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Joint Report

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Cabeza de Vaca

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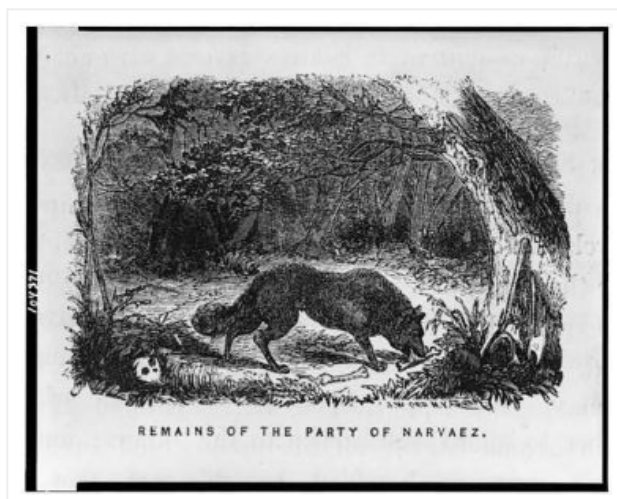
Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

Cabeza de Vaca, Joint Report

In 1527 Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo, and Andrés Dorantes sailed with Pánfilo de Narváez through Cuba to Florida. The expedition suffered many hardships, including the loss of two ships and several men, due to a hurricane prior to reaching Florida. The men in the expedition faced trials such as thirst, starvation, captivity, illness, and aggression as their numbers dwindled from hundreds to a mere four. These four survivors spent eight years traveling from Florida to Mexico.

*Upon reaching safety in Mexico, Cabeza de Vaca, Castillo, and Dorantes co-authored an account of their trials and triumphs as they trudged from the shores of the Gulf of Mexico in Florida through the untamed lands of North America, before reaching the colonized New Spain on the western coast of the continent. Their account, dubbed “Joint Report,” chronicled their eight year journey resulting from the failed Narváez expedition. No record exists of the original “Joint Report,” save a version of the text provided by Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, in his *Historia general y natural de las Indias*.*



— J.W. Orr, “Remains of the Party of Narvaez” (1858). Courtesy, Library of Congress.

Traditionally overlooked in its importance to colonial America and the early United States, Florida is lush with early literary texts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, showing a vast wilderness of legend and beauty. "Joint Report" is a tale of exploration, desperation, captivity, struggle, starvation, thirst, faith, conversion and more. It is a vital text for viewing and understanding Florida's place in the colonial history of the Americas. Through the eyes of these desperate Spaniards, one can imagine encountering early Florida and its neighboring areas, explore its sublime landscape, meet its indigenous population, and struggle through its unpredictable climate.

The following is the first chapter from Oviedo's Historia General y Natural de las Indias. A brief summary of the remainder follows in brackets and italics. Significant departures between the "Joint Report" and more widely read Chronicle by Cabeza de Vaca are noted.

Translated and edited by Catherine Johnston, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Further Reading

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"The Joint Report"

Chapter One

From the account of those who escaped from the hapless ships of Captain Pánfilo de Narváez and what happened to them on the coast and Northern lands.

Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo, and Andrés Dorantes, alone, with one negro called Esteban, survived from the whole armada of the Governor Pánfilo de Narváez. This Cabeza de Vaca was the treasurer and official of His Majesty, who says that from Xagua, which is a port of cove on the Isle of Cuba, on the 15th day of February 1527, had written to His Majesty what had

happened there, and of the loss of two ships with sixty men and all which on them went. Those who lost people and ships, and twenty horses which were on them, agreed to rest there in the port of Xagua, where says this Cabeza de Vaca, who was from the 6th day of November of the year already said, with four ships and all of the people, until the 22nd day of the month of February of the following year of 1538, that the Governor arrived there.^[1]

He embarked to continue his journey with four ships and a brigantine, with four hundred men and eighty horses. They went by sea until the 12th day of April, Tuesday of the Holy Week, when they reached the mainland, sailing along the coast in a shallow bay. At the end of it they saw some huts. Another day, Holy Friday. They left on land with the most people they could take on the small boats, and went to disembark together to the huts, in which they found no people because they had been abandoned. One of them was so big that in it they could fit 300 people, and the others were small. They found nets for fishing and between them was found a golden bell.

Another day following, the Governor erected banners and took possession of the land for His Majesty, and did come together the officials of His Majesty, and the friars who were there, and all the people who had gone ashore, and he presented the royal provisions which he carried, and was obeyed by all, and was admitted as Governor and Captain General; and the officials presented theirs, and all was done by His Majesty's officers. Then all the people and horses were disembarked, who were very fatigued because they'd been on the ships for many days, and had even lost half of them in the sea.

