

# *Mabila*

## **The Largest Battle Ever Fought Between Europeans and Natives on American Soil**

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It was October of 1540. The first large European army ever to set foot in the interior of the current United States marched into southwest Alabama. The Spanish army had landed on the coast of central Florida the previous year and trekked north through the Southeast. They marched through a large portion of the Appalachian Mountains and then turned south, heading toward their resupply ships waiting for them in Pensacola Bay. The story of the travels of the Spaniards is remarkable and has gained legendary status. The battle of Mabila was the pinnacle of that journey.

Mabila was a small Native town, likely in current Clarke County, Alabama. The Native peoples had set a trap for those strange Spaniards who rode animals they called horses and carried metal weapons the locals had never seen before. The Natives wanted to kill them all, the Spaniards and the animals they rode.

The Spanish left written records of their journey. One was written by a knight and personal secretary of the leader of the expedition, Hernando de Soto. Other accounts were written by the king's representative and a knight from Portugal and a son of a Spanish knight and an Inca mother. The documents are rich with details of the expedition.

The Spanish army crossed the Alabama River from east to west in southwest Alabama. They entered rough terrain. They called it, the "montes" or "little mountains." Apparently, the area did not contain Native villages, for the army camped in the wilds. The next night the army did camp in a Native village and reported that there were numerous Native settlements in the region on their way to Mabila. The army had reached a "plain" after they passing through rugged terrain.

The next morning the Spaniards came to the fateful Native town of Mabila. The Spanish commander, Soto, had sent scouts ahead of the main army to reconnoiter the area. They warned him that thousands of warriors were sequestered in large buildings in the town. Soto ignored the warnings and ordered the advance party of his army into the town. Young Native women danced for the Spaniards to lure them into a state of security, though strangely there were no children or old people in the town.

The Native warriors suddenly rose up against the Spaniards. A fight broke out. It turned into a battle, the largest ever fought between Europeans and Natives in the current U.S. Thousands were involved. Native warriors boiled out the buildings within the town. The Spaniards fought for their lives. They were forced out of the town. Arrows flew, swords were wielded. Soto was shot in his buttocks and fought the rest of the battle standing in his stirrups on his horse. The main army arrived and forced the Natives back into the town. The Natives taunted the Spaniards from atop the walls of Mabila Town, waving Spanish possessions they had captured from the initial onslaught in the town.

The Spaniards were incensed. Soto organized his army and attacked the town from all sides. Battle axes were used to tear through the wooden and clay walls of the town. A fire broke out. The town was ablaze. The Natives engaged the Spaniards outside their walls. They were slaughtered by the cavalry with their horses and long-handled spears (pikes).

The battle lasted all day. A pond near the town was stained with blood from the wounded men on both sides coming to drink in their exhaustion from the battle. The Native dancing women had even become warriors as the battle wore on, picking up the weapons of their dead relatives and fighting the Spaniards.

The Spanish held the field but all of them were wounded. They camped that night by the smoldering wooden walls of Mabila, afraid that more Natives would come and attack them. None came. None were left to come. The last of them hung himself with his bowstring from a tree in the wall of Mabila Town.

The Spaniards moved their camp away from the town and settled in an open field. It took the survivors a month to recover from their wounds.

One of the most amazing events of history then happened. The men in the expedition knew they were headed for their resupply ships in the Bay of Ochuse (Pensacola Bay). Hernando de Soto managed, through sheer will and force of personality, to turn the army north, away from their ships ... their lifeline.

The army marched into history and immortality. They gave us our first recorded history of the Native peoples of the interior of the current southeastern United States. Half of them died in the process.

The bedraggled remains of the Soto Expedition drug themselves into Mexico City. Once the people recognized them they became revered for their remarkable adventures.

*“Along the roads a very great concourse of people, Castilians as well as Indians, thronged to see them; and the crowds were amazed to behold Spaniards afoot, bare-legged, and clothed in animal skins ... Moreover the onlookers were shocked at seeing our people so sunburned and haggard ... as a result, both Indians and Spaniards offered them hospitality with much affection and great acts of endearment.”*

(from the writings of Garcilaso de la Vega, the son of a Spanish Conquistador and an Inca Princess.)

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The researchers of Contact Archeology Inc. are looking for the Mabila Battle Site. It is a linchpin for understanding the Anthropology of the Native and Spanish peoples on that day in October of 1540.



Credit: De Soto National Monument, Bradenton, Florida