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Juan Ponce de León

THE GREAT PIONEER OF
PUERTO RICO AND FLORIDA

BY Manuel Trillo

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Title page picture:

Statue of Ponce de Leon in front of the church of San Jose in Old San Juan (Puerto Rico).

Courtesy: Puerto Rico Tourism Company

*MOLE SUB HAC FORTIS REQUIESQUNT OSSA LEONIS
OVI VICIT FACTIS NOMINA MAGNA SUIS*

(The remains of a king rest under this structure, more for his
magnificent feats than because of his name)

Epitaph engraved in the Juan Ponce de Leon mausoleum
in the San Juan Bautista Cathedral, in San Juan, Puerto
Rico. In brackets, the translation of Juan de Castellanos
in his *Elegías de varones ilustres de Indias* (1847)



Tomb of Juan Ponce de Leon in the Minor Basilica and the Saint Church Metropolitan Cathedral of San Juan Bautista, in San Juan (Puerto Rico).

Courtesy: Metropolitan Cathedral of San Juan Bautista.



FIVE CENTURIES WITHOUT PONCE DE LEON

It is now in 2021, 500 years since the death of one of the main leading figures of the Spanish heroic deed in the New World: Juan Ponce de Leon, the man that changed the island of Boriquen and put North America on the map.

After a full life of adventures and great deeds, but also disappointments and setbacks of a changing fortune, Juan Ponce de Leon breathed his last breath on the island of Cuba in July of the year of our Lord 1521. **Entrepreneur, impetuous and daring, he served as captain in the pacification of Hispaniola**, he was the first governor of San Juan (Puerto Rico), he opened to the West a lush land that he named Florida and he found the Gulf Stream the that ships would follow for centuries on their return to the Peninsula. In short, a man hungry for glory and loyal to his king, who left the heart of Castile to widen the limits of the known world, sets sail for his last voyage, this time to eternity.

2021 marks five centuries since the death of one of the great figures in the exploration and colonization of America, who made a decisive contribution to strengthen the Spanish presence in the Caribbean, and laid the groundwork for the expansion of European civilization across the vast lands of what is now the United States. A fascinating character, with his strengths and weaknesses, **the protagonist of brilliant exploits and hated by political intrigues**, in which the legend is intertwined with history.

His name has been irretrievably associated with the myth of the Fountain of Youth, however fallacious that this really was the object of his first

expedition to Florida. But, beyond the fabulous spring, his legacy lives on today in both Puerto Rico and the North American continent for being a true pioneer who made these lands as we know them today. Although there are those in the troubled waters of racial protests in the United

Ponce de Leon contributed to strengthening the Spanish presence in the Caribbean, and laid the groundwork for the expansion of European civilization across the vast lands of what is now the United States.

States and attacks to Spanish colonization, who to take advantage to slander his memory, Juan Ponce de Leon's work endures and does not deserve to be forgotten. This is his story.



POOR SQUIRE AND HIDALGO

A veil of mystery envelops the misty origins of Ponce de Leon. In fact, historians cannot even agree on the date of his birth. Many of them place it in 1460, **but many others place it fourteen years later, in 1474.** There is a greater consensus on the place where he is considered to have come into the world: **Santervas de Campos, today a modest town of just a hundred souls** forgotten among the high moorland of the north in the province of Valladolid, and which, in the fifteenth century housed a monastery dependent on the nearby Abbey of Sahagun.

It is possible that the future adelantado (a high Spanish dignitary who carried out a public company by mandate of service, account and under royal design) of Florida may belong to the nobility. Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, in his indispensable *Historia general y natural de las Indias, Islas y Tierra-firme del mar Oceano (General History of the Islands and Mainland of the Ocean Sea Known As the West Indies)*, refers to him as “**an honest captain and hidalgo**”. In the extended lineage of the Ponce de Leon's, there no lack of noble blood, and in the case of our man there is a relationship, perhaps even a kinship, with people of high birth, **but we lack a certainty about his social status.** In any case, whether or not he is a member of the nobility, everything seems to indicate that he has a rather modest position. Fernandez de Oviedo ensures that

Juan Ponce was a poor squire when he passed here [to Hispaniola], and in Spain he had been a servant to Pedro Nuñez de Guzman, brother of Ramiro Nuñez, lord of Toral. Pedro Nuñez, when Juan Ponce served him, did not have a hundred thousand maravedies or little more of income, since

[even though] he was of illustrious blood, and later he was tutor to the serene Lord Infante Ferdinand, who is now King of the Romans.

This description coincides with that given in a memorial **sent to Cardinal Cisneros without date or signature**, but attributed to the Dominican Bartolome de las Casas between 1516 and 1518:

Juan Ponce was the varlet of Mr. Pedro Nuñez de Guzman, Major Commander of Calatrava; he went to the Indies as a laborer with Christopher Columbus, and there he married in Hispaniola with a wench of an innkeeper.

Ponce de Leon's relationship with the Guzman family would come from his grandmother on his father's side, Teresa Ponce de Leon y Guzman, according to Aurelio Tio, who cites in 1961 many other ties with the nobility. Her **own mother, he says, would be Leonor de Figueroa, own mother, he says, would be Leonor de Figueroa**, sister of Lorenzo Suarez de Figueroa, Lord of Salvaleon.

However, similar to so many other aspects of the origins of the adventurer of Santervas, **his biographers do not agree on who his parents were.** Some go as far as to suggest, such as Juan Gil, that he could be the son of Don Rodrigo Ponce de Leon, “the famous Marquis of Cadiz who died in 1492, a ladies' man who left the kingdom of Castile strewn with bastards”. Seduction skills aside, the Marquis and Duke of Cadiz **is the hero par excellence of the conquest of Granada**, compared even to El Cid. Robert H. Fuson contends



instead that a brother of Ponce de Leon, Luis, married his daughter, or perhaps his sister.

The war against the Moors waged by the Catholic Monarchs to complete the long

Reconquest of the peninsula marked the time when Juan Ponce de Leon would have been “varlet” of Nuñez de Guzman, although there is also no concrete data in the chronicles of his direct participation on the battlefield.

THE LEAP TO THE NEW WORLD

In the early morning of September 25, 1493, the port of Cadiz was a hotbed. A thousand and a half people of the most varied conditions, from knights and hidalgos to religious, rush to embark on seventeen ships and caravels that, equipped with supplies, weapons and ammunition, **make up the formidable fleet assembled by Admiral Christopher Columbus for his second trip to the Indies.** After reporting to the Catholic Monarchs in Barcelona on the findings of his first voyage, the Genovese navigator set out to return to “instruct in the Catholic faith and imbue in good customs” its original inhabitants, **as indicated by Pope Alexander VI's *Inter caetera* bull.** Among this colorful crew, says the chronicler Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, is Juan Ponce de Leon:

Who I knew very well, and is one of those who went to these parts with the first admiral, Christopher Columbus, on the second trip he took to these Indies.

The seventeen ships set sail before the sun rises over the horizon and, after landing in the Canary Islands, they set sail for new lands, still barely

discovered, on the other side of the Atlantic. After weeks of sailing, they arrive in the Lesser Antilles, travel through the string of small islands that dot the Caribbean and pass by an island that the natives call Boriquen, and which Columbus christens San Juan Bautista. They finally arrive in Hispaniola, where they find to their regret that there is no trace of the men who stayed in the precarious village of La Navidad after the first trip. Columbus builds a new settlement, La Isabela, **then replaced by Santo Domingo, now the capital of the Dominican Republic.**

However, the documents do not provide news of Ponce de Leon's arrival in Hispaniola and his trail is lost again for a decade. Authors such as Manuel Ballesteros place him on the expedition that sails from Sanlucar de Barrameda on February 13, 1502, with thirty ships, **and which took its new governor, Nicolas de Ovando,** commander of Lares and later commander major of Alcantara, to Hispaniola. He replaces Francisco de Bobadilla, the investigator who had arrested Christopher Columbus himself and sent him back to the Peninsula in shackles, and his purpose is to bring order once and for all in the affairs of the island.



The possibility that Ponce traveled to Hispaniola in 1502 with Ovando is not necessarily incompatible with his having done so before with Columbus in 1493, since between the two expeditions he may have returned to Castile. In particular, Fuson mentions the idea

that he shall return to Antonio de Torres, **who left La Isabela on February 02, 1494, and arrived in Cadiz in April of that year.** In any case, the darkness over his journeys between 1493 and the beginnings of Nicolas de Ovando's tenure in Hispaniola is absolute.

CAPTAIN AND FARMER IN HISPANIOLA

It finally comes to light in 1504. That year Juan Ponce de Leon participated as captain in the second war of Higüey, the easternmost province of Hispaniola. At that time, more than a decade since Columbus' arrival in the New World, the Spaniards settled in Santo Domingo and a handful of small villages from which the first gold mines and other resources of the island begin to be exploited.

Hostilities in Higüey had been triggered a couple of years earlier, but after the first clashes, **Cacique Cotubanama (or Cotubano) and Spanish Captain General, and the Sevillian Juan de Esquivel**, had sealed the peace. As is customary, they exchanged names and became *guatiaos*, or, in other words, “perpetual friends and brothers-in-arms”.

The calm is short-lived. The Indigenous burn a wooden fort defended by a garrison of nine men and Nicolas de Ovando calls for war for the second time “by fire and blood”. Esquivel is appointed Captain General again.

It is at this time that Ponce de Leon reappears in history, being appointed captain of the city of

Santo Domingo in the operation to stifle this second revolt. Three to four hundred Spaniards come together, joined by faithful natives from a neighboring region, and approach the plateaus

Hostilities in Higüey had been triggered a couple of years earlier, but after the first clashes, Cacique Cotubanama (or Cotubano) and Spanish Captain General, and the Sevillian Juan de Esquivel, had sealed the peace.



where the rebels have their villages. Bartolome de las Casas does not spare any lurid details and ensures that they do not pardon “an old man or child, no woman with child or pregnant”.

The uprising ended with the capture of Cotubanama on Saona Island, and sending the chief to Santo Domingo, where Nicolas de Ovando sentenced him to death. The war comes to an end and Hispaniola was definitely “pacified”.

There is no precise data on the actions of Juan Ponce de Leon during this conflict, although presumably that, **being Captain of Santo Domingo, capital of the island** and actually the only population worthy of being called a city, his role is relevant. In addition, Fernandez de Oviedo highlights another point in his chronicle that,

as he had been in past wars, he had personal experience in his effort, and he was regarded as a man of trust and good ability.

At the end of the war, the governor appointed Ponce lieutenant of Salvaleon, **one of the two new Spanish villas in Higüey aimed at strengthening control over the rebellious province.** In Santervas, a house is built there, of which there is a record in a file from 1511 kept in the General Archive of the Indies:

At the time that said Juan Ponce populated a town called Higüey, he made and built a house of stone and upholstery and limescale at his expense, which was made for the town's fortress, in which he maintained his hamlet and abode.

