

Juan Ponce de León and the Discovery of Florida Reconsidered

by Samuel Turner

Introduction

This paper will reconsider a number of sources, both those commonly cited as well as some that are less well known, that are used in our interpretation and understanding of Juan Ponce de León's 1513 voyage of discovery to Florida. A number of ideas that are commonly accepted as fact are reexamined. These include the date of Ponce's first sighting of the east coast of Florida, the specific ship types used during the voyage, as well as the perception that the latitudes provided in our principal source for this voyage suffer from a "northing error." The Melbourne Beach landing theory will also be examined and considered in light of these findings. Additional historical information regarding Ponce is offered in order to place him in his contemporary historical context and illustrate some of the political circumstances that led to this voyage.

Ponce was born in the small agricultural town of Santervás de Campos in the province of Valladolid in 1474.¹ As a youth he

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1. Robert Weddle, *Spanish Sea: The Gulf of Mexico in North American Discovery 1500-1685* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 39; Samuel Morison, *The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages A. D. 1492-1616* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 502; Aureio Tió, *Fundación de San Germán y Su Significación en el Desarrollo Político, Económico, Social y Cultural de Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Biblioteca de Autores Puertorriqueños, 1956), 86.

All was going well until the arrival of Diego Columbus, the new governor of the Indies, in August 1509.⁴ Diego Columbus was the eldest son and heir of Christopher Columbus. He was raised in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic Monarchs, and became the head of their household guard. Diego was incensed that King Ferdinand had essentially violated the contract that was drawn up between Christopher Columbus and the Catholic Monarchs at Santa Fe previous to his father's momentous voyage in 1492. According to the terms of the contract, Christopher Columbus and his heirs had the right to appoint political officials in those lands discovered during the 1492-1493 voyages. The lands explored comprised an enormous dominion and the details of the contract gave incredible power to the Columbus family. Diego considered Ponce's mining contract with King Ferdinand an infringement of those rights.

Upon his arrival in Santo Domingo, Diego Columbus appointed political officials to the island of Puerto Rico. These were Juan Cerón and Miguel Díaz de Aux. These men arrived in Puerto Rico in October 1509, with hundreds of immigrant followers intent on gaining wealth through mining and other businesses utilizing Indian labor.

King Ferdinand responded to the situation in Puerto Rico by appointing Ponce governor. The decree was placed secretly on a vessel in Santo Domingo by Miguel de Pasamonte, the king's treasurer on Española, and taken to Puerto Rico where it was delivered. Cerón was adamant the king had no authority to appoint the governor and would not acknowledge Ponce as such. Consequently, Ponce had Cerón and Díaz detained and sent to Spain under arrest to explain their attitude to the king in person. Meanwhile, the train of events initiated by Diego Columbus's settlement venture on Puerto Rico culminated in the Indian rebellion of 1511.⁵

Ponce's tenure as governor was short. Diego Columbus sued the king in the "Cortes of Castile" over numerous issues, including that of appointing his own political officials in lands discovered by his father. The Cortes of Castile, or Royal Council, was a ruling body

4. Samuel Turner, "Inter-Island Trade and Spanish Colonial Expansion from Española 1512-1517" (PhD diss., King's College, University of London, 1998), 397.

5. Floyd, 102-103.

During the course of one of these slaving voyages in the Lucayos, a mariner named Diego de Miruelo accidentally discovered a large land to the north when his vessel was driven there in a storm. Miruelo traded with those he encountered but took no captives.⁹ This was curious behavior for a slaver like Miruelo but he may have observed that the Floridians were a more dangerous adversary and felt himself under-armed for such a venture. He may also have realized that the slaving license issued to him by the government in Santo Domingo did not include this new land and that he would have legal problems upon his return if he took captives.

