



Top: The 1936 United States De Soto Expedition Commission standing in front of Smith Hall on the University of Alabama campus, December 1936. The young boy is Douglas E. Jones, who is now head of the Alabama De Soto Commission. *Front row, left:* Jones, Mr. Nelms, Mrs. White, Mr. Albert Thornton, Mrs. W. G. Brorein, Dr. John R. Swanton (chairman), Dr. Walter B. Jones (secretary). *Second row:* Miss Dorothy Maxwell, Miss Mary Claire Ryan, Dr. Roland M. Harper, Col. John R. Fordyce, Miss Ellen Hildreth, Miss Caroline Dorman, Miss White. *Back row:* Mr. John Buckner, Mr. Jones Foster, Mr. William Haag.

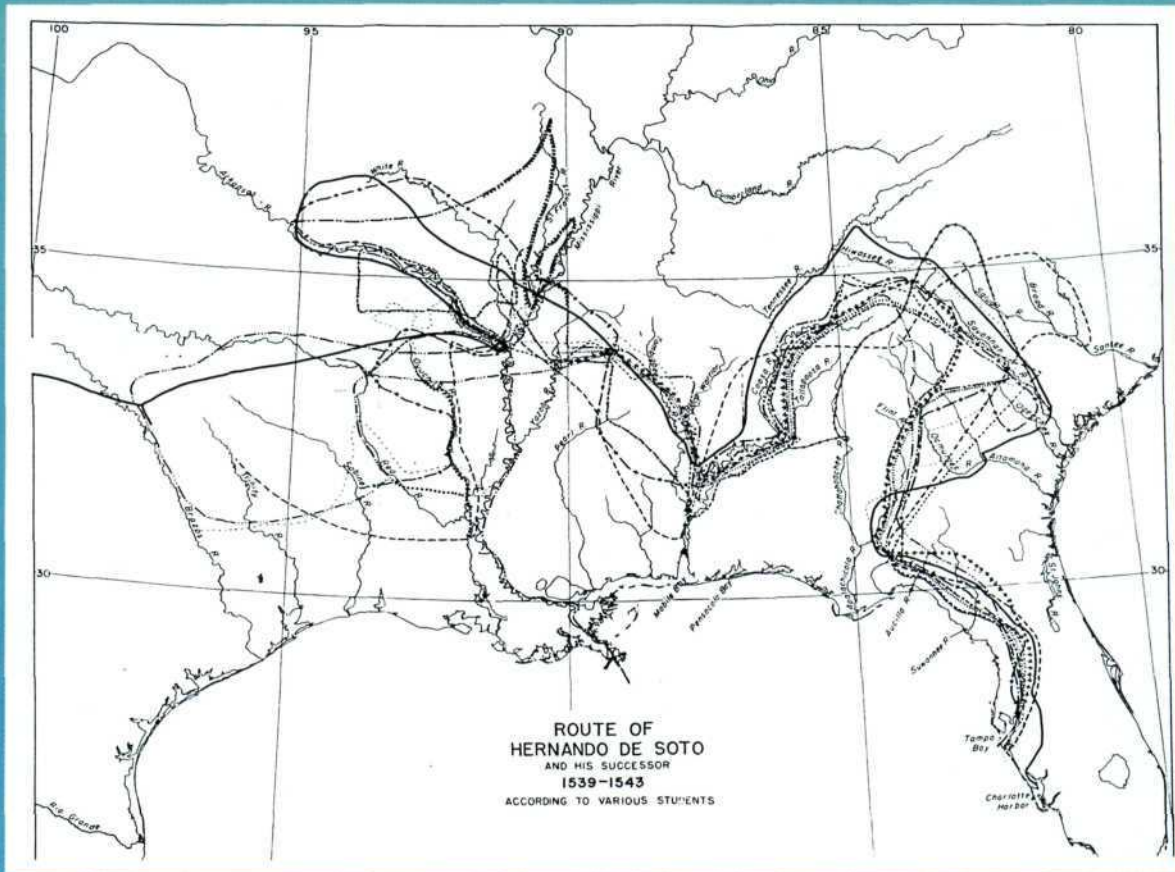
(Courtesy Alabama State Museum of Natural History)

Bottom: The 1985 Alabama De Soto Commission: *Front row, left:* Douglas E. Jones (chairman), Paul B. Mohr, Sr., Bessie Jones, Margaret S. Douglass, T. Clifford Bibb, Charles Hudson, Caleb Curren. *Second row:* Edwin Bridges, Joe Caver, Nicholas H. Holmes, Jr., Richard Bailey, Daniel T. Williams, James W. Oakley, C. J. Coley. *Third row:* Joe T. Smitherman, Amos J. Wright, Lawrence Oaks, Vernon J. Knight, Jr. Not shown: Alfred H. Mitchell, Joaquin Cervino, Jean Pinkerton.

(Courtesy Alabama State Museum of Natural History)

Right: The "spaghetti map" prepared by the 1936 United States De Soto Expedition Commission illustrates the various De Soto routes then under consideration.

The De Soto Commissions, 1936, 1985



The route followed by Hernando De Soto in 1540 through what is now the southeastern United States has mystified scholars and the public alike for centuries. To resolve the mystery, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the United States De Soto Expedition Commission in 1936, four years before the four hundredth anniversary of De Soto's expedition. Headed by Dr. John R. Swanton of the Smithsonian Institution, the commission issued a report in 1939 outlining the various hypothetical routes put forward by scholars [see the "spaghetti map," above]. The Swanton report also presented a model route based on "available historical, ethnological, archaeological, geographical, and geological information." That route was proposed to Congress as the "official" De Soto route for the quadricentennial.

In the intervening half-century, new evidence and new archaeological methods and testing procedures have disproved many of the hypotheses put forward in the national commission's report. Additionally, in recent years, portions of De Soto's route have been fixed with a reasonable amount of scientific confidence in Florida, east Tennessee, and north Georgia. As yet, no site in Alabama has been confirmed, but several look promising.

Anticipating the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of De Soto's *entrada* in 1990 and the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America in 1992, several Southern states, including Alabama, have renewed efforts to learn more about the region's Spanish heritage and to locate the De Soto trail. On September 13, 1985, Governor George C. Wallace established the Alabama De Soto Commission, the first commission of its kind in the Southeast. Dr. Douglas E. Jones, Director of the Alabama State Museum of Natural History, was appointed chairman, with four *ex officio* advisors, and sixteen Alabamians were appointed commissioners. During the next four years, the commission will "direct the efforts of researchers relating to the early Spanish exploration and colonization of Alabama," designate "sections of existing highways as the De Soto Trail," and plan an appropriate public commemoration of De Soto's entry into Alabama. Assisting the commission with technical staff and support will be the Alabama State Museum of Natural History, the Alabama Historical Commission, and the Alabama Department of Archives and History.