The house still stands today, converted into Casa Museo de Ponce de Leon (House Museum of Ponce de Leon), in San Rafael del Yuma, a municipality of the province of Altagracia forty minutes drive from the beaches of Punta Cana.



The House of Juan Ponce de Leon in San Rafael del Yuma, province of Altagracia (Dominican Republic).

Courtesy: Ministries of Culture and Tourism of the Dominican Republic.

Its robust architecture, with thick stone walls and no windows on the ground floor, gives it an air of defensive strength, perhaps a prevention against new uprisings.

There Ponce de Leon settles with his wife Leonor, with whom he will have three daughters and a son, and he dedicated himself to growing cassava and raising cattle. He also benefited from the strategic location of his estate, on the route of the ships returning to Castile from Santo Domingo, where they were supplied before facing the long journey across the Atlantic. Once the weapons are silenced, **therefore, we are presented with a Ponce concerned with raising a family**, and who gradually begins to prosper with his quiet life as a farmer.

But he is also an ambitious man and will soon extend his gaze beyond the paradisaical coasts of Hispaniola.



IN SEARCH OF THE RICHES OF BORIQUEN

The eastern region of Hispaniola, where Ponce de León makes his home, is only separated from the neighboring island of Boriquen, or San Juan Bautista, by the choppy waters of the Mona Canal, where the Caribbean meets the Atlantic. Its existence has been known since the second voyage of Columbus and in 1505 Vicente Yañez Pinzon, captain of the caravel Niña on the first voyage, received royal commission to populate it and build a fortress, although he did not complete the task.

But through the Tainos who assiduously cross the Mona Canal, the restless hidalgo of Santervas now hears promising stories about its natural riches. Fernandez de Oviedo says that Ponce

had heard from that province and learned from the indigenous that there was a lot of gold on the island of Boriquen or San Juan. And knowing this, he communicated it in secret with the major commander, who at the time resided on the island of Hispaniola: who gave him a license to go to the island of San Juan to try and find out what it was; because although the island was already known and had been discovered by the admiral first, it was neither conquered nor peaceful.

Indeed Ponce de León, after obtaining permission from Governor Ovando, **embarks in 1508 with fifty Spaniards and native guides** in a caravel to explore that island of which nothing was known “except that it was very beautiful on the outside, and that many people seemed to be there every time ships passed by”, according to Bartolome de las Casas.

Back in Hispaniola, in May of 1509, the Terracampino explorer presented Brother Nicholas with a full “account” of his adventures and discoveries. It starts like this:

First of all, I left the Villa of Santo Domingo to go to the said island of San Juan on July the twelfth of a thousand and five hundred and eight years, and I began to follow the said journey to the said of San Juan with the caravel, and I went to Salvaleon to supply myself and the people I brought, which was forty-two and eight sailors, fifty people in all.

But at the beginning of August “such a storm was unleashed that put the caravel on some rocks” and many of the provisions were lost. After the storm, he heads to Mona Island, a small piece of land halfway to San Juan. From there, Ponce tells,

I left and went to the Southern part of said island of San Juan, on August the twelfth of that year, where I emerged on the beach that is in the site of Cacique Queban, and I went to his house, I spoke to him on behalf of Your Grace what he commanded me, and assured him and commanded him to make a conuco for His Highness.

After “dressing” the caravel, which had been hit by another storm while anchored, he went along the coast of the island, **talking to the Caciques and Caribs he encountered along the way**, “and giving them all gifts for their safety”. This brings him to a cozy bay in the north,

and there I saw such a good port and island from the outside; I entered it and walked around the bay, believing I found a settlement and water, and I did not find it; and from there I went eight leagues down coast, where I found a river called Ano, which the caravel could enter, and there I emerged and unloaded on the ground everything that I carried, and I built huts, which once done, I sent the said caravel for bread to the said Isla de la Mona.



However, after staying in the place for a month, he was not convinced. His priority is that the new settlement meets the right conditions as a basis for mining activity, so he continues to explore until he finally found an appropriate location half a league inland. There he raised “a medium house with its roof and petril and battlements, and a barrier in front of the door and all whitewashed from inside and outside”. He immediately begins extraction with a crew, and from the bowels of the island obtained the first eight hundred and thirty-six pesos and four gold tomines.

At the same time, he begins to cultivate the land in “two pieces of tillage”. According to Ponce, “from these said conucos, **the farming to be done for His Highness will be made and exploited**”. With some air of resignation, he concludes that

this is what we have been able to do so far, and no more, because the town has changed so many times, and because I have nothing to eat or there is nothing on this island, even if I wanted to take advantage of it, and because I could not take advantage of the indigenous people of the said island as expected, for which reason it has not been possible to do more.

After presenting his relationship, Ponce enters into a negotiation with Ovando to determine the island's colonization model. He proposed a kind of partnership between himself and the Crown, **in which, the explorer would bear the expenses and proceeds would be divided equally between the two partners**. The commander accepts the proposal, but clarifies: first the mandatory “King's fifth” will be deducted and the remaining amount will be divided into two halves, one for Ponce and one for the royal coffers.

On the other hand, **the future governor of San Juan** wants to prevent the island from starting to fill up with Castilians ahead of time. As he warns,

it is not convenient for the service of His Highness that the said island be populated with residents at present, until we have enough food to eat there, because there is no way to sustain people, nor here to take it from this island [Hispaniola], and for this reason the island would be harmed, and those who went there to populate could not be supported.

Jealous in his quest to isolate the island from pernicious influences and avoid the traveling between Hispaniola and San Juan, Ponce de Leon goes so far as to pose

that two or three canoes that there may be in the land of Higüey may be to be able to go there to the said island of San Juan, so that in them some bad indigenous people and bad Christians do not pass who will impose on those there, it will be well to cunningly break and burn them, even if they have to pay them to their owners, so that it seems that I was not consenting.

At this point Ovando refuses that canoes “break”, but forbids passing in them from Hispaniola, under threat of punishment.

Ponce also calls for a ship to be dispatched, from which his wife and children, as well as calves and pigs, can go to San Juan. However, **he does not want to part with what he owns in Hispaniola** and begs to keep the indigenous people entrusted there “for the support of the tillage and rearing that I have in it”, since “it is not hacienda that I can get rid of quickly of it because it is bulky”.

Ponce doesn't forget his subordinates. He asks to help his lieutenant and the Captain of the caravel, Gil Calderon, “with the indigenous to make a farm and take some gold”, as he has not received a salary for his service, and requests that officers and others also be allowed to benefit from precious metal to compensate for its low remuneration.



Juan Ponce de León
The great pioneer of Puerto Rico
and Florida

Nicolas de Ovando gives the go-ahead to the settlement **in the place chosen by Ponce and gives it its name: Caparra.** For the chronicler Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo, however, it is a place

unhealthy and hard-worked, because it was among mountains and swamps, and the waters were rough, and the children were not raised. Before leaving the milk, they were sore and turned the color of the copper, and until death they always went from bad to worse, and all the Christian people were discolored and sick.

In short, the commander meets almost all of Ponce de Leon's demands and signs the Capitulation. **Now, the Spanish colonization of San Juan begins.**

The agreement between Ovando and Ponce turns the island into a kind of half-monopoly between Ponce de Leon and the King, in which the former operates the island exclusively, at his expense, and in return pays a share to his great partner.

With the agreement closed, the capitulant settles into his new destination. He raised a house first in Caparra **"a house of brick, and after some time made another stone;** because in truth, he was a man inclined to populate and build," says Fernandez de Oviedo.

Gradually, **the Boricua land begins to bear fruit thanks to the gold mining,** a task that rests largely on the backs of the natives, and until then the Captain of Higüey began to make an estimated fortune.



Remains of Ponce de Leon's house in Caparra (Puerto Rico).
Courtesy: Puerto Rico Tourism Company.



THE ADMIRAL'S SON

While Ponce sets up his fledgling emporium, an important innovation occurs in Santo Domingo that will be the source of numerous headaches and will mark the rest of his days: **Diego Columbus, first-born of the Admiral (died in 1506), disembarks in July of 1509 as the new governor of Hispaniola.** The era of Nicolas de Ovando, benefactor of Ponce de Leon in the Indies, comes to an end. Another one of constant tribulations and hardships opens up.

The second Admiral, ready to impose his authority from the beginning in the lands discovered by his late father, immediately **appoints his own aides in San Juan, to the detriment of Ponce de Leon,** even though his settlement with Ovando remains perfectly in force. Juan Ceron will be mayor and Miguel Diaz, sheriff, thus becoming momentarily the rulers of the island.

Meanwhile, the deposed Ovando intercedes for his ward before Ferdinand the Catholic, regent of Castile after Felipe the Handsome died in 1506, and Queen Juana was left heartbroken and without judgment. **The commander gets the monarch to appoint Ponce as Governor of San Juan "in the meantime",** that is, in the interim. Later, in March of 1510, the post of Governor will add those of Captain and Judge:

I command each and every one of you that as soon as you have seen my letter, without any further delay and without requiring or consulting us, nor waiting for another of my

letters, nor commandment, you shall receive from the said Juan Ponce de Leon the oath and solemnity that in such act, they become accustomed to, which by him be done, you shall receive him as our Judge and Captain of the said island of San Juan.

After receiving royal support, not only to take gold from the mines, but also to exercise political command, **Ponce strikes back expeditiously: he has Ceron and Diaz arrested, and sends them back to Hispaniola.** He then appoints as mayor a high-end nobleman, Cristobal de Sotomayor who arrived in the Indies with Diego Columbus. The aristocrat accepts the new position **despite "the great inequality of generosity of blood"** between him and the simple hidalgo who appointed him, says Fernandez de Oviedo.

The era of Nicolas de Ovando, benefactor of Ponce de Leon in the Indies, comes to an end. Another one of constant tribulations and hardships opens up.



INDIGENOUS REVOLT IN SAN JUAN

Meanwhile, Ponce's resistance to the island being populated by residents does not prevent the influx of more Spaniards. After a more or less cordial coexistence, **the excesses of the newcomers with the natives soon make sparks fly.** On a Friday, in early 1511, the natives of the village of Sotomayor, named after the aforementioned nobleman, rise up, and the rebellion immediately ignites among the Caciques of the rest of Boriquen.

During the first exchange, they kill “eighty Christians or more”, according to Fernandez de Oviedo. More than three thousand Tainos gather to burn down the village and there would have been no one left alive, the chronicler continues, had the brave Captain Diego de Salazar not come to their aid. He could not, however, save Cristobal de Sotomayor himself, who was killed despite being alerted by a sister of the Cacique whom he had “entrusted” and whom he had as a “friend”, and by the interpreter Juan Gonzalez. He is this one who, after escaping badly wounded, gives an account of what happened. Ponce de Leon calls to arms. After the blood spilled in Hispaniola, the war now took over the island of San Juan.

