

NEARBY HISTORY:

The De Soto Trail

Did explorer's route take Spanish through this area? What was 'pure' Indian culture like before Europeans arrived?

Did a Spanish army pass through present-day Lancaster and York counties in 1540?

Archaeologists and historians from universities in 10 Southern states along with various government departments have for at least 30 years been hard at work on the question of the exact route taken by Hernando De Soto when he laid claim to most of the present-day Southern United States for Spain. De Soto's venture was 67 years before the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Va.

There is no question that De Soto left Tampa Bay with at least 500 men. The overland route from Florida to a site called Silver Bluff about 20 miles south of Augusta, Ga., has been mapped.

The puzzle has been the route taken after crossing the Savannah River into South Carolina. Formerly, historians thought that it was most likely that a mysterious Indian town the Spanish called Cofitachequi was at Silver Bluff and if so, the De Soto records would limit the Spanish penetration into South Carolina to an area that ran from the coast to the mountains between the Saluda River and the Savannah River with the possibility that a scouting party led by Juan Pardo came as far inland as the Catawba Indian Land.

Now, with more and more fresh archaeological evidence, the new theory is that De Soto's men went inland to the Congarees near present-day Columbia (which may have been the site of Cofitachequi) and split, with one group going toward Cheraw and the other up the

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Louise Pettus



Catawba River.

There hasn't been any real evidence to show which side of the Catawba River but Chester De Pratter of the University of South Carolina hopes the De Soto Trail Commission will place historical markers from Camden to Lancaster on S.C. 97, and then up U.S. 521 to S.C. 160, which goes through Fort Mill and on to the N.C. line. Others would like to see the trail marked on Interstate 77.

Charles Hudson of the University of Georgia, who wrote a cultural history of the Catawba Indians in 1970, directed a major institute for scholars, "Spanish Explorers and Indian Chiefdoms: The Southeastern United States in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" in 1989. The institute focused on the time period 1526-1670 (1670 was the year the English established the Charles Town colony).

Besides an interest in where the Spanish explorers traveled in the Southeast, the scholars addressed questions on the nature of Indian societies in the 16th century Southeast and what effect the European settlements had on the "pure" pre-European culture following contact with the white man in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Currently, archaeological evidence, when added to new translations of Spanish records, points toward the idea that Indian society was breaking down in the century before the settle-

ment of Charles Town. Population decline and other factors caused a realignment of tribes.

Hudson believes the Catawbas were one of the surviving tribes that took in remnants of a number of less successful tribes. Hudson says that in 1710, the present-day Catawbas were known as Esaws and that in 1740, the Catawbas spoke at least 20 different dialects. The language called Catawba was the "court language" for the 20 tribes. He has no doubt that the Catawbas were culturally affiliated with the Cherokees.

De Soto and his men had two goals: to find gold and other riches and to convert the Indians to Catholicism. In contrast, the English, experimenting with a rudimentary form of capitalism, hoped to achieve wealth through trade with the Indians and wanted land for their surplus population.

The first extensive European contact with the Catawba Indians was through traders from Virginia who came to this area around 1680, seeking animal pelts. They came down the Occaneechee Trail through Salisbury, N.C., to Charlotte. South of Charlotte, the trail split. The most eastern trail is near U.S. 521 in Lancaster County, called by early settlers of this area, "The Great Wagon Road."

The trail southwest of Charlotte became known as the Nation Ford Road, roughly following U.S. 21 and crossing the Catawba River south of Celanese at the point where the Southern Railway trestle is now.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.