Shortly thereafter, slavers went directly to this new land in search of captives. The first slaving voyage to follow Miruelo did not have a license for that region. When the ship returned to Santo Domingo with slaves, local Spanish authorities condemned the slaver and attempted without success to have the Indians repatriated.¹⁰ Thus the initial discovery in the north, sometimes termed "Bimini," became common knowledge, even appearing on a map published in 1511. This "unofficial" discovery led ultimately to Ponce's licensed voyage of 1513.

The Fleet

Ponce's fleet consisted of three vessels. However, sixteenth century customs documents and historical sources are in disagreement on the types of ships under Ponce's command. We have conclusive documentary evidence regarding two of Ponce's vessels, however. These were the caravels named *Santiago* and *Santa María de la Consolación*. The *Santiago* had been brought over from Spain by Ponce, possibly with the voyage of exploration in mind. The *Santa María de la Consolación* was likely purchased in Santo Domingo in 1512 since no documentation exists for it arriving from Spain under the ownership of Ponce.

The French scholars Huguette and Pierre Chaunu documented a total of five vessels named the *Santa María de la Consolación* sailing

9. Garcilaso de la Vega, *La Florida del Inca: Historia del Adelantado Hernando de Soto, Gobernador y Capitán General del Reino de la Florida, y de otros Heroicos Caballeros Españoles e Indios* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1956), 14.
10. Carlos Deive, *La Española y la esclavitud del indio* (Santo Domingo: Ediciones Fundación García Arévalo, 1995), 244.

voyage of some five months duration which required a considerable quantity of supplies that could not have been accommodated on a relatively small *bergantín*.

The caravels *Santiago* and *Santa María de la Consolación* began the journey from the port of Yuma in Salvaleón de Higüey. It seems likely enough that a number of the expeditionaries came from Española where they were listed in the vessel's clearance documents. The documents were drawn up in late January 1513 and the vessels sailed, arriving in the port of San Germán on the west coast of Puerto Rico in early February.¹⁵

Both inter-island and trans-Atlantic traders used the port at Yuma. The crews of these vessels were referred to collectively as *gente de mar*, or mariners. The men composing the crews of Ponce's caravels were different, however. These are described in two separate categories in the documents. The first was the typical *gente de mar* found on all ships. The second group was called *gente de tierra*, or landsmen. This group, for the most part, was composed of soldiers needed by any expedition that was going into places unknown or, as was likely with the lands to the north, being exploited by slavers and known to be hostile.

Arriving in San Germán in early February 1513, the two caravels discharged cargo and were then joined by the third vessel of the fleet, the *San Cristóbal*. Ponce's fleet took three weeks to make preparations and await favorable sailing conditions. On the afternoon of March 3, 1513, the small fleet left port and sailed to Aguada, the westernmost extension of the island and, consequently, an excellent navigational landmark.¹⁶ They spent the next day making final preparations and departed to sea that evening on a course of northwest by north.

The small fleet raised the first of the Lucayo Islands on March 8. Its crew sighted and explored a number of islands until March 11 when they anchored and made repairs at an island called Amaguayo. Three days later, on March 14, they arrived at Guanahani, the place of first landfall for Christopher Columbus in the New World.¹⁷ Here they carried out work to prepare one

15. AGI, *Relaciones de Navios, Contaduría*, 1071, ff 231-239.

16. Herrera y Tordesillas, 318; Alonso de Chavez, *Quatri Partitu en Cosmografía Practica, y Por Otro Nombre Espejo de Navegantes* (Madrid: Instituto de Historia y Cultura Naval, 1983), 285.

17. Herrera y Tordesillas, 318.

out to sea, maintaining their heading to the northwest, paralleling the land.