Another day, Sunday, the day of Easter, the Indians came to that town and talked to the Christians without being understood; but, it seemed that they threatened them and told them to leave the land, and made gestures and threats; and they went away. The following day, to see the land and to explore what it was, the Governor sent six horses and forty men on foot along the northeast road until they arrived that day to a bay that enters the earth, and from there they returned to the people, and the Governor with them, because he was one of the six on horses.

Another day ahead the Governor sent a brigantine, carrying these people, sailing along the coast of Florida to look for a port that the pilot Miruelo said that he knew, where to take these people; which he was wrong, and did not know where he was. The Governor commanded them, thus looking to cross to the island of Cuba, and go to the villa and port of Havana in search of another ship waiting there, in which forty men and twelve horses came; And if they found it, both ships in Havana would take all the supplies they could, and they would take them where the Christians and the Governor were.

When this was done, the Christians there went to the bay that is said they had discovered, and sailed along the coast of it. They had gone four leagues from where they set off and found some Indians, and they took three of them. The Spaniards showed them a bit of corn, asking where they had it. Those Indians led the Christians to a town that was at the end of the bay, and they showed them a bit of corn that they had sown there, which was the first thing they saw in that land. There they found some large Castilian boxes, and in each of them a dead man, the bodies covered with painted leather. It seemed to the commissioner and friars that they were idolaters, and the Governor burned them.^[2] Likewise, there were pieces of shoes and canvas, and of cloth and iron and when the Spaniards asked the Indians, they said that they had been found on a ship that had

been lost on the coast and bay.^[3] And he showed the Indians a little gold, and they said that there was none there in that land, but far from there, in the province called Apalache, in which there was much gold in great quantity, which the Christians came to understand by their signs; And all they showed to those Indians, who seemed to them what the Christians had valued, they said that there was a lot in Apalache. With this simple information they departed from there, taking those Indians with them. Ten or twelve leagues from there they found up to twelve or fifteen houses where there was corn, and there were two days without any Indian being seen. They agreed to go where they had left the bookkeeper and the other people with the ships. When they arrived, they gave them an account of what they had found in the land, which was no more than what was said.

Another day, the 1st of May, the Governor spoke with the King's officers and the commissioner; and by decree before a clerk, he told them that he had the will to enter the inland, and that the ships would leave by the coast. He asked them about this plan. The treasurer, Cabeza de Vaca, told him that it seemed to him that he should not abandon the ships, without leaving them first in port and town; At which time, the Governor and those which he commanded could enter the inland, and they would have a place and a designated part where they could return to find the people when agreed; and that for many reasons it seemed to Cabeza de Vaca that the Governor should not enter the inland, because the land through which he had entered, with the information of the Indians and what the Christians had seen, was poor land with no people. Also because they expected the brigantine and ship that is said to be attending with supplies from Havana, and even because the pilots did not know nor sufficiently understand to where they were. And for other reasons that seemed fair to the treasurer, he said that which the Governor had done was not to be.

The commissioner said that his opinion was that they enter inland going near the coast until reaching the port that the pilots said would be fifteen leagues from where the route from Panúco was, which they could not pass without touching on it because it entered the inland in twelve leagues, and that the ships would wait for them; they should not return to embark because it would tempt God, for in this journey many fortunes and works had suffered to get there.

The accountant and the inspector conformed with the commissioner and the Governor determined to do it like that; but the treasurer, in view of his opinion, asked many times that the Governor not enter for the reasons he had said and others that increased in his requests, nor should he abandon the ships and people who were in them without first staying in a known and populated port that he [the Governor] would then do that which he had wanted; and so he asked for testimony from the notary which was present. More the Governor replied that because there was no port or arrangement to populate the land and that it was barren, that the people who had settled would search for a new port and land to populate and he asked for testimony from the notary. Then he ordered that all people prepare to go with him and that the ships were provided of what they needed.

On the next day, they set off from there taking forty horses and 260 men on foot.^[4] They left with the officers and the commissioner and other friars, and they entered the land. They walked fifteen days with a pound of bread and a half a ration of bacon^[5] until they came to a river that they swam across. After which, 200 indians came and fought with them. They captured five or six of the indians, who took them to their homes, which were near to there, where they found a lot of corn in the field which was ready to be eaten.

The next day, the officials and the friars begged the Governor to send them to search for the sea and port, if there was one. He commanded the treasurer and Alonso del Castillo, who went with forty men, and so they went on foot because they couldn't take horses. They walked by the shallows of the sea coast, through oyster beds,^[6] the work of two leagues and they came to the river they had passed the day before. Because it was deep, they couldn't pass and returned to the army.