Fernandez de Oviedo says that the indigenous people of Boriquen think that Christians are immortal beings, having heard how they have conquered an island as large and populated with natives as Hispaniola, and

as they had come from where the sun rises, so they fought; who were heavenly people and children of the sun, and that the natives were not powerful to offend them.

Only when the body begins to decompose do they convince themselves that Christians are mortal like themselves.

To get rid of any doubt, a Cacique named Urayoan devises a ploy. He gains the trust of a young man named Salcedo who passes through his territory, **removing himself in courtesies and putting at his disposal fifteen or twenty of his own to carry his things.** As they pass a river called Guarabo, the natives they offer to pass him without getting wet, which the young man, unaware of what is coming, willingly accepts.

The natives took him on his shoulders, for which the sturdiest and hardest working were chosen, and when they were in the middle of the river, they put him under the water and carried him, those who passed him and those who had remained looking at him, because they all went for his death from an agreement, and drowned him.

Three days they spent asking questions of the wretched Salcedo to check if he's still alive, until the corpse starts to stink. And even then, they distrusted whether the boy is really dead. Only when the body begins to decompose do



they convince themselves that Christians are mortal like themselves. "And from there they took boldness and confidence for their rebellion, **and put in the work of killing Christians, and to rise,**" Fernandez de Oviedo concludes the episode.

When the Tainos are still rising up, new events thousands of miles away give another turn to the government of Ponce de Leon in San Juan. In May 1511, Diego Columbus definitively won his lawsuit with the Crown and regained all of his father's rights and privileges, becoming Viceroy. **Consequently, Juan Ceron returns to San Juan to replace Ponce as Governor,** who nevertheless remains Captain and retains Ferdinand's backing. In fact, the king cares about protecting him from Colombus' men's thirst for vengeance and orders both Ceron and Miguel Diaz, who also returns to the island, that when they recover the rods of justice they are to have

very good manners, and do not take them in anger or spite, nor so that no one can believe that you have any grudges with Juan Ponce about what happened between you and him, because if [they leave] the inhabitants of the island, and especially those who have followed Juan Ponce, of course it would become very depopulated, of which we would be very deserved. You should treat Juan Ponce and his friends and relatives very well so that, as they were yours, they may be yours, and in this way the things of the island can be grown.



The natives in Boriquen drown the Spaniard Salcedo to verify he is immortal, in an engraving from 1592.

Theodor de Bry.

The monarch refuses to confiscate assets from Ponce, demands that he be respected by the Tainos entrusted to him, and prohibits Diego Columbus' officials from taking "residencia", that is, to open a judicial review. At the same time, he instructs the ousted Governor **to facilitate the transition to the position, load and to help conclude San Juan's "pacification"**. But his situation on the island is now untenable and Ferdinand suggests returning to the Peninsula. Even that won't be possible for the time being, as his opponents even seized the ship he intended to take to Castile.

It's time to dream, once again, of new goals.



THE LEGEND OF FIERO BECERRILLO

Among the weapons of the Spaniards there is one that causes special terror in the natives, according to the authors, more willing to accentuate the cruelty of the colonizers. According to Bartolome de las Casas,

they taught and trained sight hounds, fierce dogs, who in seeing an Indian tear him to pieces in a creed; and they'd better lash out at him and eat him as if he were a pig. These dogs wreaked havoc and carnage.

The most famous of these dogs is Becerrillo, taken from Hispaniola to San Juan, and who Fernandez de Oviedo describes:

red in color, and the front of the eyes black, medium and not armored, but of great understanding and boldness. And surely, according to what this dog did, Christians thought that God had sent him to their aid; because it was as much a part for the pacification of the island as the tertiary part of those few conquerors who took part in the war, because among two hundred Indians, he took one that ran away from the Christians, or as he was taught, and thus took him by one arm and restricted him to come with him and bring him to the royal, or where the Christians were; and if he resisted and didn't want to come, he'd tear them to pieces, and he did very pointed things and admirable things.

Moreover, he says he earns pay-and-a-half of that a crossbowman enjoys. The story of such an exceptional animal makes its fortune and is replicated over the centuries, but it may well be one of deeds that pass into the common heritage by mere inertia. According to the historian Salvador Brau, the dog does actually belong to Captain Sancho de Arango, who takes him to San Juan when they return to Ceron y Diaz Island, and

he had in him a fierce guardian on his estate. Neither was Sancho de Arango a companion of Ponce de Leon when he came to Borinquen, nor in the battles of Jacaguas, Yagiüeca and Culebrillas in 1511 is he mentioned, and yet Oviedo - who took time collecting news about the red color of the animal and in repeating the tale of the old Indian woman, forgiven by the dog after urinating - mentions by name the captains, champions and even soldiers who distinguished themselves in those martial encounters.

Becerrillo, according to the chronicles, dies in the act of service, pierced by an arrow of the Caribs, "which was not a small loss, because even if some Christians died, it was not felt so much by those who were left and missing the dog", adds Fernandez de Oviedo. This author adds that Becerrillo has a descendant, who inherited his ferocity, Leoncico, owned by the discoverer of the Pacific, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa.



THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND OF BIMINI

On July 25, 1511, King Ferdinand drafted a certificate in Tordesillas for his trusted man in the Indies, treasurer Miguel de Pasamonte, Aragonese for more signs. In it he indicates:

I send Juan Ponce de Leon, our Captain in the Island of San Juan, and who I have had and have as a servant, to speak with you, and talk about everything he thinks I can do him mercy, and he will write to us, especially if he wanted to take a new population in his charge, as he did that of San Juan; And that with what I will talk with you, and taking your opinion in everything, comes to where I am, for come and see the negotiation, I send in it what should be done, surely longer of it; you will know that because I am willing to pay, of what Juan Ponce de Leon helped us to give him mercy, and he wanted me to understand some new town, because I think he's a man who is prepared for it.

That same day, he wrote to the officers of the Seville Recruitment House. He updates them on the conversation that the treasurer and Ponce are going to have, specifying now that it is about populating "some islands":

It seems very good to me what you say about Juan Ponce, who is a good servant, and that is reason for him to be rewarded; I regard him as such, and I am willing to do so, and for this, I am writing to him to talk to Pasamonte and discuss with him all the things that suit you, and get the opinion of Pasamonte about all of it; and also, that if I get to that City of Seville, I expressed to you the opinion of Pasamonte, and talk with you about the same negotiations,

especially if you want to populate some Islands again, as the one of San Juan populated, so that in view of the opinion of you and Pasamonte, I will dispatch your things.

What islands does the monarch speak of? What mysterious lands does Ponce de Leon intend to populate? From Christopher Columbus' first trip to America, when he believed he had arrived in Asia, **there is vague news of a territory in northern Cuba that can provide new riches.** And in the following decades, raids have been made on the Lucayos (Bahamas) to capture natives, further spurring curiosity about these enigmatic regions.

In the early 1510s there was talk of an unexplored island called Bimini (it appeared in the documents in many other forms: Beimeni, Bimine, Bininy...). In fact, on top of a map of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico incorporated by Pedro Martir de Angleria's "Opera Legatio Babilonica", first printed in 1511, is the line of a coast designated as "Beimeni part island". It is the first printed map of the discoveries in the New World, although, as in so many things of the time, there is no absolute certainty about its date, and may have been added later to Angleria's work, as it does not appear in all editions.

Apparently, Bartholomew Columbus, brother of the discoverer, is already on the track of Bimini. But the King is a shrewd politician (believed to have inspired "The Prince" by Nicholas Machiavelli) **and does not want the Columbus family to further increase its power in America with new domains.** He



The meeting with Miguel de Pasamonte by the King revives the adventurous spirit of Santervas. After the setbacks in San Juan, he now sees before his eyes a new opportunity to achieve glory and fortune, and does not want to let it escape. So, he sends the King a "judicial

is very dishonest and far from reasonable, because everything that can be discovered now, is very easy to discover. And not looking at this, everyone who talks about discovering wants to end the capitulation that was made with Admiral



Columbus, and they do not think how then there was no hope of what was discovered, nor was it thought that it could be. You must tell Juan Ponce about this as it is convenient to know the mercy, I give him in granting him the capitulation... And it seems to me that he is right to be content, because the adelantado Don Bartolome Columbus told me here that he wanted to discover this island, and I think he was going to discover it with a better match for our hacienda than the one we do with Juan Ponce.

Despite these reservations, Ferdinand signs the capitulation. It is February 23, 1512:

The King allows Ponce to “touch any Islands and land of the Ocean Sea, both discovered and undiscovered”, provided that they do not belong to the Serene King of Portugal.

Insomuch as you, Juan Ponce de Leon, sent me to beg and ask at your mercy, to give you license and power to go and discover and populate the Islands of Beniny with certain conditions that will be declared hereinafter, therefore, by doing you mercy, I give you license and power so that you can go to discover and populate the said Island, so long as it is not one of those that until now have been discovered, and with the conditions and according to what it will be contained hereinafter in this manner.

The king gives Ponce de Leon three years to complete the discovery of Bimini and forces him to bear the costs of the expedition. On his journey he allows him to "touch any Islands and land of the Ocean Sea, both discovered and undiscovered", provided that they do not belong to the Serene King of Portugal, and from the beginning grants him the title of "adelantado" of Bimini and other regional islands that he discovers, as well as the government and justice in them for the rest of his days.

In his stipulations, Ferdinand states "to take gold if any in the same way as in Hispaniola" and descends into detail to specify that **the new inhabitants will pay the Crown for gold** and other metals or profitable things that there is one-tenth the first year, the ninth the second, the eighth the third, the seventh the fourth, the sixth the fifth and fifth the next five years. The economic aspect of the company is evident.



THE “INSPECTION” OF THE ACCOUNTS IN SAN JUAN

While the expedition to Bimini was taking shape, the adversaries of Ponce de Leon were not resting. **The men of Diego Columbus in San Juan call into question the accounts of the man from Santervas regarding his earnings with the king.** The Monarch, as mentioned above, denies that the anti-Ponce faction itself is in charge of investigating him, but he decides to take action. Through a decree signed in Burgos on the November 1st, 1511, he commissions the lawyer Sancho Velazquez, to investigate Ponce de Leon and his officials to check

how and in what way he and his officials used and exercised such office, executing Our justice regarding everything attached and related; and if he or his officials, named the parties, were guilty, to find out the truth, and once found, to make justice to the accused, so that any of them gets injured to have a reason to complain.

The king is surprised that there is an imbalance in the accounts by who he trusted so much. In a document sent to the officials in the Recruitment House in Seville, on the February 23, 1512, he states:

I am very surprised that Juan Ponce de Leon is in such a bad place as the one regarding the earnings.

