

Hancock, James F. *From Ponce de León to Sir Walter Raleigh: Early European Arrivals in Southeastern North America*

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Long before Jamestown and Plymouth Rock, numerous European voyagers probed, mapped, ravaged, and even settled the North American continent's Atlantic and Gulf shores. Dauntless men like John Cabot, Ponce de León, Cabeza de Vaca, Hernando de Soto, and Sir Richard Grenville revealed the possibilities, and the challenges, of an exciting New World. Centuries later, talented historians and writers like Francis Parkman, Woodbury Lowery, Samuel Eliot Morrison, and Robert Weddle chronicled these voyages, drawing on a rich store of eyewitness narratives. Unfortunately, the contemporary state of historical literacy being what it is, too few among the lay public know much, if anything, of this rich prequel to the national epic.

This trim volume by James F. Hancock, a retired biologist and history writer living in Maine, could help correct this lamentable situation. In only 175 pages of text, Hancock provides a brisk overview of 10 early voyages along the southern coasts of what are now the United States. A companion volume, *From John Cabot to Henry Hudson: Early European Arrivals in Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic North America* (McFarland, 2025), canvasses the trips to the continent's northern Atlantic shores. Throughout, Hancock writes in an accessible manner with lots of subheads and no footnotes, tailor-made to appeal to the busy modern reader. He offers frequent block quotes from eyewitness accounts, as well as recent historical and archaeological studies. The latter helpfully illuminate the complex cultures of the Indigenous peoples who first confronted the Europeans.

In the preface, Hancock explains that he originally intended to write a history of New England, but as his research progressed, he found that he could "not ignore Spanish-dominated Florida and the Southeast" (3). He begins with Ponce de León's 1513 voyage to La Florida, noting that the Spaniard "was the first European explorer to land in the Atlantic mainland of North America" (13). Happily, he quickly dispenses with the Fountain of Youth legend, declaring it "a fabrication of early historians that was perpetuated by those who followed them" (22). Indeed, it is surprising how many writers continue to repeat the story. It is to Hancock's credit that he is alert to the modern historical consensus on the matter.

In relating Panfilo de Narváez's disastrous 1527–35 journey along the Gulf's northern littoral, Hancock leans heavily on Cabeza de Vaca's incredible

descriptions, as well he should. However, he clearly does not know the reason for one of the castaways' most important decisions. "Unfortunately for them," he writes, "near the present Mexican border town of Reynosa instead of turning southeast to the Gulf where they would have found Spanish settlements in a few weeks, they headed west into the rugged Sierra Madre mountains, and then northeast, crossing the Rio Grande" (62). In actuality, the castaways feared the famously hostile Indians who lived along the coastal route. Quite rightly they deemed it wiser to strike west where they could count on a friendlier reception than to risk certain death.

Especially interesting is the chapter on Giovanni da Verrazzano. This Florentine navigator led four ships across the Atlantic in 1524 seeking a passage to the Orient. He represented a consortium of Italian merchants and sailed under the auspices of the French King. In less than a year afloat Verrazzano skirted the Atlantic coast from Newfoundland to Cape Fear and left a remarkable narrative only discovered in 1909. According to Hancock: "It is a pithy firsthand account of the geology, plants, and people of North America that most historians consider to be mostly honest and accurate" (40–41). Given the devastation, both violently intentional and inadvertent through disease that the Europeans were to visit on the continent's native peoples, Verrazzano's description of one early encounter is truly moving. Rough surf threw a young sailor onto the beach, and local Indians pulled him ashore, stripped his clothes, marveled at his white skin, and built a large fire. Verrazzano wrote, "Our sailors in the boat seeing a great fire made up, and their companion placed very near it, full of fear, as is usual in all cases of novelty, imagined that the natives were about to roast him for food" (43). Instead, the Indians "hugged him with great affection and accompanied him to the shore, then leaving him, so that he might feel more secure, they withdrew to a little hill, from which they watched him until he was safely in the boat" (43).

Hancock closes with the better-known tale of the Lost Colony of Roanoke, Sir Walter Raleigh's ill-starred colonization attempt. As to whether Indians absorbed the colonists or massacred them, he leans toward the latter as more likely "considering the previous conduct of the English towards the local people" (165). While this is hardly a minority view, the recent archaeological discovery of 16th-century ironworking on Hatteras Island, which only the Europeans would have known how to do, seems to strengthen the assimilation argument. Which is to say that the study of North America's early exploration remains a surprisingly dynamic enterprise. Hancock's brief book capably summarizes this extraordinary saga for the general reader.

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