This sighting of the Florida coast on Easter Sunday is where many writers on the subject of the discovery of Florida err in their interpretation of the only known written record available. This stems from a simplistic approach to the Herrera text. Because the land is described as an "island" many historians assume that it must be one of the numerous Bahama Islands. Other theories contend that this "island" was Great Abaco, Grand Bahama, Man of War Cay, or Eleuthera.¹⁹ Not all scholars of the subject make this assumption. Henry Harrisse, writing in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and Benjamin Harrison, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, also interpret Herrera to mean the first sighting of the coast of Florida occurred on Easter Sunday, March 27.²⁰ It was not until Alonso Alvarez de Pineda's 1519 voyage of exploration in the Gulf of Mexico that it was determined to be part of a greater land mass.²¹ This sixteenth century misunderstanding of geography continues to confuse scholars to this day.

A close examination of the Herrera text in reference to Ponce's departure from Puerto Rico and his landing in Florida demonstrates that the way it was written also shows that the first sighting on March 27 and the latitude reading and anchoring the evening of April 2 are all tied to a single discovery event. According to this text, there are six distinct episodes of navigation in the run up to the discovery of Florida. These are different legs of the journey between islands, up to the arrival at Guanahani.

19. Weddle, 41; Robert Fuson, *Juan Ponce de León and the Spanish Discovery of Puerto Rico and Florida* (Blacksburg, VA: The McDonald & Woodward Publishing Company, 2000), 114; Lawson, 24; Peck, *Ponce de León*, 36; Morison, *The European Discovery of America*, 506; James Kelly, "Juan Ponce de Leon's Discovery of Florida: Herrera's Narrative Revisited," *Revista de Historia de América*, 111 (January–June 1991): 52; T. Frederick Davis, "History of Juan Ponce de Leon's Voyages to Florida: Source Records," in *The Voyages of Ponce de León: Scholarly Perspectives*, ed. James G. Cusick and Sherry Johnson (Cocoa: The Florida Historical Society Press, 2012), 39; Luis Arana, "The Exploration of Florida and Sources on the Founding of St. Augustine," in *The Voyages of Ponce de León: Scholarly Perspectives*, ed. James G. Cusick and Sherry Johnson (Cocoa: The Florida Historical Society Press, 2012), 68; Scisco, 724.
20. Henry Harrisse, *Discovery of North America. A Critical, Documentary, and Historic Investigation* (Amsterdam: N. Israel, 1969), 147; Benjamin Harrison, "Old Pictures of the New Florida, Ponce de Leon and His Land," in *The Voyages of Ponce de León: Scholarly Perspectives*, ed. James G. Cusick and Sherry Johnson (Cocoa: The Florida Historical Society Press, 2012), 11.
21. Harrisse, 135.

geographic fix was not given though the islands were identified by name. As we shall see below, the next segment of text was different. While at Guanahani, the crew prepared one of their vessels for the journey across the Windward Gulf suggesting they knew they were departing the island group and expected to be at sea for some time.

Ponce's fleet departed Guanahani sometime after March 14, (Herrera does not tell us the date) and they raised land on March 27. If we examine the text construction for the next episode of navigation we see that it is quite different.

Partieron de aqui [Guanahani] corriendo por el Noroeste y domingo a 27, que era día de Pascua de Resurrección, que comúnmente dicen de flores, vieron una isla y no la reconocieron, y el lunes a 28 corrieron quince leguas por la misma vía, y el miércoles anduvieron de la misma manera, y después con mal tiempo hasta dos de abril, corriendo Luesnorueste yendo disminuyendo el agua hasta nueve brazas a una legua de tierra que estaba en treinta grados y ocho minutos, corrieron por luengo de costa buscando Puerto y la noche surgieron cerca de tierra a ocho brazas de agua.²⁴

They departed here [Guanahani] running to the northwest and Sunday the 27th, which was Easter Sunday, which they commonly called the day of flowers, they saw an island and they did not recognize it, and Monday the 28th they ran 15 leagues along the same course, and Wednesday they traveled in the same manner, and later with foul weather until the second of April they ran west-northwest with the water shallowing to nine fathoms one league from land that was at thirty degrees and eight minutes, they ran along the length of the coast looking for a port and that evening they arrived near land in eight fathoms of water.