The Velazquez audit concludes that Ponce de Leon quitted the company with the king without his consent and he continued benefit from these earnings without giving the Crown its part. According to the estimation made, Ponce owes the royal tax office the important amount of one thousand, three hundred and fifty-two reals, two tomines and six gold grains. **The judgment, dated on October 06, 1512, obliged him to refund it.**

The convicted, totally disagreeing, feels “very offended by many grievances, that clearly seems and can be deducted from these accounts and the said capitulation”, so notice of appeal is filed. He considers that the monarch’s company was dissolved when the officials of Diego Columbus arrived, and the natives were reassigned. But Velazquez ignores the appeal and ratifies. Ponce has no other option than paying the one thousand, three hundred and fifty-two reals, two tomines and six gold grains to the San Juan treasurer, Francisco de Cardona, who provides him a payment receipt and an acquittance on October 10, 1512.

This case would not be finished there. Ponce would never forget the suffered affront that meant a painful economic damage for him and turned the king against him. But he kept his revenge for the right moment...



THE “DISCOVERY” OF FLORIDA

Problems with the liquidation of the company in San Juan do not prevent the king Ferdinand from trusting Ponce de Leon and the Bimini project continues. **With the capitulation in his hands, the adelantado gets on with it.** He collects two ships in Hispaniola, the Santa Maria de la Consolacion and the Santiago, and he heads for San Juan with them, where he adds a third ship, the San Cristobal. In the afternoon of the March 03, 1513, Ponce de Leon leaves with his small fleet to San German and stops in Aguada, in the northwest of the island. At night next day, Friday March 04, he leaves for good towards the enigmatic Bimini.

A varied crew from Andalusia, Galicia, Basque Country, Castile and Leon aboard these ships, among others. The logbook disappeared, so the information about that historical navigation **is known thanks to the story of Antonio Herrera y Tordesillas** in his “Historia de los hechos de los castellanos en Tierra Firme e Islas del Mar oceano” (History of the Castilians’ facts in the Islands and Mainland of the Ocean Sea), published in 1601, and for which it is assumed that he had access to the official records of the expedition.

Ponce de Leon sets a northwest course. He travels the route followed by Christopher Columbus on his first trip in reverse, crossing the Lucayos to reach Guanahani, **baptized as San Salvador by the Admiral.** By the end of March, he sighted an until then unknown land. Herrera narrates it as follows:

They left here towards northwest and, on Sunday 27, Easter day, commonly known as Flowers, they saw an island and did not recognize it; on Monday 28, they traveled fifteen leagues in the same route; and on Wednesday, they traveled the same way; and then, with bad weather, until the second of April, they traveled towards the westnorthwest, the water diminishing to nine fathoms to one league of land, which was in thirty degrees and eight minutes, the traveled long the coast to find port, and at night, they emerged near land, eight fathoms of water. And thinking that land was the island, they called it Florida, because there was a beautiful view of many fresh groves and it was flat and even; and also, because they discovered it in Easter (Pascua Florida in Spanish), so Juan Ponce wanted to name it like that for these two reasons. He got on land to take notes and possession.

Latitude 30° 8’ is located at the height of what today is Ponte Vedra beach, in St. Johns County. In this point, close to the historical city of Saint Augustine, in April 2013 would be commemorated the fifth centenary of the landing of Ponce de Leon in Florida. Nevertheless, as Herrera narrates that in the expedition, they traveled the coast to find port, some authors locate more south the point where he set foot on land. Some of the locate **it 250 kilometers from Ponte Vedra**, on Melbourne beach, not far from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral.

Wherever it was, Ponce de Leon and his crew arrived, without noticing, at the huge North



Juan Ponce de León
The great pioneer of Puerto Rico
and Florida

American subcontinent, immeasurable dry land that extends west to the Pacific and North to the Arctic ice, and on which, as time passes, would settle the United States and Canada.

It is often discussed whether it is appropriate to speak of a “discovery” with the arrival of the

Spaniards in America, since by then it was already populated by natives and the idea that there had already been an unrecorded incursion is not dismissed. Of course, for those who arrived at an unknown land for them, it was a true discovery, and in the documents from that time it is constantly said that Ponce “discovers” new lands.



Map attributed to Alonso Alvarez de Pineda of the Gulf of Mexico coast, which includes the Florida peninsula, with the legend: “Florida named Bimini discovered by Juan Ponce.”

General Archive of the Indies.



When disembarking in Florida, he connects both civilizations ignored until then and he joins the region to the written History. It seems then that is not senseless to describe Juan Ponce de Leon as the discoverer of Florida.

The members of the expedition set sail again on Friday April 08, following the coastline south. On April 20, they discovered huts and they anchored, but Herrera did not manage to meet any of the inhabitants of these cabins. **Something unbelievable happens the next day.** While the three boats were sailing along the coast,

they saw a current, that even with favorable wind, they could not sail forward, but backwards, and it seemed like they were sailing well; and at the end they knew that the current was stronger than the wind. The two ships that were closer to land anchored; but the current was so strong that all the cables tangled; and the third ship, which was brigantine, that was further into the ocean, did not find the bottom, or did not face the current, and distanced from land, and they lost sight of it, in a clear fair-weather day.

They just made another great “discovery”, even if they did not know its importance then: it was the powerful Gulf Stream, which for centuries will propel Spanish ships loaded with riches on their return voyage through the Bahamas Channel and the Atlantic towards the Peninsula, a type of maritime highway for transoceanic traffic.

Ponce de Leon set foot on land again to find the natives. However, in contrast to the kind



Route of the expedition to Florida of Ponce de Leon in 1513.
Manuel Trillo.

welcome in San Juan, this time the natives tried to grab his rowboat, paddles and weapons, and the first problems arise. **Spaniards avoid the hostilities**, but, according to Antonio de Herrera, they are forced to fight after a sailor was “dampened” after being staked. A couple of skirmishes occur, in one of which, the Spaniards take a native to be used as guide and interpreter.

After leaving in what they call the river of the Cross a Christian symbol sculpted in stone, the explorers continue their journey. On Sunday, May 08, they turn in the Cabo Corrientes (currents cape), baptized as such “because there is so much water there, that it is stronger than the wind, and it does not allow ships to move forward, even with all the sails”. They find two islands close to the current Miami city and on May 15, they begin to traverse a chain of islands and islets that they name Los Martires (martyr),



because from afar the rocks look like men that are suffering, and the name is suitable too for the great number of them were lost there.

We are of course referring to the Florida Keys. After sneaking between the islets and entering the water in the Gulf of Mexico, they stop to refill the water supply, get firewood and clean the San Cristobal. Being there, on June 4th, a native that speaks Spanish shows up, Spaniards **suppose that he could come from Hispaniola or another of the already colonized islands**, and he promises them that the cacique in the region would send them gold. But while the wait for the announced gold, twenty canoes appear, and the natives attack the intruders by surprise. They react and get five of the canoes, kill “some natives” and take four prisoners, but they lost one of their own in the scuffle. Ponce wants to make peace with the cacique. But he, however, gathers a bigger contingent together to launch an offensive on June 11. The fight begins and

they fought from morning to night, Spaniards not being harmed as the arrows did not get to them, because the crossbows and artillery shots did not get closer, and at the end the natives retreated.

In memory of the spilled blood, **that place is named Slaughter**. Spaniards decided to go back to San Juan, but taking advantage of opportunity to discover other islands on their way. On June 21, they arrived at the islands named Turtle, as they took in one of them “just

for a while at night”, up to 160 of these animals. This little archipelago in the southeast of the Florida peninsula **preserves the Spanish footprint in its name: Dry Turtles**.

They stop in what seems to be Cuba, they go through the Martyrs again and, without losing hope of finding the evasive island of Bimini, they continue towards the Lucayos. There, they run into a boat from Hispaniola, in the charge of Diego Miruelo, who was illegally prowling the waters where Ponce de Leon had exclusive rights granted by the King. He ends up joining the expedition, but it gets lost at sea after a storm, but the crew manages to save themselves.

After roaming the archipelago for weeks, Ponce de Leon finally determines to head San Juan, to where he arrives on October 09, 1513. Before that, however, he ordered one of the boats, commanded by Juan Perez de Ortubia and navigated by Anton de Alaminos, to continue searching for Bimini. When they return, they say they have found the famous island, that it is “big, fresh and full of water and grooves”. Nowadays, **there are some islands in the Bahamas Called Bimini North, South and East**, but they seem to not match the description of the explorers.

That’s how the treacherous expedition ends. Despite discovering and exploring what he thinks is a lush island, for the moment, Ponce did only get a series of clashes with aggressive natives. He ignores that, with his adventure, he started a new chapter in history.



THE MYTH OF THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

The reader will notice that, until now, this story has not mentioned **the universally renowned Fountain of Youth, to which the name Juan Ponce de Leon is linked**. According to the traditional legend, the discovery of Florida was the result of his crazy search for extraordinary waters that rejuvenated those bathing in it. It is a tall tale.

As we have seen, what the fearless explorer from Santervas was looking for was new territories for fame, titles and fortune, for which he obtained royal permission.

Any of the documents from the time Ponce de Leon lived, written by him or others, name the fabulous fountain. Not in the capitulation nor in the correspondence of Ferdinand with the adelantado, the officials in the Indies nor the Recruitment House appears such absurdity. On the contrary, there is only talk of the search for gold and other riches, and of the Christianization of the natives, but never of miraculous springs.

The first time that the Fountain of Youth appears is in the account written by the chronicler Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo in his “Historia general y natural de Indias” (General and natural history of the Indies) published in 1535, that is to say, more than two decades after Ponce’s discovery of Florida and fourteen years after he died in Cuba. According to this version, which, by the way, confuses the year of the expedition,

he agreed to start and left with two caravels to North, and he discovered the Bimini islands, which are in the northern part of Fernandina Island [Cuba]; and then the fable was disclosed about the fountain that rejuvenated or turned old men into



The Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park in Saint Augustine, Florida (United States).

Manuel Trillo.

younger men: this was in the year fifteen twelve. And this was so well publicized and testified by the natives there, that Captain Ponce de Leon and his crew and caravels were lost and with much of the work for more than six months on these islands to find the fountain: which was a huge mockery from the natives, and nonsense that the Christians believed it and wasted time looking for that fountain.

The historian Michael Francis, one of the experts that more firmly tried to disprove the aroused obsession of Ponce de Leon with the Fountain of Youth, underlines that Fernandez de Oviedo “praised the actions of men such as Christopher Columbus and, to a lesser extent, Hernan Cortes; however, he vilified the greed, the whim, the superstition and the stupidity of others. One of these objectives was Juan Ponce de Leon”.

