

**PONCE DE LEON
AND HIS DISCOVERY OF FLORIDA
IN THE YEAR 1513**



Juan Ponce de León, Discoverer of Florida

By
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A Story should begin at the beginning, so we will start at the beginning with Ponce de Leon's birth. It is not clear exactly what the year of his birth was – perhaps 1474 or even an earlier time perhaps 1460.

Spanish colonization in the New World had come of age before the name Florida was used to designate Spanish territory, for it was 21 years after the landing of Christopher Columbus on San Salvador that one of his companions on his second voyage gave the "Land of Flowers" its name. In those two decades great additions had been made to Man's geographical and ethnological knowledge. Marvelous exploits had been performed by men whose names still stand boldly forth on History's pages. There had been novelty in the first discoveries. Much attention was paid to the origin and previous accomplishments of the men who made them. By 1513 discovery was becoming a more or less routine occupation. The later discoverers received less intensive consideration. Information concerning them is scattered.

The discoverer of Florida, Juan Ponce de Leon, came from a family of ancient Spanish nobility and could count as one of his ancestors a King of Leon.

In the year 1142 don Pedro Ponce de Minerva came from southern France, as majordomo of Alfonso IX, King of Leon, and established his residence in the city of Leon, head of that Kingdom. By marriage with dona Aldonza Rodriguez de Leon, daughter of King Alfonso and dona Martinez de Silva, he obtained government of the City. His descendants adopted the name Ponce de Leon and as their Arms the red lion rampant, similar to that on the Spanish Arms, but with the royal crown.

With the passage of years the Ponce de Leon family divided into two branches. One went south to establish itself in Seville and Cadiz. A scion of this branch, don Rodrigo Ponce de Leon, was a leader in the wars of Granada. Its head, don Pedro Ponce de Leon, was Duke of Cadiz at the time Columbus discovered America.

The other branch remained in the north of Spain. It is from this northern branch that the discoverer of Florida, Juan Ponce de Leon, descended. It is generally accepted that he was born about 1460. Although no record of birth has been found, the place of birth is well established as the village of San Tervas de Campos, situated on the right bank of Rio Valderaduey, on a little hill in the valley called Val Madrigal.

He was born to the distinguished Leon dynasty, a well known and wealthy family controlling much of the Iberian peninsula. It was from this distinguished family that he achieved his character, good physique, red hair, robust strength and brave and aggressive posture in warfare. A Catholic prelate and historian, Vincente Murga Sanz, in searching Ponce de Leon's genealogy, states that he was one of twenty-one illegitimate children of the Count Juan Ponce de Leon, but he was considered an aristocrat. As a young man he served as a page to Pedro Nunez de Guzman, and he began to study the art of warfare in which he excelled. It is thought that by the age of 14 he entered the war against the Moors. Young Ponce then 19 years old joined 200 other gentlemen volunteers to go

aboard Columbus' second voyage to the newly discovered Indies. In the year 1493, he sailed with Columbus to the length of the Antilles including an anchoring off the shore of Puerto Rico. Columbus' seventeen vessels were filled with soldiers and people of many trades – a cross section of people to colonize the Island of Espanola (Hispanola).

In 1493, shortly after the arrival of Ovando, Governor General of the Indies, came Juan Ponce's first opportunity to demonstrate his ability as a colonizer and administrator. A revolt of the natives of Higüey, at the northeastern end of Hayti, had been suppressed by troops under the leadership of Juan Esquivel. Failing to capture the native leader, Esquivel's expedition proved but a temporary victory. When the second rebellion took place, Ponce de Leon commanded the Santo Domingo troops. The native chief, Cotubanama, was captured. As a reward for his services in this campaign Juan Ponce de Leon was focal governor of the province. Establishing himself at Salva Leon, Juan Ponce started development of a large plantation devoted to raising food crops, cattle and horses.

At this time the island of San Juan de Borinquen, now called Puerto Rico, had not been explored. Christopher Columbus had stopped at its western end to obtain water from the spring at Aguada. Other vessels had stopped along its shores for water and firewood, but the interior of the Island remained terra incognita. Natives from Borinquen frequently visited the eastern end of Hayti. These visitors were evidently impressed by the peaceful development of Higüey under Juan Ponce's administration, for they informed him gold was to be found in the rivers of their homeland. This news he communicated to Ovando who ordered him to explore the interior of the Island and found a settlement on it.