The wording of the text does not follow the familiar -travel/arrival, -destination name, and -geographic fix, discussed above. This is because the arrival was protracted. In this case its -travel/arrival, destination, continued travel, continued travel, more travel, geographic fix, arrival. The destination name, *La Florida*, was applied after the landing discussed below.

24. *Ibid.*, 318-319

Table 1. Table showing the names of geographic features with their latitudes as well the quality of the source and textual tense use.

Name	Latitude	Description	Source	Tense
Del Viejo	22° 30'	Place Name / Latitude	Suspect Secondary Source	está
Yaguana	24°	Place Name / Latitude	Suspect Secondary Source	en
Manegúa	24° 30'	Place Name / Latitude	Suspect Secondary Source	está
Guanahani	24° 40'	Place Name / Latitude	Suspect Secondary Source	está
tierra	30° 8'	No Place Name / Latitude	Primary Source	estaba
Cabo de la Florida/ Cabo de Corrientes	28° 15'	Two Place Names / Latitude	Very Suspect Secondary Source	está
Santa Marta	27°	Place Ponce Named / Latitude	Possible Primary Source	en
Santa Pola	26° 30'	Place Ponce Named / Latitude	Possible Primary Source	está
Los Mártires	26° 15'	Place Ponce Named / Latitude	Possible Primary Source	están
La Vieja	28°	Place Ponce Named / Latitude	Possible Primary Source	está

the fleet traveled for the balance of the remaining daylight hours away from that latitude location, anyone who claims to know the exact spot of Ponce's first landing in Florida is unwisely going out on a limb.

One writer, Douglas Peck, who hypothesizes that Ponce's first landing on the Florida coast occurred at Melbourne Beach, contends that no celestial navigation techniques were used at all during the voyage and that latitude was determined strictly by dead reckoning, calculated by estimating distance run north of a known starting point, which in the case of the 1513 voyage, was Puerto Rico.²⁹ Peck attempted an accurate re-sailing of Ponce's 1513 voyage in 1990. This he did with a modern fiberglass fore and aft Marconi rigged craft. The prevailing wisdom with regard to re-sailing voyages is that they must be done with a craft similar in terms of displacement, draft, sailing rig, and spread, which is to say the same square footage of canvas. This Peck failed to do. With regard to dead reckoning just discussed, Peck takes his information primarily from a volume by Samuel Eliot Morison on Christopher Columbus.³⁰ Morison claims that most late fifteenth century European navigation was done by dead reckoning using compass headings and estimated distance traveled over time and that instruments such as the quadrant or the mariner's astrolabe were used only by astrologers, mathematicians and the like.

Regardless, the business of exploration and discovery in completely unknown waters required new methods to chart and locate oneself in the new unknown. As the Portuguese pushed south along the African coast during the course of the fifteenth century, and particularly after moving past Cape Bojador in 1484, they found that returning to Portugal required extensive sailing on the high seas out of sight of land. In order to overcome the problem of fixing a position without familiar landmarks, they developed, in conjunction with the resident Genoese pilots in Lisbon, sailing by *altura*, or altitude. In Spanish this technique was called the "*Regimiento del Norte*", or the "Regiment of the North".³¹

29. Peck, "Reconstruction and Analysis of the 1513 Discovery Voyage," 136-137.

30. Samuel Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea - A Life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1942), 183-196.

31. Douglas Peck, *The History of Early Dead Reckoning and Celestial Navigation: Empirical Reality Versus Theory*. New World Explorers, Inc., <http://www.newworldexplorersinc.org/index.html> (accessed July 17, 2013), 7-8.

Enciso's work was years in the making, and in fact, it is likely he was working on it in 1513 when Ponce and his chief pilot, Alaminos, made their voyage of exploration to Florida. The fact that this first Spanish work on New World geography and navigation, including the Regiment of the North and the Regiment of the Sun, was written on Española should come as no surprise. Furthermore, if one man on Española went to the effort to write an entire manuscript and have it published (1518), it is highly likely there were others who were already applying such knowledge on a daily basis, specifically the best of the New World and trans-Atlantic pilots.