In fact, even that he recognizes his work in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, **the first chronicler**



of the Indies is merciless with Ponce and sarcastically makes fun of “how he looked for that fabulous fountain of Bimini, that the natives said turned old men into youngsters”:

And this I have seen (without the fountain), not in the person nor the improvement of his strength; but in the weakening of his manhood, and in becoming in his deeds younger and of little understanding, and one of these was Juan Ponce himself, as he kept that futility of believing such a nonsense from the natives.

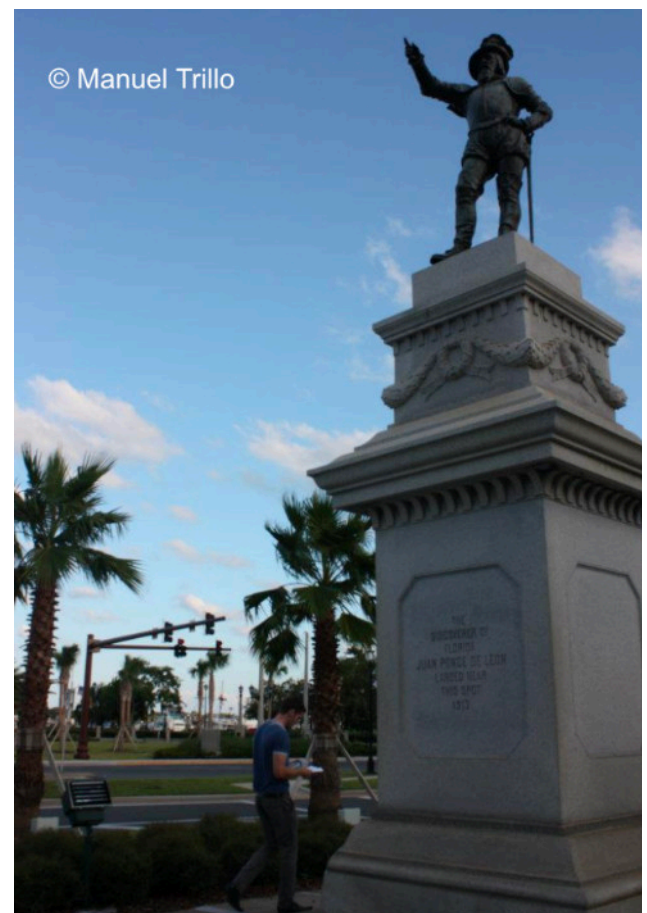
Four decades after the chronicle of Fernandez de Oviedo came to light, in 1575, a Spaniard called Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda insists on the myth writing the memoirs of the seventeen years he spent captive by the Florida Calusa. But Escalante, instead of locating the magic fountain in Bimini, talks about a sacred fountain somewhere in Florida where, **according to natives from Hispaniola and Cuba, those who dived in, recovered youth.** He himself says to have bathed in many rivers without, to his disappointment, being able to confirm its existence.

Despite the fidelity he seems to accept the defeat of the adelantado in his expedition, Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas also falls into temptation to echo this succulent legend, and, in his case, he also refers to the fountain to a river in Florida. He affirms that Ponce

went to look for the Fountain of Bimini, and in Florida a river, believing like that the natives from Cuba, and others from Hispaniola, that said that taking a bath in it, or in the fountain, old men turned into younger men, and it is true that many natives in Cuba, thinking that this river was true,

went, not many years before Spaniards arrived at this island, to Florida, to find it, and they stayed there and settled a town, and this generation of the ones from Cuba exists today.

The truth is that the stories about the mysterious waters with miraculous properties are abundant since ancient time and in different civilizations. The sacred aura of rivers such as the



Statue of Juan Ponce de Leon in Saint Augustine, Florida (United States).

Manuel Trillo.



The legend has become ingrained in such a manner that it is now an identity sign of Florida, which is exploit for tourism. Nowadays, it is possible to visit in Saint Augustine the Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park, where it is even offered to taste the sulfurous water supposedly pursued by Ponce.

Ganges, Nile o Jordan, or the mythical fountain that returned youth to old men described in the Alexander Romance, a French medieval poem about the life of the Macedonian king, are just some examples. **Therefore, it is not strange that the saga of the Spanish in America is also affected by these legends.** But if Ponce de Leon actually heard about the Antilles natives stories about the fountain of youth, in Bimini or in Florida, it was of course not his main motivation to go discover these lands.

Since Herrera's book was published, “dozens of modern writers have repeated, twisted and, often, exaggerated the relation between the Ponce expedition in 1513 and the Fountain of Youth”, affirms Michael Francis, who adds that, over time, “the myth has been slowly turned into a historical fact”. The legend has become ingrained in such a manner that it is now an identity sign of Florida, which is exploit for tourism. Nowadays, it is possible to visit in Saint Augustine the Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park, where it is even offered to taste the sulfurous water supposedly pursued by Ponce. In any case, Francis mentions,

the “real” history of Florida is richer and, I would say, more entertaining than the mythical tale of an aging conqueror in a failed search to find a magical river whose restorative water would provide good health and perpetual youth.



THE ARMADA AGAINST THE CARIBBEANS

The time between the Ponce de Leon's two voyages, from 1513 to 1521, may at first seem less exciting, compared to his discovered achievements, but, for our hero, it is for sure an intense period, full of shock and disputes, and not devoid of action.

Changes in the Indies happen quickly. Spain secures its administration in the Antilles, while new explorations spread over the continent, what begins to shape a powerful empire. It is the era of the Hernandez de Cordoba expedition to Yucatan (1517), the conquer of the Aztecs empire by Hernan Cortes (1519) and the fierce empire of Pedrarias Davila in Castilla del Oro (1514-1526). Not to mention the epic planet circumnavigation set out on by Fernando Magallanes and Juan Sebastian Elcano in 1519.

In the absence of Ponce, notable facts happen in San Juan. On the July 02, 1513, Diego Columbus arrives at the island with new public workers to manage it, once again a detriment of the influence that the discoverer of Florida still had. **But what was more worrying is that the Caribbeans attack Caparra and burn it to ashes.**

These war natives, famous for being vicious archers and cannibals, come from Lesser Antilles and terrified the other Pacific Tainos that inhabited San Juan. Columbus launches a counteroffensive against these cannibals, but Ponce suspects that he uses it as an excuse to win territories at the expense of the poor Tainos, make slaves and increase his power in the region. Faced with this alarming state of

affairs, and surely eager to promote his recent discoveries, **Ponce decides to travel to the Peninsula for the first time in a long time.**

He arrives in Bayona, on the Galician coast, in April 1514. Juan Perez de Ortubia and five thousand pesos for the Royal Treasury travel with him. In Valladolid, where Ferdinand is staying, he again obtains the support of Your Majesty, according to Antonio de Herrera influenced by Pedro Nuñez de Guzman, to who Ponce was once a servant and is now the tutor of prince Ferdinand, grandson of the Catholic King and future Emperor. The Monarch confirms his privileges in the discovered land, this time granting him the title of adelantado in Bimini and Florida:

To doing good and thanks to you, Juan Ponce de Leon, regarding the services you have done me and those which I hope you will do me hereafter, mainly for your work and service in the discovery of the island of Bimini and island of Florida, in the Indies of the Ocean sea, which you have discovered, and as we consider that you were always at our service in the Indies, and trusting your sufficiency and ability, so that we remember you and your services, it is my mercy and will, as far as I am concerned, that now and from now on for the rest of your life you are my adelantado in these islands of Florida and Bimini, that you have discovered, and of other islands and land that there you have discovered under my command, that are not yet discovered by anyone.

This document, signed on September 27, 1514, in Valladolid, **is the first one in history**



to include the name Florida. The Monarch also gives him instructions to populate the new lands, including the reading of the Spanish Requirement to the natives so that they embrace Catholic faith.

Ponce de Leon also has his titles in San Juan ratified and is granted an annual salary of fifty thousand maravedies as compensation for his expenses. But, furthermore, he receives from the king the assignment to command an armada to confront the Caribbeans, granting him once again pre-eminence over Diego Columbus and his clique. The Recruitment House is this time in charge of creating the fleet, formed by three ships, that leaves Seville on May 14, 1515, commanded by Ponce.

The armada first docks on the Island of Guadalupe, where they suffer a confusing attack by the Caribbeans. Apparently, some Castilians were wounded when they arrived on land by the water and four of them died, according to the treasurer of San Juan, Andres de Haro, who writes a letter to the King. **Pedro Martir de Angleria, in a vitriolic narration of this chapter,** adds that several women are captured and the leader of the expedition “turned his back to the Caribbeans, who, being safe and sheltered, boasted to have exterminated”. In his opinion, “Ponce lost his honor” in Guadalupe.

Whatever happened, the fleet arrives in San Juan in July of 1515. By that time, a new Governor had taken control in the plaza, Sancho