On June 12, 1508, Juan Ponce set sail from Salva Leon, carrying food, supplies, and 42 people, many of them natives from his plantation. On August 3rd, his caravelon was thrown on the rocks by a storm in the harbor of Ynaa, and much of the provisions were lost. A fortunate wave refloated the vessel. Not discouraged by this bad beginning, the explorer obtained fresh supplies and proceeded to Mona, a small island lying between Puerto Rico and Hayti. Here he made arrangements with the local native chief to raise crops of yucca, the native name of the plant from whose roots cassava bread is made, to be sent for as needed and paid for in trade goods. It is worthy of note that in all accounts of Juan Ponce's expeditions he is always described as starting with vessels well provisioned. His own reports show that he took great pains to provide additional food supplies. In this particular he evinced much better judgement than most early Spanish explorers who were prone to depend on such supplies as they could obtain from natives by gift or plunder.

From Mona the caravelon was sailed to a landing on the southwest end of Borinquen, where friendly relations were established with the native chief, Agueybana, and arrangements for more yucca planting were made. Here on August 10th, misfortune again overtook the expedition. A sudden tropical storm parted the anchor cable, threw the caravelon high on the beach, and much labor was necessary to set the vessel again afloat. While this was being accomplished, Juan Ponce, in company with Agueybana and native carriers, explored the interior of the Island, particularly the gold-bearing rivers having their mouths on the north coast. Convinced by this exploration that the best location for a

settlement would be in the vicinity of these river mouths, Ponce de Leon sailed eastward, around the eastern end of the Island, then started search for a suitable townsite. Two locations were found undesirable, after short occupancy, and were abandoned after considerable development work had been done.

The great bay on the northern coast had not escaped the explorer's notice. Repeated examination of its shores had not found a suitable site. He then determined to explore inland and find a location as near to the bayshore as possible.

The site selected, about two miles in from the coast, was named Caparra. Here a storehouse was erected. A fortified house of rammed earth wall was built. Extensive planting of yucca and ajos (a species of yam) were made. After a gratifying quantity of gold had been collected, the food supply being inadequate for a longer stay, Juan Ponce decided to return to Santo Domingo to report to Ovando, leaving some Spaniards and some of the natives he had brought with him to care for the growing crops until his return.

During his absence events had occurred in Spain which were to leave a profound effect on the explorer's life. Christopher Columbus was now dead, leaving as his heir his legitimate son, don Diego. As the Spanish Crown had removed the Columbus family from any part in government of the New World, it became necessary for don Diego to bring suit in the Spanish courts to establish his rights as heir to the concessions granted his illustrious father. After prolonged delay, and at last no doubt hastened by don Diego's marriage to dona Maria de Toledo of very influential family, the courts decided don Diego was entitled to all the concessions given Christopher Columbus in the capitulation signed before his first voyage. This verdict was modified, however, by King Ferdinand, who conceded don Diego the title of Admiral but limited him to government of such lands as had been actually discovered by his father.

News of this decision had not reached Santo Domingo at the time of Juan Ponce's return from exploring Borinquen, although Niculus Ovando, wise in the ways of courts and kings, may have suspected how the case would be terminated. In any event he did the best he could to reward Ponce de Leon for his labors by appointing him Governor and Chief Justice of the Island. The explorer returned to Caparra in May, 1509. Although he found his townsite had some drawbacks, the drinking water being impregnated with copperas and the swamp lying between town and bayshore being impassible at times, he still developed on a large scale.

The form of government, as established by Juan Ponce, was the encomienda system devised by Ovando. Under this system the general government of all natives of the island was entrusted to the Governor who might delegate his authority over any group or tribe to a Spaniard designated as an encomendero. Native chiefs remained in charge of their villages and were held responsible for furnishing a certain number of men for mining and agricultural work. Personal service could not be demanded from free natives. Time was allowed them to raise their own food crops and attend to other needs. This system, as

designed by Ovando and practiced by Juan Ponce de Leon, resulted in peaceful development of the island of San Juan de Boringquen as long as the latter remained in charge. Unfortunately, under other administrators, the encomienda degenerated into virtual enslavement.

The first task there was to totally subjugate the Indians in any way possible. Those who escaped death became slaves to work for the gold mines on Spanish plantations. For this task young Ponce was perfectly fitted. He was already restless, well skilled in weaponry, and a true conquistador. The enslavement of the native people in the year 1493, declined the population from 250,000 to fewer than 500 who were still alive in 1538. Again cruelty and disease destroyed the native people.