Peck describes pilots as "unlettered" and not capable of mastering celestial observations and tables of declination.³⁷ He further argues that pilots, being a conservative breed, shied away from learning the techniques of celestial observations and stuck with the tried and true method of dead reckoning. However conservative, there are always in any field those who will try new methods in order to derive an advantage, and once a few pilots mastered the technique, its utility and benefits would have been obvious. These leading pilots in turn would have instructed their most talented protégés in these techniques as part of their apprenticeship.

It would seem that Morison's discussion and Peck's stand on dead reckoning might be taken as descriptive of the familiar waters of Europe and the Mediterranean in the late fifteenth century, but they are certainly not descriptive of the situation in the New World twenty-one years after the 1492 voyage of Columbus. Peck largely rests his thesis on the belief that the 1513 voyage of Ponce was conducted strictly by dead reckoning. He likewise is convinced that the "unidentified island," shown here to be the Florida coast sighted March 27, was Eleuthera Island in the Bahamas. These mistakes place all his arguments and conclusions in doubt, and in particular, his assertion that Ponce's first landing on the Florida coast occurred at Melbourne Beach.

To return to our narrative, Ponce and some of his company went ashore, presumably during the early daylight hours of the next day, April 3. The land was found to be flat and lush in subtropical plants. Since the Easter holy day, called *Pascua Florida* by the Spanish, had just passed and since that had been the day the Florida coast was first

37. Peck, *The History of Early Dead Reckoning*, 6.

and have corrected several mistakes and deciphered one or two obscure passages."⁴⁰

Davidson further opined that: "Among the Spanish discoverers [i.e., Cabrillo and Ferrelo] the meagerness of detailed descriptions, a failure to seize the salient points for the determining of their positions, the want of minute accuracy in most of their plans—sometimes giving weight to general features and sometimes to details without distinction—and a leaning to exaggerate certain discoveries and to completely overlook others" created problems. This, Davidson said, had made recreating those voyages difficult.⁴¹ He based his opinion of the early Spanish texts in part on the often more detailed and intact primary source documents of later discoverers such as Francis Drake, Sebastián Vizcaíno, James Cook, and George Vancouver.

In his work on the geography of the west coast, which he based on Cabrillo taken from Herrera, and his own study of works by other explorers, Davidson tabulated the latitudes from Herrera as well as those of other navigators from the sixteenth through the late eighteenth centuries. He then provided the "corrected" latitude for many of those places based on his personal conclusions with regard to their actual locations.⁴²

The abridged Herrera account of Ponce's 1513 voyage with its different sources of latitudes makes it impossible to ascertain with certainty most of the geographic locations discussed. As shown earlier, we only have the 30° 8' north latitude fix identified positively as having come from 1513 documentation. Further, there are only two geographic features, Florida itself and the Florida Keys, with their single latitude fix, which we can positively identify from the 1513 voyage. The truth is we just don't know which geographic features go with Herrera's other eight latitudes so how can one say the latitudes for these geographic features are too far north? Perhaps the latitudes are correct and the assumptions about which geographic features they represent are wrong. If historians cannot make precise geographic determinations using latitudes from Herrera's account of Ponce's 1513 voyage, why should we assume that Davidson could make precise geographic determinations of Cabrillo's landmarks based on Herrera's account of Cabrillo's voyage, which likely contains latitudes taken from later sixteenth century charts?

40. *Ibid.*, 156.

41. *Ibid.*, 155.

42. *Ibid.*, 242-247.

case of the 30° 8' latitude fix, the most carefully and scientifically gathered information from Ponce's voyage to Florida that survived Herrera's editing: the latitude fix obtained by his very competent pilot, Alaminos. It is time to concede that we can't positively correlate Herrera's latitudes with specific landforms by using the "northing error" argument. Indeed, "northing error" should be dropped altogether from the 1513 voyage discussion.