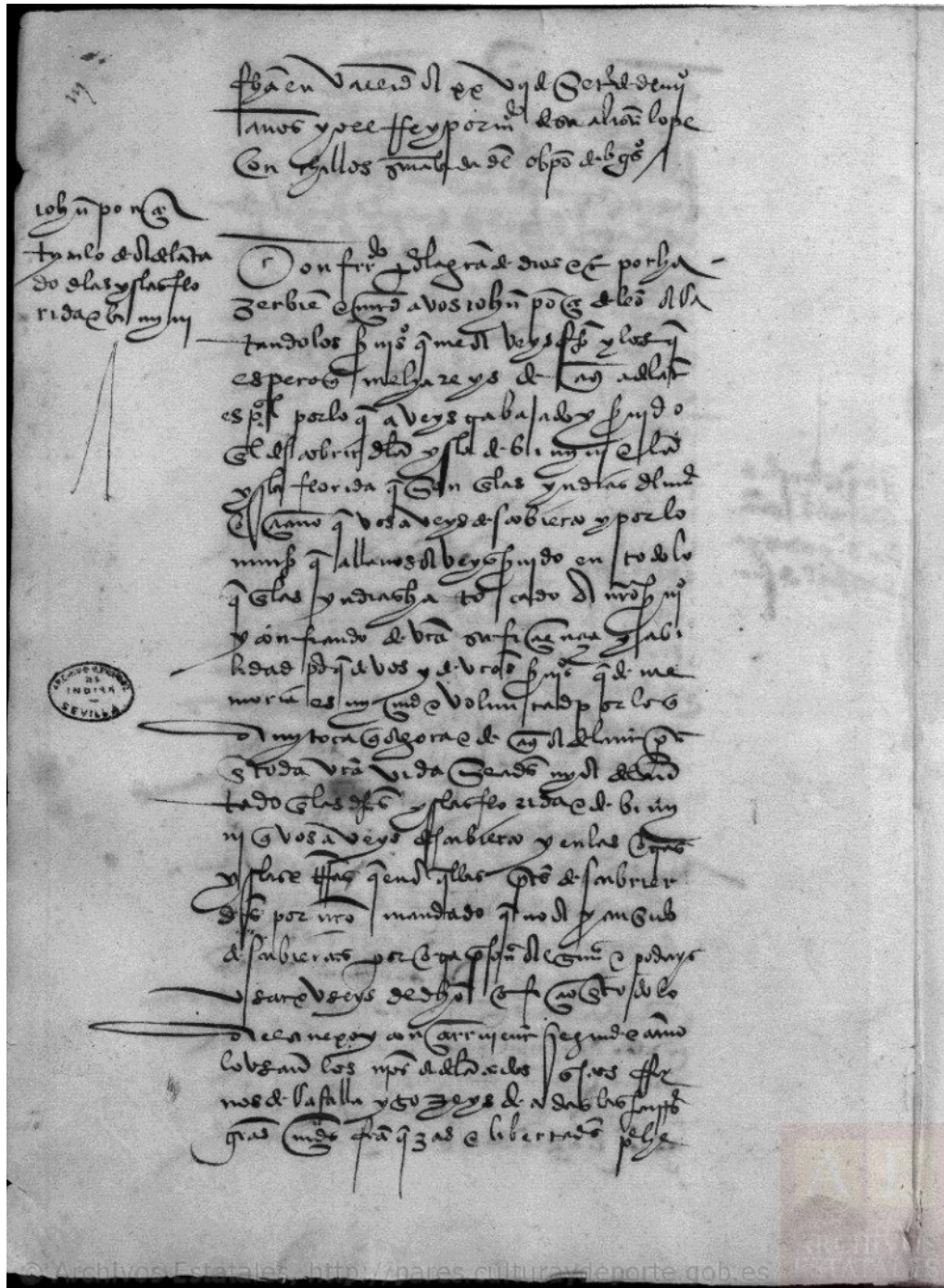
Velazquez, the residence judge that sentenced Ponce de Leon to pay the funds supposedly embezzled. The armada against the Caribbean seems to not have a good reception on the island. According to De Haro, “there is not that much need of it as until now, due to the good armadas created there.” Ponce commissioned Captain Iñigo de Zuñiga to take charge of the ships and sent him to fight the Caribbeans, but the armada does not succeed, and his role is faded into history unnoticed.

While Ponce continues facing the eternal tensions in San Juan, **on January 23, 1516, Ferdinand the Catholic passes away in Madrigalejo (Caceres province now),** who supported and protected him from a lot of his enemies. Charles, the son of Queen Joanna and Philip the Handsome, still very young and absent from his peninsular kingdoms, will ascend to the throne.

The shabby adventurer of Tierra de Campos sets course again to Castile, to make sure that everything is the same under the new administration. He arrives in Seville in November 1516. Ponce now has to deal with the Cardinal Cisneros, and above all with Adriano de Utrecht, the man of the new king in Spain. His processes seemed to yield results. His titles and privileges, in San Juan as well as in his adelantamiento in Florida, are intact, and the future for Adriano VI orders to end the armada against the Caribbeans, provided that the accounts are in order. He takes two loads off to return once again to the Indies.



Juan Ponce de León
The great pioneer of Puerto Rico
and Florida



Real Order by King Ferdinand, naming Juan Ponce de Leon adelantado of the Florida and Bimini Island, dated on September 27, 1514, Valladolid.

General Archive of the Indies.



HUMANE TREATMENT OF THE NATIVES

Lately, attacks of Spanish “conquerors” monuments in the *totum revolutum* of the protests against racism in the USA **have reached Ponce de Leon, whose statue in Miami was covered in red paint** and messages in favor of the “Black Lives Matter” movement last June.

It is important to mention the reflexion made by Manuel Ballesteros in his book “Juan Ponce de Leon”.

With the Spanish colonization of America and the relationship between the Spanish and the natives, a curious phenomenon happens: that being the only civilized colonization that thoroughly worried about the destiny -material as well as moral- of the less civilized native, has been the most attacked one over the course of time.

Despite the enormous impact resulting from suddenly running into a full continent and some unknown settlements until then, **the Catholic Kings made efforts to treat the natives humanely and to stop abuses.** Royal Ordinances that came from the Burgos Board of 1512, in which it is ordered to educate natives and respect their customs, without suppressing them to abusive works, **it is considered for many a precedent of the Human Rights Declaration.**

In what we know about Ponce de Leon from the documents, he moves away from the stereotype of fierce and cruel conqueror that massacres vulnerable natives. When he makes war, it is not just with the intention of enslaving the natives, but in **response to revolts or aggressions such as those of the Caribbeans, from whom he protects the gentler Tainos.** In his first trip to Florida, he even tried to make peace with those who attacked him when he just arrived.

Certainly, Ponce searched for his own benefit and that of the Crown, and he uses the natives for the work in the mines, but **not at the expense of free violence nor savage exploitation.** He always tries to find an agreement with local leaders and to maintain a peaceful cohabitation with natives. The fact that King Ferdinand ordered him to distribute servants shows that he trusted him with such a delicate responsibility because of his good judgment, opposed to others with less scruples.

Finally, it is surprising that the graffiti on his statue in Miami say “Black Lives Matter”, since during **his first expedition to Florida, it is said that two black men that were free, not slaves, were traveling with him.** As time goes by, this Spanish territory become a freedom sanctuary where **slaves escaped from the British colonies came to take shelter.**



Juan Ponce de León
The great pioneer of Puerto Rico
and Florida



Statue of Juan Ponce de León in Miami, Florida (United States), before and after being covered by paint during protests against racism in June 2020.

The Hispanic Council.



ARGUMENT FOR THE NEW CAPITAL

Once again in San Juan, Ponce de León takes part in the island public life as a member of the Council of Canons, even though he seems to be in the minority compared to Sancho Velazquez, the strong man at that moment.

In another sign of the changes in process, it is discussed to move the capital from Caparra, the original location chosen by Ponce, to the island in the entrance of the bay known as Puerto Rico. This matter causes a passionate debate.

The founder of Caparra opposes to the change. In a document presented in the afternoon of July 13, 1517, he argues that the current location has “three exists for the servitude of this city through the traverse”; it is “flat and dry, there are no waters at all, and if it rains, mud is not created”, it has deep wells and three streams in the surroundings, as well as “lots of good wood for planks and beams for earthen houses, and to make straw houses, and lots of straws to cover them”. Plus, the closeness to farmlands, pastures and mines. But, furthermore, he emphasizes that

if the town is moved, the neighbors and inhabitants of this City and its limits would be damaged, as they already have their houses built here, and their ovens and wells, and all the other things they need to serve, they would lose it all and they would have to build again where the town is moved to, and neither the poor nor the rich would be able to do that, but with huge difficulties, because of the decrease of natives.

However, Ponce advises,

the island where you say the town should be moved to is close to the sea, and it has no exit through dry land, and in case there is dry land, and a road or a bridge is built to get to dry land, it would be very expensive, and we do not know if the building made there would be stable.

But Ponce de León was alone in opposing this move. Nevertheless, the Hieronymites Fathers, sent to San Juan in 1516 and with great importance now on the island's society matters, approve to have with him the deference to allow him to keep in the old Caparra the house he worked so hard to build:

And because the Adelantado Juan Ponce de León has spent a lot of time creating and building the stone house that he has in this city, we allow that the said Adelantado can live in this house for the desired time, provided that the site or sites granted to him in this new City, are fenced and his house inhabited, and he goes and comes to the Council of Canons as many times as needed, and to provide him with whatever else he needs, as Captain General and Counselor of said island and City.

Thus, against Ponce's will, **the capital would be moved to what today is old San Juan, the heart of the Puerto Rican capital.** The place where Caparra was is today devoured by the expansion of the modern city and is now part of its metropolitan area.



Incidentally, something curious happens with the name of the capital and the country. First, Spanish name San Juan to what natives named Boriquen or Borinquen, while the new capital is known as Puerto Rico, because of the

good qualities of its bay. However, over time, the city and the country exchange their names, so that the capital is called San Juan and the group of islands and the country, Puerto Rico.

THE REVENGE AGAINST SANCHO VELAZQUEZ

While the lobbyists take care of moving the city, in 1519, a new residence judge arrives on the island, Attorney Antonio de la Gama, who **provides Ponce de Leon with the opportunity to get his revenge against Sancho Velazquez.** The then convicted sues now the old judge for making him pay “unfairly” for the well-known one thousand, three hundred and fifty-two reals, two tomines and six gold grains. In the document presented by his attorney, Pedro Sedeño, he alleges that “the gold that he had taken was after the death of such company”, so he did not owe anything, and he holds that he did not even process his appeal to Velazquez. He, for his part, defends that the lawsuit is inappropriate, and he only followed the King’s command.

In the cold administrative language of the scribe that transcribes the judicial proceeding, the tension between Ponce and the man that had dishonored his fame was discerned. During the hearing before the judge De la Gama, on September 22, 1519,

said Attorney Velazquez, and the Adelantado Juan Ponce de Leon, who was also attending, swore to God and Saint Mary and the words of the Saint Gospels and the Sign of the Cross, touching with their right hands the five articles, one that

the lawsuit filed, and the one denying his response, both were fully or partly good and true; and being required to tell the truth, they would say it; and that they would not provide false documents or witnesses, and that they would not request spiteful deadlines, and that they would not give the Judge nor the mentioned scribe too much money so that justice is made to them if they do not get it; and they said I swear, and amen.

The lawsuit is prolonged six months, in which, in addition to the plaintiff and defendant, numerous witnesses appeared from both parties, **and documentary evidences are provided, which today are valuable sources** to reconstruct firsthand the story of the San Juan colonization.

Ponce de Leon insists that the unilateral dissolution of the company with the king was legal as the conditions were altered, because the administrators of Diego Columbus, Juan Ceron and Miguel Diaz, took away the natives that he had according to the capitulation and distributed them to the just arrived ones, such as Cristobal de Sotomayor. Along this line, in his interrogation to the witnesses, the aggrieved asks

if they knew whether the said company that he had with Your Highness had been sustained until the time that the said account was requested of



me, and the natives had not been taken and distributed to me, and with which I began to take gold and profits, I would have profited from more than ten thousand Castilians, according to the great amount of gold taken then, and according to the amount I obtained from La Mona for ransom, and from this Island, and from Santa Cruz, as I had license for that according to what was capitulated with me.

Finally, the residing judge Antonio de la Gama pronounces judgment on March 05, 1520:

I rule that I must condemn and sentence the said attorney Sancho Velazquez with the one thousand, three hundred and fifty-two reals, two tomines and six gold grains that he seems to have made the said Adelantado pay too much in the account taken from him, which shall be given and paid to him in the first nine days thereafter, and he has the right to request the said gold pesos paid to who he gave it to or whoever is convenient.

