Were it not for the De Soto chronicles, those contemporary accounts of the ill-fated expedition, there would be practically no evidence that Hernando De Soto was ever in the Southeast. Everyone interested in finding De Soto's route must eventually confront the chronicles, which consist primarily of four documents—three first-hand accounts and one second-hand account of the expedition—all differing widely in reliability and completeness.

The first chronicle, unpublished until 1851, was written by Rodrigo Ranjel, De Soto's private secretary, who kept a diary during the expedition. The surviving portions of the diary trace the expedition from its beginnings at Tampa to its 1541 winter quarters in Mississippi. The second account, published in 1841, was written by Luys Hernando de Biedma in 1544 as a more or less "official" report of the expedition. It has the advantage of being written immediately after the event, but it is woefully brief.

A third chronicle, written by an unknown Portuguese who signed himself "the Gentleman of Elvas," was published in 1557, just fourteen years after the *entrada*. Its strength is that it was compiled relatively soon after the events and seems to be uninfluenced by other accounts. The last of the chronicles was compiled by Garcilaso de la Vega in 1591. This volume includes the testimony of several participants, primarily Gonzalo Silvestre, a minor member of the expedition. It is the longest of the chronicles, but it is heavily romanticized and is primarily responsible for the popular legend of De Soto as a romantic hero. Written almost forty years after the expedition, the work is of doubtful accuracy, but it has been widely published in French and German since 1670.

Given the conflicts, variations, and inconsistencies apparent in the chronicles themselves, it is not surprising that historians and other scholars have interpreted the chronicles—and the route of De Soto—in widely diverging ways. And if Luna found it difficult to locate De Soto's trail twenty years after the expedition, the task of retracing the route nearly four hundred and fifty years later, using documents shot through with unknown flaws, is also full of hazards.

Serious efforts to locate the trail appear on Spanish maps as early as 1544. Notable nineteenth-century attempts to trace the Alabama portion of the journey were made by historians Albert J. Pickett and J. F. H. Claiborne in 1851 and 1880, respectively. The founding of the Alabama Anthropological Society in 1910 provided yet another boost to De Soto studies and to Alabama archaeology. That society's monthly report, "Arrowpoints," published several interpretations of possible De Soto routes, notably those by J. M. Andrews in 1916, and James Y. Brame in 1928.

The major event in a long line of historical attempts to find the trail of the famed explorer, however, was the establishment of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission in 1936. Created by Franklin D. Roosevelt in anticipation of the 400th anniversary of De Soto's *entrada,* the commission was composed of seven representatives from the Southeastern United States. Led by Dr. John R. Swanton of the Smithsonian Institution, who had been studying the De Soto route since 1918, the commission published its findings in 1939. In that publication, Swanton, who seems to have been the report's sole author, treats the complicated subject of the different routes at some length. Using a chart of the Southeast, Swanton plotted a number of routes proposed by earlier scholars, creating what has come to be known as the "spaghetti map" (*page 23*). This map, with its confusing, overlapping lines, illustrates well the difficulties involved in reconciling the various hypotheses.

Swanton also presented the commission's well-considered model for the route, which was based on a detailed analysis of the Spanish chronicles and which combined the best features of the hypotheses. The report recommended that Congress accept the commission's version as the official quadricentennial route.

**Much of what was "known" about the De Soto trail in 1939 has proven incorrect.**

The commission also recommended that markers be set up along highways intersecting the De Soto Trail and that Congress appropriate $5,000,000 to cover celebrations in the various states and to underwrite additional research. Few of these requests ever bore fruit. The report was published and a few markers were placed by historical groups in various states, but no money for commemorative celebrations or additional research ever materialized.

After the publication of the Swanton report in 1939, the controversy over the De Soto route slackened for many years. The report's authoritative tone gave many readers the impression that all questions regarding De Soto's travels in Alabama had been answered. People "knew" where Tali was, where Coosa was, where Mabila was. Unfortunately, much of what was "known" about the De Soto trail in 1939 has proven incorrect.