucita, of all places, would be the most likely spot. Not only was De Soto's army of 570 men encamped there for six weeks with full equipment but a rearguard of about a hundred lived there for five months. When they left, surplus supplies were burned, according to Ranjel;²⁰ or, according to Garcilaso, given in great quantities to Mococo, the friendly chief of a nearby village.²¹

In spite of a great amount of shell and mound removal at Terra Ceia, all possible finds which might relate to De Soto consist of a Spanish medallion(?) (now lost), a piece of horse hardware, one sherd of a Spanish olive jar, and a sword-like piece of metal.²² It would seem as if more should have been found if Terra Ceia were the Ucita of the narratives.

We have discussed every reference to De Soto's first headquarters found in the original narratives. Apparently none apply when referred to the Terra Ceia site on the eastern side of McGill Bay. There are other locations which meet most of the requirements imposed by the narratives, but their consideration is beyond the scope of this article.

***Florida Park Service,
Gainesville, Florida.***

20. Bourne, 1922, vol. II, p. 81,

21. Lewis and Wilkinson, n.d.

22. Bullen, R. P., "The Terra Ceia Site, Manatee County, Florida." *Florida Anthropological Society, Publications*, No. 3, p. 37. Gainesville. 1951.