The following day, the Governor commanded a captain with six horses and forty men^[7] on foot to follow the river from where they had come and search the bay to see if it had a port, and so he did. He found that it was shallow and ships could not enter there. In light of this, they left from there in search of the province called Apalache, taking with them as a guide the Indians which they'd captured.^[8] They went until the day after Saint John's Day of June,^[9] when they arrived in Apalache, which was the thing in the world that they most wanted, since it was a long trip, as well as the great need of supplies. Although in some places they found corn in the earth, many times they walked four or five days without finding it, and also because of the great gold which was said to be in that province. When they arrived at the town, the Spaniards rushed to enter into it, but they found no resistance in it and they took the women and children captive. There were no men; all were gone. There were forty small houses in this town, and very sheltered, because of the extreme cold and storms which happen in this land. They found many deer leathers and some coarse blankets. There were large quantities of cornfields, and a lot of dry corn in the village.

The land through which these Spaniards passed was flat with crusty sandstones, and many pine groves, although they were scattered and separated from one another's pines. There are many lagoons and very many deer all over the land. Many groves and trees have fallen due to the great storms and hurricanes that often occur in that region, and so they saw many tall trees in the bright and shady sunlight; and all along the way, after they crossed the river that was mentioned, they did not find people who were waiting for them.

After two days in Apalache, the Indians came in peace, and the cacique with them. They asked for their women and children, and were given them all. The Governor had the cacique with him, but the next day they [the Indians] attacked and came to set fire to the huts where the Christians were. There were up to two hundred Indians; but as the Spaniards were cautious, they quickly and boldly went out to them, and the Indians took refuge in the hills and mountains. The Christians could not capture any one; but two or three of them were killed. Then came another two hundred Indians on the next day from another place, and from other towns and people. The Christians also went out to them, and they also withdrew and fled as the first.

The Governor and the Spaniards were in this town for five or six days, in which they made three entries to the inland. Everything they saw of it they found to be poor with few people and very bad paths and lagoons, and thickets of very thick trees. They the cacique and other Indians whom they brought there from the lands and villages near to them. They said that all was of less men and food than where they were, and that this was the most principal town in this land, and ahead there are many depopulated areas, swamps, lagoons, and many large forests. The Christians asked if there were towns and people to the sea; they said that eight days away there was a town called Aute, where there were friends of them, and that they had a lot of corn and beans, and that it was near the sea.

With that which they were told, and with having seen, in the explorations they had made inland, they saw that the land they were in was not as they had been told. They were without hope of finding a better, and where they were, people were beginning to hurt them and to wage war. The Indians had killed a cacique whom the friars brought from New Spain, and they fought other companions who went to drink. The Indians in the lagoons and thickness of those forests shot with arrows all who passed them. Because of all of this, the Spaniards agreed, at the end of the twenty-six days, to leave for Aute

[The rest of the journey was as perilous as the beginning. From here, Oviedo provides a brief commentary about the perils the Spaniards faced, commenting on the irresponsibility of traveling through land that is unknown with inexperienced navigators.

The Spaniards set out for Aute, being attacked by Indians and wounded, only to find all of the houses burned down. Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo, and Andrés Dorantes, with nine horses and fifty men, were ordered to search for the sea. The Governor and the rest of the Spaniards stayed in Aute due to illness and injury.

Eventually, the Spaniards were forced to move on from Aute. They built five canoes and had eaten as much corn as possible and killed all of the horses for sustenance while working on their escape. Upon their escape, they reached an island containing huts and canoes. They used these to shore up the sides of their boats, improving their stability.

During their attempted escape, a storm struck, stranding some of them on an island and separating many of them. Narváez declared that every man should seek his own survival.

Each boat was separated from one of the others, with one being carried out to sea. Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, and Castillo were captured by Indians. They worked for several years as captives for the natives before finally managing to escape together.

Throughout their journey, the Spaniards act as tradesmen, Christian missionaries, and miraculous healers for the Indians as they travel from the Florida peninsula, through Texas, and into the southwest toward New Spain. The report ends with Melchior Díaz telling the Indians to build churches and wear crosses and whenever the Christians are near, they should greet them with crosses, and they will be treated like brothers.]

[1] In *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition*, Cabeza de Vaca claims to be there until the 20th of February.

[2] In *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition*, the crates are burned by the Commissary, not the Governor.

[3] In *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition*, the crates contain linen, cloth, feather headdresses from New Spain, and samples of gold, not iron. Additionally, *Chronicle* makes no mention of a ship, but that the Indians claimed that these things came from Apalache.

[4] In *Chronicle*, this is 300 men on foot.

[5] Two pounds of ship biscuit and ½ pound of bacon each in *Chronicle*.

[6] In *Chronicle*, Cabeza de Vaca mentions their feet being cut badly.

[7] Sixty men in *Chronicle*.

[8] There is much missing here that is in *Chronicle*. For instance, in *Chronicle*, Cabeza de Vaca speaks of meeting a chief wearing a painted deerskin being carried on the shoulders of another Native American, preceded by many playing reed-flutes (15).

[9] June 25th. June 24th is the day of Saint John.