The first landing by Ponce and his men, discussed above, likely occurred April 3. Whether a Spanish party camped on land for five days or explored inland at this first landing site is unknown. No mention of what occurred during that time, besides the act of taking possession, is mentioned in the account Herrea based on Ponce's expedition log. Conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the native population. Ponce's fleet made sail and departed the first landing site on April 8. It sailed north along the coast for one day and then reversed course and sailed south-by-east until April 20, 1513, when its crew spotted an Indian settlement along the shore where they anchored for the night. Anchoring every evening was standard practice on voyages of discovery during this early period. Having no previous knowledge of the shallows, reefs, or shoals of a new coast, Spanish pilots anchored in the evening once light became insufficient for navigation.

There is no mention of a social exchange with the Indians. The fleet set sail the next day, April 21, but was hampered by the Florida Current, the beginning of the Gulf Stream system. The *Santiago* and *Santa María de Consolación* managed to anchor but the current was so powerful that their anchor cables were stretched and under tremendous strain. The *San Cristóbal*, possibly in deeper water, had insufficient cable to anchor. The current bore the craft away and out of sight though the day was clear of mist and haze. This particularly strong current was probably a combination of the Florida Current and tide since the fleet was able to make headway against the current later on. This current was noted by pilot Alaminos who in 1519 would pioneer its use as the quickest return route to Spain.⁴⁶

46. Diego Velázquez, Gonzalo de Guzmán and Pánfilo de Narváez. "Relación de la Llegada de un Navío Cargado de Oro y Joyas, de los que el Velázquez Había Enviado en Armada a las Tierras Nuevamente Descubiertas, en el que Venían Francisco de Montejo, Alonso Hernández Portocarrero, y Antón de Alaminos, que Habían Salido Ocultamente," in *Collecion de Documentos Ineditas, Relativos al descubrimiento, Conquista, y Organización, de las Antiguas Posesiones Españolas*, Vol. XI, ed. Louis Torreses de Mendoza (Madrid: Imprenta de J. M. Pérez, 1869), 435.

the Calusa Indians. The Calusas politically dominated the tribes of the central interior and southeastern coast of Florida but had their principal population centers on the west coast in this region.

The careening of the *San Cristóbal* represents the most intensive episode of ship repair undertaken during the 1513 voyage. The careening of a vessel consisted of unloading its contents and heeling it over on its side along shore, using the vessel's masts and block and tackle. This exposed the underside of the vessel, one side at a time, so that it could be scraped of barnacles and other marine growth which could accumulate over time and significantly reduce a sailing vessel's speed and handling.

The particular maintenance tasks performed on these kinds of vessels are well documented in a 1537 court case from Puerto Rico.⁴⁹ This case describes a circular voyage from Puerto Rico down to the coast of South America and then to Santo Domingo before returning to Puerto Rico. The task carried out most often on this voyage was the caulking of the ship's deck. Exposed to the tropical sun, planks could shrink, opening deck seams. This caused rain, or seawater in rough conditions, to leak through the deck, spoiling supplies and making life uncomfortable for the crew. Caulking consisted of oakum made from the remains of old lines that were kept in place with tar, both of which were generally carried on board ship.

Other tasks documented in this case and which may have been carried out at the time of the careening of the *San Cristóbal* included the tarring of standing rigging, the shrouds and stays that support a vessel's masts, which is subject to rot by constant process of wetting and drying out. Of crucial importance to the *San Cristóbal*, and all ships generally, was the maintenance of the vessel's bilge pump, the interior leather components of which were in need of regular replacement. Once the *San Cristóbal's* bottom had been cleared and scraped, any bottom planks found to be rotten would have been replaced if supplies of plank had been included in the ship's provisions. These were secured by nails always found on board well provisioned and stocked vessels.