Eight years after his humiliating sentence, **the name Ponce de Leon is clean before justice.** It is a shame that Ferdinand the Catholic joined Queen Elisabeth to eternally sleep, and he cannot see it.

Even so, there is one detail that cannot be omitted: in same year, 1520, when De la Gama pronounces his judgment, he marries one of the daughters of Ponce de Leon, Isabel, “and they gave him a big dowry with her”, **Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo mischievously points out.**

Eight years after his humiliating sentence, the name Ponce de Leon is clean before justice. It is a shame that Ferdinand the Catholic joined Queen Elisabeth to eternally sleep, and he cannot see it.

Finding a husband for his daughters was one of Ponce de Leon's main concerns at that time, as in an unknown date a tragic event takes place: the death of his wife, Leonor. The marriage of his older daughter Juana, with the accountant Garcia Troche, is joined to the one of Isabel with De la Gama. As for his third daughter, who some authors name Leonor and some Maria, there is no clear information about her marriage either: some link her to Gaspar Troche, Garcia's brother, and some to the residing judge, Antonio de la Llama.



THE FINAL JOURNEY

Once the marriages of his daughters and the old lawsuits with Sancho Velazquez were solved, **it was time to resume the task that Ponce de Leon left half done some years before: the Florida colonization.**

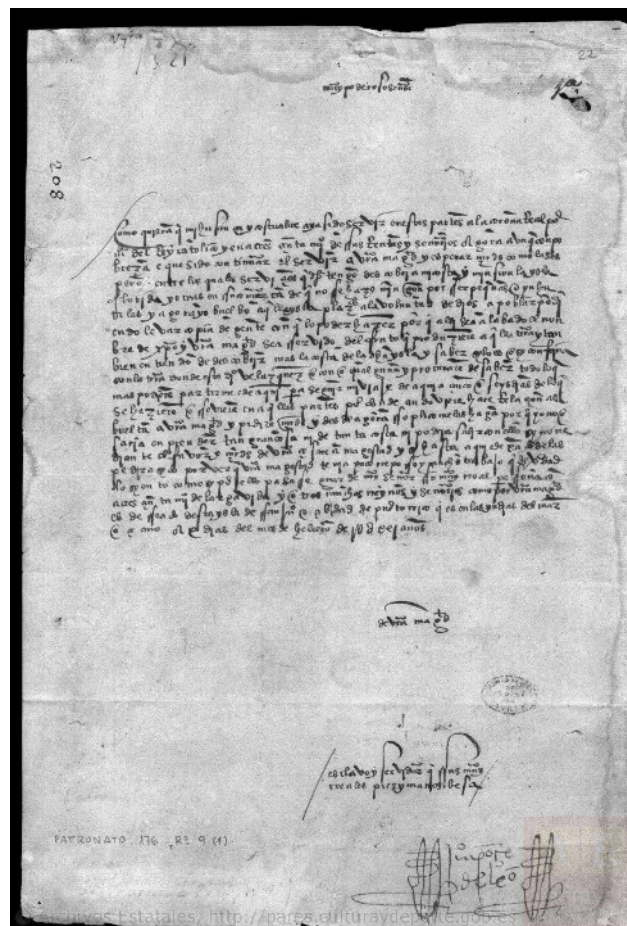
During his long absence, other expeditionaries had been to that land. Bernal Diaz del Castillo narrates in his "Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España" ("True history of the New Spain conquest") that the expedition of Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba to Yucatan in 1517, in which the author takes part, **he decides to return to Cuba after suffering an attack from the natives,** but following a different route than the one used in the outbound trip.

And the pilot Alaminos arranged with and advised the other two pilots, that from the location where they were they would cross to Florida, because he found, regarding his charts and degrees and height that it would be about seventy leagues from there, and after arriving in Florida he said that it was a better trip and a closer navigation to go to Havana than the route we used to arrive, and that is how he said that, because, as far as I understood, he came with Ponce de Leon to discover Florida fourteen or fifteen years ago.

The calculation of the passed time was clearly wrong, **but Alaminos is not wrong regarding the location.** When on land in search of water,

he recognized the coast and said that he had already been to that location, that he came with Juan Ponce de Leon, when he came to discover that coast, and that the natives on that land had caused them trouble and many soldiers had died, and that we should be on alert.

Another expedition that reached Florida was the one led by Francisco de Garay and headed in 1519 by Alonso Alvarez de Pineda, who traveled along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, thus proving for the first time that Florida is not an island, as Ponce de Leon thought, but the end of a gigantic extension of dry land still unexplored. A royal decree for De



Letter of Juan Ponce de Leon to King Charles, informing about his returning to Florida, dated on February 10, 1521, in the island of San Juan, city of Puerto Rico.

General Archive of the Indies.



Garay explains that expeditionaries

came across the Florida land, that Juan Ponce de Leon discovered. And recognized and saw it, and they wanted to hug the coastline to move forward, but they were not able to, because land appeared everywhere, towards where the sun is born (...). Therefore, it seems that the adelantados Diego Velazquez and Juan Ponce de Leon and you discovered that it is all dry land and coasts.

But, besides these official expeditions, there were **some irregular incursions in search of natives for Hispaniola**. The adelantado himself complains to the Court. He left the

caciques and natives in this island of Bimini being peaceful, and made sure they were on our side, promising them that they would not be hurt by Juan Ponce nor any other person, and that no one would move them from there to take them to Hispaniola as servants, which was their biggest fear.

That is how it is registered in a Real Cedula (Royal Decree) of 1517, addressed to the Hieronymites Fathers and signed by Cardinal Adriano de Utrecht, who heard news about the “insurance” promised to the natives by Ponce and ordered to obey by the King being broken. Because of that, the decree orders that the captured natives are returned to their place of origin and left alone.

Now Ponce is ready to set sail to Florida again. In a letter sent to the Cardinal from Puerto Rico on February 10, 1521, he makes excuses for not having been able to resume until that moment what he started in 1513, and he announces his immediate departure, asking “profits” from that. It is one of the only two letters received that are signed in his own writing:



Route of the expedition to Florida of Ponce de Leon in 1521.
Manuel Trillo.

I served the Royal Crown a lot in these parts of the Indies, subordinated by the Catholic King, and thus far my services have been suspended, therefore in the continuation I will do, as well as in what was already done and give me benefits from; because of that, and also because of time and the work arose, as well as becoming a widower and being responsible for my daughters and not wanting to leave them until they were married, and now that they are married, as per God desired; I know there have been many works and difficulties, for Your Majesty and Your Honor; but as I trust God that everything will be fine and the Estate and the dominance of Your Majesty will increase and he will have mercy for me, I agreed with that poverty I had left to serve Your Majesty and go to the Florida island and its regions, and populate if possible and discover all I am able to; I will leave here in five or six days for there, with two ships and the people I am able to take, I will keep Your Majesty and Your Honor informed about what is done there; and I beg you to remember how I served and I serve, and how I



spent all I had to serve, and now I am not staying in the lodge. I beg Your Honor that by your hand I receive mercies from Your Majesty, so that I may serve, I really do not want to amass nor to pass this miserable life, but to serve with that and myself what Your Majesty needs, and populate that land that I discovered.

That same day, Ponce de Leon sends another letter directly to the king himself, to whom he accounts for the made services, **to inform him about his return to Florida and he demands to be compensated as deserved.** This is the full content:

As wanted my usage and habits have served here the Royal Crown, by order of the Catholic King increasing his Profits and Manors, now, poorly, I want to continue to serve Your Majesty, and hope for profits as I do; among these services I made, I discovered at my expense and my mention the Florida Island and others in its region, which are not mentioned because they are small and useless; and I am now returning to this island responding to God's will, to populate, taking with me people with who I would be able to do it, so that the name of Jesus Christ is praised there, and Your Majesty is served by the fruit made in that land; and I would also try to discover more, the coast of such island, and get to know if it confines within the land where Diego Velazquez is [Governor of Cuba and since 1518 also of Yucatan] or with any other land, and I will try to discover whatever else is possible: I will leave in five or six days; I will inform Your Majesty about what is done or seen in that land I will be in, and I will ask for benefits; and from now I beg you to provide it, because I would not start such a great thing, nor so expensive, and I would not be able to do it, without asking you the favor and profits from Your Most Gracious Majesty; and if I stopped asking

for it until now, is because I saw that Your Majesty had little rest and lot of work, what I really suffer as if it happened to me.

Save Our Lord Your Royal person wishing you a long life a many other Kingdoms and Estates, as Your Majesty desires. From this San Juan Island and City of Puerto Rico in the Indies of the Ocean Sea, on the tenth day of February of fifteen twenty-one.- Slave and servant of Your Majesty, who kisses your Royal feet and hands.-. Juan Ponce de Leon

Thus, eight years after stepping foot in Florida for the first time, **Ponce de Leon set sails again towards that land he still thinks is an island**, ignoring the result of the Alvarez de Pineda's expedition. He no longer mentions Bimini.

There is even less information about this second expedition than about the first one. To fulfill what he mentioned in his letters, he weighs anchor on February 15 or 16 in command of the two ships. However, a letter from Antonio de la Gama to the emperor Charles on the February 15 delays the departure date several days:

The Adelantado Juan Ponce de Leon departs from this island on the twentieth of this month, with another Armada, to populate the Florida Island, and discover its regions.

He possibly follows a similar route than the one in the prior occasion, so it is to suppose that in **the second half of March 1521, he was already in his adelantamiento.** He thinks he is moving towards the southwest of the Florida peninsula, in the Gulf coast, with the aim to establish there his first village. But things did not end as he expected. Once Ponce lands in Florida,



Juan Ponce de León
The great pioneer of Puerto Rico and Florida

after a difficult navigation, the natives came to resist, and fought obstinately with him, they killed some people, and being injured in the thigh, he went back to Cuba with the ones that remained, where he ended his days, and the king, contemplating his services, gave his Adelantamiento and his other benefits to Luis Ponce de Leon, his son.

With this brief and cold paragraph, Antonio de Herrera sorts out the end of this adelantado. Chroniclers that have devoted rivers of ink to Ponce de Leon's adventures, **are extraordinarily scared when narrating the outcome of his last expedition.** Little is known about the confrontation, probably with the Calusa, he came off badly, nor about the navigation to Havana,



Statue of Ponce de Leon in San Juan (Puerto Rico).
Courtesy: Puerto Rico Tourism Company.



during which it is told that the cadaver of his nephew Hernan, dead in the quarrel with the natives, was thrown into the sea. Fernandez de Oviedo just notes that, after returning from Spain, Ponce

he returned to the island of San Juan, and he gathered more courage to populate his adelantamiento and that was given to him, and he spend a lot in the armada and returned from there broken into pieces and injured with an arrow, which was the wound that caused his death on the island of Cuba. And it was not only him who lost his life and wasted his time and money in this petition: many others that followed him, died on the journey and once they arrived there, some died at the hands of the natives and some due to diseases; and that is how the adelantado and the adelantamiento ended.

