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De Soto Trail Study

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The De Soto National Trail Study Act of 1987 (Public Law 100-187) directed the National Park Service to conduct a feasibility study of the approximate route traveled by Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto and provide recommendations to Congress as to its suitability for national historic trail designation. The preliminary report prepared by the Southeast Regional Office of the National Park Service (NPS), assisted by the Southwest Regional Office, describes the study and provides an analysis of national historic trail designation as well as other alternatives appropriate for the commemoration of the De Soto expedition.

Hernando de Soto and 600 men landed on the west coast of Florida in May of 1539. They explored the southeastern United States—Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana—for more than four years, searching for gold and silver, and fighting repeated battles with Native Americans. More than 300 soldiers, including De Soto himself, died during the expedition. Although the expedition was judged to be a failure because it discovered no new wealth, it was the first group of Europeans to explore the vast interior portion of the southeastern United States.

During this century, a number of attempts have been made to delineate the actual route of the De Soto expedition. The first significant route hypothesis was that of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission whose findings were completed in 1939. A substantial advance in archeological data subsequent to the Commission's findings has resulted in several more recent hypotheses. The most widely accepted—that of Dr. Charles Hudson, University of Georgia—is based on the expedition chronicles (as were the Commission's findings), the travels of related expeditions and substantial data from a number of archeological investigations. Even though a number of investigators are actively working on various route hypotheses, the only location to which De Soto can be linked with a reasonable degree of certainty is the site of the expedition's first winter encampment in Tallahassee, Florida.

As a result of the De Soto Trail Study, the NPS has determined that the route of the expedition fails to meet two of the three criteria for national historic trail designation. Although the expedition is of national significance, the determination indicated that there is a substantial lack of evidence as to the actual route location and that potential for historic interpretation cannot be adequately assessed at this time.
Consequently, the NPS provided the National Park System Advisory Board with a recommendation that until the actual location of the De Soto expedition route is determined, it does not qualify as a national historic trail. In view of this determination, several alternatives to national historic trail designation are analyzed in the draft study report, including the completion of a state-by-state highway marking effort first initiated by Florida, the enactment of special legislation to formally commemorate the expedition through the establishment of a National Heritage Corridor or creation of a De Soto Expedition Trail Commission, and the expansion of existing federal and state interpretive facilities associated with the De Soto expedition.