Ponce was then made the Governor of a land which was known as the Kingdom of Higüey on the eastern end of Espanola. By the year 1506 Ponce was restless. His "foes" had vanished into oblivion and he was ready for another "conquestor" assignment, so he went forth to the large island then called Boringquen now known as Puerto Rico. He landed with 100 carefully selected soldiers – men who loved warfare as well as he did. Here they met the fierce tribe of Caribs, some of the worse cannibals in all of history. Not only did the Caribs eat their vanquished foes, but according to Douglas Peck took the women and children, put them on island and then bred the women for a constant supply of human food. The other tribe of Indians were the friendly Taino, and they could be used as laborers.

Ponce de Leon's campaign to extinguish the Caribs in Puerto Rico was so successful (thanks to his horsemen with lances and large dogs trained to catch and kill the Indians) that the Crown appointed Ponce as the Crown Governor of the Island in the year 1509. He held this post for three years. In the year 1512 Ponce was given the authority to seek and claim the island of Beniny. Throughout the area's early history, the occupying Indians always told the Spanish conquerors that wealth was elsewhere, and so this must have been the case as Ponce asked and received permission to discover the island of Bimini. Older historians believed it was to discover the Fountain of Youth, but reason dictates it was for wealth which was told by the natives. Ponce's sailing records of his rudder and sailing records are much in question, and we probably will never know the real truth.

Whatever the reason Ponce de Leon's course would send him to the eastern shore of Florida and make him famous for landing in La Florida in 1513 and taking it under the name of Spain. It has now been 21 years since Columbus' landing in 1492. Spain wasted no time in sending its ships to Cuba and Central America to take gold and silver and capture slaves. In a few years, Cuba was devastated by the loss of its people to slavery. A group of Cuban fishermen fled Cuba and set up their own settlement among the west coast Calusa Indians. Fishermen from the Caribbean area along with traders had already passed information to the Florida Indians what the Spanish conquerors were like, thus paving the way for the native hostility that would greet Ponce when he attempted to land on Florida's soil along with other early Spanish ships landing on Florida's west coast.

Ponce de Leon had to undertake his exploration voyage using his personal fortune. He had to pay for three ships, their crews, cargo and food. He had to have a large amount of livestock aboard for a long voyage. Ponce's flagship was a large caravel named Santiago. His other caravel was named Santa Maria, and there was also a bergantina.

His small caravan sailed from the island of San Juan on the third of January in the year 1513 leaving Anasco Bay in search of great riches. For the sake of brevity, I have omitted his various anchorages on various islands on his north-westerly course – a course that would change history. From the book "The Discovery of Florida And Its Discoverer Ponce de Leon" by Edward Lawson, I will partially quote his last entry before Florida's discovery: "On the fourteenth day of March, 1513, they arrived at Guanattani, which is twenty-five degrees and forty minutes, and they left from here running northwest. On Sunday the twenty-seventh which was the day of the Feast of Resurrection which commonly they called Flowers, they saw an island (the east coast of Florida)". Then on the second of April, they ran along the coast seeking a harbor, and at night anchored in eight fathoms of water. This beautiful land they ran along was then named La Florida. On Friday the eighth, they set sail. On Saturday the twentieth of April, they saw some native huts along the coast. As the three ships followed the coastline southward they became aware of a current (the Gulf Stream). The strong head wind along with the north flowing Gulf Stream caused Ponce to anchor two of his vessels and rowed ashore. The hostile Indians swarmed upon them and tried to take boat, oars, and arms. Three crew members were wounded. Ponce and his crew withdrew from the beach. (No name is given to those Indians, but they may have been the fierce Ais Indians who controlled the east coast from Jupiter Inlet to Turtle Mound). Ponce again sailed south to a brackish river he called La Cruz (probably Jupiter Inlet), and the crew found some fresh water. (There still remains questions about whether Ponce actually first landed on the Florida east coast).

On Sunday the eighth of May, they found the Cape of Florida and anchored because of the current. This was near an Indian village they called Abaioa. When they set sail again they came upon two islands to the south – one they named Santa Marta (Key Biscayne). On Friday the thirteenth of May, they ran along a bank and a reef of islands they called Pola (Key Largo).

It is remarkable seamanship that enabled Ponce to take his three ships around and through the Florida Keys to reach the Ten Thousand Islands, the Everglades part of south Florida. Their ships then turned northward and northeast until the twenty-third of May. By the 24th they began to run along the west coast. On the third of June, their ships were met by Indians in canoes eyeing their Spanish vessels. The Spanish very wisely did not go ashore from their anchorage at first. Finally they made close contact with the Indians, took four women, and traded skins and low gold with them. Ponce had discovered the Calusa people.

