

David W Fletcher, June 1999

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GEOGRAPHICAL MISCONCEPTIONS IN SOUTHEAST CARTOGRAPHY

William Patterson Cumming's article, "Geographical Misconceptions of the Southeast in the Cartography of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. IV, No. 4 (November 1938), 476-492, outlines three persistent errors by early mappers, namely "the delineation of the great island of California, the number and location of the five Great Lakes, and the placing of a large lake in the southeastern part of the continent" (page 476). Cumming, however, focuses his attention in the article on the southeast, noting that "by the end of the seventeenth century a long swampy savanna over two hundred miles in length had been placed to the north of the great lake in the piedmont and to the east was a large barren sandy region usually called the Arenosa desert" (page 477).

The De Soto–Moscoso (ca. 1544) map, apparently drawn from information gleaned "from the survivors of the De Soto expedition by Alonso de Santa Cruz, a Spanish royal cartographer" (page 477), the Le Moyne map of Florida (1591), from the artist "who accompanied Laudonniere on the ill-fated French expedition of 1564" (page 478), the Hondius edition of Mercator's *Atlas* with a Le Moyne type plate on Florida (1606), and the work of German physician and scholar John Lederer (1672) all served as prototypes to subsequent cartographers who passed on their mistakes. Interesting are some of the reasons given by Cumming for these misconceptions, e.g., the imagination of the early explorers, stories from Indian legends, failure to put Indian information in a larger spatial geographical perspective, confusion about details, and inability to understand statements or sign language from the Indians.

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Although the misconceptions of southeastern geography persisted in European cartography for sometime (“by the beginning of the eighteenth century continental map makers began to abandon the Mercator–Hondius type map, frequently using the Lederer material in its place,” page 486), John Lawson, surveyor general of North Carolina, built upon the work of the Lords Proprietors’ map by Joel Gascoyne (1682) and laid to rest most of the mistakes of past cartographers with information from personal exploration in his *History of Carolina* (1709). Following this, “the excellent maps of North Carolina by Moseley in 1733 and Wimble in 1738 superseded all that had gone before” (page 486). To the contrary, on the continent, popular atlases by Delisle and Homann “continued to include the Lederer material in some of their maps until the middle of the century” (page 486). Cumming summarizes:

Countless traders, pioneers, and explorers must have looked in vain for [the long savanna, the great Arenosa desert, and the fabled lake with the invisible shore] during the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth centuries before these geographical vagaries of the Southeast at last went the way of Verrazano’s sea, the northwest passage, and the island of California (page 487).

Growth in understanding the American continent interior came slowly. Errors continued until more information and/or better means of collecting and assimilating such data became available.

[Also, I noticed in browsing through several copies of *The Journal of Southern History* from the 1930s that many articles addressed issues of the Civil War. At that time, they were much closer to that event than we are today (about 70 years versus over 130 years). I suppose this might account for the greater interest, although one could plausibly argue that interest in the Civil War hardly has waned.]