49. García Troche, "Fianza prestada por García Troche al gobernador Gerónimo de Ortal y Martín de Eguíluz. Evidencia de que Gerónimo de Ortal fue gobernador de Puerto Rico desde alrededor de febrero 20 de 1537 hasta fines de agosto de 1537," in Aurelio Tió, *Nuevas Fuentes Para La Historia de Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Ediciones de la Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico, 1961) 435-461.

that the mariner killed in the armed boat that day was Pedro Bello. Ponce released two of the native captives taken that day with a message to the *cacique* that the Spanish sought peace with him even though the explorers had lost a man in the attack.

The following day some of the ship's crew took the boat to sound another anchorage and eventually went ashore. These Spaniards met some Indians who communicated that the *cacique* would bring gold to trade the next day. The Calusa message was intended to deceive the Spanish, however. Ponce's fleet apparently moved to the new anchorage while canoes gathered and the number of assembled Indians increased. The next morning, eighty canoes set out from the shore and attacked the closest ship. They remained all day, staying out of range of Spanish crossbows and artillery while shooting arrows in the general direction of the ship. No great harm was done to either side.

Deciding finally that *cacique* Carlos was probably not coming to trade gold after all, the men of the fleet made preparations for departure and a return to Española and Puerto Rico. En route, they intended to search for some islands that were reputed to lay out at sea to the west. They returned to the first anchorage they had called Matanzas for the Indians they had killed there. There they filled their water casks and put everything ready for sea.

The ships departed Matanzas on Wednesday June 15, sailing west in search of islands that the Florida Indians said lay in that direction. The Spaniards raised a group of islands on June 21. These Ponce called the Tortugas for the great number of turtles present on the islands, some of which the crew used for food. Many birds and *lobos marinos*, possibly sea lions or manatees, were noted to be inhabiting the islands. These islands, along with Florida itself, are the two principal geographic features that retain the names assigned by Ponce during this voyage. The ships raised sail on Friday, June 24, 1513 and steered southwest by west, the crew sighting land on Sunday, June 26. They sailed along the unrecognized coastline for a few days, finding an anchorage on the following Wednesday.⁵² No one recognized the land but the majority of the expeditionaries believed it to be Cuba. There were signs that this region had experienced some contact with Europeans. Dogs and iron tool marks on timber were observed but no Spanish settlers.

52. Herrera y Tordesillas, 324.

After the wrecking of Miruelo's vessel, Ponce decided to split the expedition. Ponce had wanted to continue exploring but with unwanted company on board, compounded by supply problems, he really had no choice in the matter. Sometime in mid September, Diego Miruelo and his crew were placed on board the *Santiago* and *Santa María de la Consolación*. The *San Cristóbal*, with Juan Pérez de Ortubia as Captain and Alaminos as pilot, was dispatched on September 17 to continue the search for Bimini. Ponce departed with the *Santiago* and *Santa María de la Consolación* and returned to Puerto Rico where he arrived twenty-one days later, sometime in mid October. The *San Cristóbal* arrived in Puerto Rico on February 20, 1514, with the news, wrote Herrera, that they had discovered Bimini but no miraculous "Fountain of Youth."⁵⁶

Thus ended the voyage of discovery to Florida. Ponce returned to find Caparra, the settlement he had founded in Puerto Rico, ruined. In his absence the Carib, a neighboring Indian tribe, and the Taino Indians, had sacked the town and carried off all the church ornaments recently arrived from Spain.⁵⁷ War between settlers and Indians would continue to plague the island for years.

A little more than seven years would elapse before Ponce would return to Florida. Many things happened in his life during those intervening years, though there is not space enough to discuss them here. Significantly, he departed for Spain to consult with the king in 1514 and was granted the title of Adelantado of Florida and Bimini. However, due to the state of war on Puerto Rico with the Carib Indians, he was given command of a fleet with which to attack them in their home islands. For King Ferdinand, securing Puerto Rico by making war against the Carib and rebelling Taino in and around the island was the royal priority, not Ponce's return to Florida. Ponce was also made Captain General of the island of Puerto Rico giving him military, if not political, command of that island.