Now comes the big day, Friday the fourth. The ships' sails awaiting a favorable wind had come to the land of the Calusa King, Cacique, Carlos, the land of the mighty Calusa

people. The Spanish on board the ships were astonished that some of the Indians spoke Spanish. They had learned from the Cuban Indians who escaped to the land of the Calusa. The Indians speaking Spanish told them to wait, as the Cacique Carlos wished to trade with them, and he could send gold. Soon up to twenty war canoes, some attached to each other, headed for the ships' anchor ropes to cut them and drag the ships ashore. As the Spanish opened fire on the Calusa canoes, the Indians retreated, but not before the Spanish killed some Calusa warriors and captured four. Two were sent back to Carlos to carry a message of peace and trade. Again Carlos sent out many war canoes, and the fighting went on all day. There is no record of how many Calusa died, but the number must have been high. One writer says the water ran red with their blood.

This exposure was enough for Ponce de Leon, and the following day he set sail for Hispanola and to San Juan. This was April fourteenth, 1513. Ponce stopped at Sanibel to get more water and named it Matanca before leaving on his journey home.

Another stop made by Ponce after passing the Keys was on June 14th. He headed for the last of the Keys (Tortugas), and on June twenty-first he put on board his ships 160 Loggerhead turtles to furnish fresh meat.

Now we come to the most amazing aspect of Ponce de Leon's life. He returned to Spain in 1514. Not too much is known about the six years following his visit. We do know he led a military expedition again against the Caribs in the islands east of Puerto Rico. He was then able to use the ships and soldiers to go back and conquer La Florida.

By the year 1521 Ponce's affairs no longer required his being in Puerto Rico. His home was vacant. New information from other Spanish ships suggested Florida was not an island. Ponce was now aging but craved the excitement of military action.

Ponce de Leon sailed from Puerto Rico on the twenty-sixth of February, 1521, with two ships loaded with settlers and all their supporting gear and tools - all that was needed to begin the first colony by the Spanish in North America. The boats were crowded with farmers, their cattle, sheep and swine. They brought all kinds of seeds and young plants. All kinds of people came who were needed for the settlement including soldiers and all kinds of tradesmen, carpenters - even priests.

The most incredible part of this whole settlement proposal was that Ponce wanted to put his settlement on an island very close to King Carlos' throne room and village on Mound Key. King Carlos was the absolute ruler of maybe as many as 100,000 Calusa people. The Calusa had about fifty villages within just a few miles of Ponce's island settlement. King Carlos had a navy and an army. Ponce de Leon was so uninformed about the strength of the Calusa he wanted to build his settlement right in the middle of a hornet's nest, so to speak.

The settlers were attacked almost as soon as they unloaded their ships. Each day their numbers decreased. The settlers were living in an unhealthy compound, and daily they died from the constant barrage of Calusa arrows. In just a few months the settlement was

destroyed. Ponce de Leon took a Calusa arrow that was probably tipped with a shark's tooth into his thigh. He was taken back to Cuba to die. Douglas Peck says he died in 1521 at the age of 47. Edward Lawson says he lived to age 60. But whatever his age was when he died, building a settlement near King Carlos' Mound Key was certainly the biggest mistake he ever made and cost him his life. His decision to build the settlement next to Carlos showed his great arrogance and ignorance of the Calusa who were known as the Fierce People.

Ponce de Leon's discovery of La Florida was the beginning of the Spanish invasion of Florida. In the first two hundred years of Spanish control of Florida, it was possible as many as 250,000 of Florida's natives lost their lives mostly from the European diseases. At the end of the Spanish period, Florida was almost totally devoid of its native people.

Special Note: If a reader of Ponce de Leon finds it to be of special interest, I urge you to visit the Randell Research Center which is a 52 acre Calusa site of on-going research involving Calusa mounds and remnants of a canal. Their phone number is 239-283-2062, and their address is P.O. Box 608, Pineland, FL 33945-0608. The location is not far south of Sarasota.

To write the story about the life of Ponce de Leon, I used a number of different sources. I was surprised at the differences in the dates used and ages used, so the reader will have to decide which is the closest to the truth.

The two books I used for references more than any other were "Ponce de Leon And The Discovery Of Florida" by Douglas Peck - 1993 and "The Discovery Of Florida And Its Discoverer Juan Ponce de Leon" by Edward Lawson, 1946.