The Last Settlement & Death

Ponce was a soldier, cattleman, gold miner, and a settler. He was present and participated in the founding of La Isabella in 1493. He saw numerous settlements grow on Española and founded his first,

56. Herrera y Tordesillas, 326; AGI. *Relaciones de Navíos, Contaduría, Legajo* 1071, 299.

57. Tío, 60.

years later by some of the participants or their descendants and information gathered by contemporary chroniclers yield some information on the voyage. Some 250 horses were taken as well as cattle, pigs, sheep and goats and agricultural stock and tools.⁵⁹ Approximately 200 expeditionaries went along, including priests and friars to convert the Indians and establish missions.

Though much of the expedition's encounters in Florida are still a mystery, there is one passage by chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés that describes a battle in the interior with the local Calusa Indians. Oviedo writes that Ponce was not as skilled in that land as in the islands. Ponce and some of his men fought with a very large number of Indians and had not the strength of numbers to persevere. Many were killed during this action. Others were wounded, including Ponce, who was struck by an arrow in one of his thighs. The expedition retired to the coast and departed for Cuba in order to heal from the action and regroup for another attempt.⁶⁰ Ponce's nephew, who had accompanied him on the journey, was injured in the action, died on the voyage to Cuba, and was buried at sea.⁶¹

The expedition arrived at the new settlement that would become Havana shortly thereafter. After arrival, a number of the injured expeditionaries died of their wounds, including Ponce who died in July 1521. Before dying, Ponce put his affairs in order and left instructions and power of attorney for one of his men to purchase horses and take his vessels and their cargo to New Spain where the supplies were desperately needed and would consequently fetch a high price. The money from the sale was to go to his heirs in Puerto Rico. What occurred was something different.

As soon as Ponce died, the receiver of goods of the deceased in Havana, aided by its mayor, confiscated the vessels and equipment from which they purchased what they wanted, no doubt at a very good price, and then sent the vessels and the remainder of goods to New Spain where all were sold. Then they pocketed the money. There were two royal decrees issued in relation to Ponce's estate, one in 1523 and the other in 1524, requesting that the authorities

59. Murga Sanz, 248.

60. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias, Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano* (Asunción del Paraguay: Editorial Guaranía, 1945), 259.

61. Murga Sanz, 241.

settlements of the time. So Ponce decided on the west coast of Florida. From a provisioning standpoint it was quite a bit further from his estates on Española and Puerto Rico than was the east coast of Florida. Havana was developing into a major port but that is not where Ponce had the majority of his businesses and partnerships. Indeed, Diego Velázquez, who had trampled on Ponce's Bimini and Florida rights by issuing licenses to slave catchers there, controlled it. Another factor that contributed greatly to the collapse of Ponce's settlement was the absence of goodwill and cooperation from the local Indians. These were not Taino Indians, whose culture Ponce grasped. He understood the Tainos. He had language skills and an established record of vanquishing them in arms. Furthermore, the area where Ponce chose to set up his settlement was apparently in the most densely populated part of Calusa lands, and if his attempted settlement was on Charlotte Bay as many believe, it was a mere stone's throw from Mound Key, the largest Calusa settlement, and possibly, its center of power.

The Calusas did not tolerate a settled Spanish presence in the heart of their territory. It would seem that besides suffering at the hands of Spanish slavers they had also been warned by other Indians about what Spanish colonial settlement meant. Indians from the Lucayos and Española, and most likely Cuba and possibly even Puerto Rico, found themselves, like the Calusas, fleeing a Spanish enemy who seemingly could not be stopped. The Calusas did stop them in 1521. Having achieved that victory may have inspired the Indians of Florida to resist the Spaniards at every point of contact. This they successfully did in Florida until 1565 when Pedro de Menéndez de Avilés established the settlement of St. Augustine.⁶⁸

68. Lyon, 115.