Bartolome de las Casas uses, as expected, less kind words to **refer to the end of Ponce de Leon's existence:**

Arriving there [to the island of Cuba], and I think, if I did not forget, to the port named today Port-au-Prince, which is on that island, he left behind a hard-work life; and this is how he lost his body, spent a large amount of gold pesos and, as I said, he arrived with many deaths and painful and bitter likes of natives, and he made big works going to and coming from Castile, and to discover and to populate, and we do not know how his soul made in purgatory. And that is how the Adelantamiento of Bimini concluded with everything else.

We have some additional information thanks to the informing letter that Hernan Cortes sends in 1522 to the Emperor Charles, in which he writes about the arrival to Veracruz (Villa Rica, wealthy

Little is known about the confrontation, probably with the Calusa, he came off badly, nor about the navigation to Havana, during which it is told that the cadaver of his nephew.

city) of one of the ships on the Ponce de Leon wretched expedition. **According to the dates he mentions, it may have arrived in the beginning or middle of June 1521.** The brave man from Extremadura just recovered from a battler where the Spanish and its allies had suffered serious losses, being him himself injured. A ship from Florida brought reinforcements for the final attack to Tenochtitlan:

By that time, the ones injured in the battle were already recovered, and a Juan Ponce de Leon ship had been sent to Villa Rica, which had been destroyed in the Florida island or land; and the ones from the town sent me some gunpowder and crossbows, which we extremely needed; and then, thanks to God, we did not have land around us that was not in favor of us.



When Juan Ponce de León died, his only male child is Luis, who is recognized by the King and the Emperor Charles as his heir and names him as Councilor of the city of Puerto Rico. But as he was underage, this legacy is assumed by his son-in-law Garcia Troche, married to his oldest daughter, Juana.

Some authors say that Luis dies before he becomes an adult, and some say that he consecrates himself to religious life. In any case, **the inheritance ends up passing the son of Garcia Troche and Juana, who takes the name of his grandfather.** This second Juan Ponce de León would be the first acting governor of Puerto Rico born on the island. The lineage continues.

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AN EVERLASTING LEGACY

Juan Ponce de Leon leaves this world in 1521, without achieving his intent to populate Florida, but he leaves a clear path for others to continue the colonization task of what, without him knowing, was the great North American subcontinent.

In the following **decades new expeditions take place to try to dominate a region that opposes the Spanish**, and not only because of the hostility that the natives showed towards Ponce. A despicable climate, sticky heat and violent hurricanes, as well as a marshy ground full of caymans make Florida a huge challenge. It is far removed from the happy paradise that the millions of tourists that visit the “Sun State” now enjoy.

The first one to take the baton of Ponce de Leon is Lucas Vazquez de Ayllon, who in 1526 manages to establish a settlement in what is today Georgia or South Carolina, named San Miguel de Guadalupe, despite its short-lived existence. Two years later, Panfilo de Narvaez tries again in another unfortunate expedition from which there were only a few survivors, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca among them, who in turn is involved in a legendary epic journey of several years through a large part of the south of North America. Hernando de Soto, the man from Extremadura, for his part, **takes charge of an expedition with hundreds of people that sets sail in 1539 around the current Tampa Bay** and traverses what is today about ten states in the USA, during which he dies, and his remains are deposited in the Mississippi riverbed. Later, in 1559, Tristan de Luna y Arellano establishes a precarious settlement on the Gulf of Mexico coast, in what



Tomb of Juan Ponce de Leon in the Minor Basilica and the Saint Church Metropolitan Cathedral of San Juan Bautista, in San Juan (Puerto Rico).

Courtesy: Metropolitan Cathedral of San Juan Bautista.

today is known as Pensacola. But it is not until 1565 that Spain, urged by the French Huguenot attempts to appropriate Florida, finally gets the Asturian sailor Pedro Menendez de Aviles to establish San Agustin. Today it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the United States.

The Spanish Florida stretches to include a territory much bigger that the occupied by the



United States state with that name, extending over a great part of the North American coast. That is what Las Casas says when he writes, referring to the return of Ponce to the Indies from the Peninsula:

He [Ponce de Leon] returned to Castile very favored with the title of Adelantado and Governor of Bimini, that he called by another name Florida, even that this name refers to all the land and coast of the sea that starts in the big cape that he discovered [the Florida peninsula] until the land of Bacallaos, also the Labrador land, which is not far from the England Island.

Spain would be the proprietor of Florida until 1821, with a digression of British sovereignty from 1763 to 1783, and it would extend its control to the Pacific, managing to control frozen locations in the distant Alaska that today preserves its Spanish origin, such as Cordova or Valdez.

On top of a big part of these territories, the United States of America would be raised. The Count of Aranda, Pedro Pablo Abarca de Bolea, foresees in 1783 that the stuttering nation would turn into a powerful titan:

This federal republic was born pygmy, to put it another way, and it needed the support and strength of two States as powerful as Spain and France to reach independence. It will grow some day and become a giant, and a fearsome colossus in other regions. Then it would forget the benefits received from both powerful countries, and would only think in their gratitude (...). The first step of this powerful country would be to take control of the Floridas, to dominate the Gulf of Mexico.

After offending us that way and our relations with New Spain, it shall aim for conquering this

huge empire, that would not be able to protect from such a huge powerful country, established on the same continent and its neighbor.

In the meantime, Puerto Rico is still Spanish until the collapse in 1898, when the last possessions of overseas are lost forever. Nowadays, being a commonwealth of the USA, the island maintains its unmistakable Hispanic nature, with the Cervantes' language being the official one.

The remains of the adelantado rest there. In 1559, they are moved from Cuba to the island of San Juan by his grandson, the mentioned Juan Ponce de Leon II. First, they are deposited in the main chapel of the Santo Tomas Church, and in 1909 they are moved to the current tomb in the Cathedral of San Juan Bautista in the Puerto Rican Capital.

Puerto Rico as well as Florida honor the memory of Juan Ponce de Leon as the key leading figure that he is in its history. The island, in 2008 celebrated a no expenses spared the fifth centenary of the arrival of the Castilian noble, and will commemorate in 2021 the 500 years since his death with "all type of activities, religious as well as cultural", as well as "symposiums, masses with bishops from different countries and classes", as they stated at that moment in the metropolitan cathedral. The event **coincides with the 500th anniversary of the walled city of San Juan**, so planned exhibitions in several museums in Puerto Rico and many more activities they added, even the pandemic finally faded the commemoration.

In Florida, the trace of Ponce de Leon is also everywhere, through the statues and multiple streets and institutions that have his name. Even in the county where the state capital is located,



Juan Ponce de León
The great pioneer of Puerto Rico
and Florida

Tallahassee, is entitled Leon in memory of the adelantado. But, above all, in the collective memory, as the person that introduced the western culture that has shaped over the centuries the identity of the current United States.

In 2013, Florida embraced a long series of acts to commemorate a no expenses spared fifth centenary of the disembarkation of Ponce on its coasts, and recognized the author of the merge of two worlds separated until then by an ocean. The spirit of Juan Ponce de Leon is still alive.

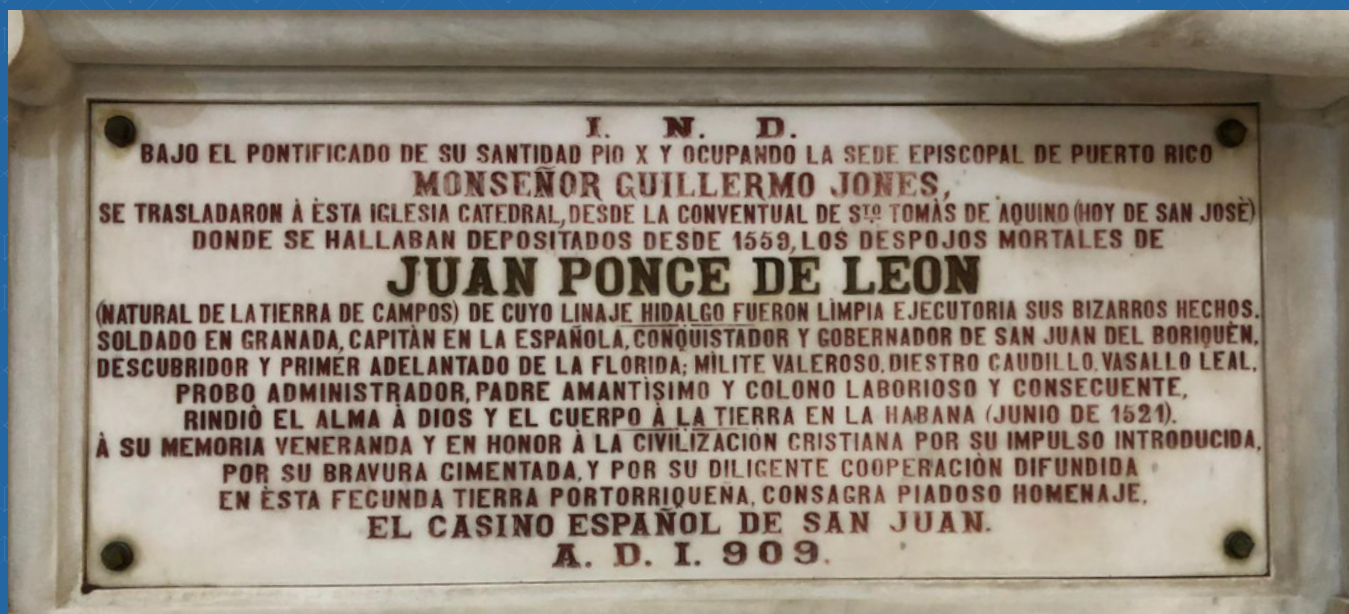


Statue of Ponce de Leon in front of the church of San Jose in Old San Juan (Puerto Rico).
Courtesy: Puerto Rico Tourism Company.



JUAN PONCE DE LEÓN

(A native of Tierra de Campos) whose noble lineage was a clean executory of his weird facts. Soldier in Granada, captain in Hispaniola, conqueror and Governor of San Juan del Boriquen, discoverer and first adelantado of Florida, brave soldier, skilled leader, loyal servant, honest administrative, loving father and hard-working and consistent colonist, gave his soul to God and his body to the land in Havana (June of 1521). To his adored memory and in honor of the Christian civilization introduced with his impetus, to his strong bravery, and for his assiduous cooperation spread in this Puerto Rican fruitful land, enshrines a merciful homage the Casino Español (Spanish Casino) of San Juan.



Tomb of Juan Ponce de Leon in the Minor Basilica and the Saint Church Metropolitan Cathedral of San Juan Bautista, in San Juan (Puerto Rico).
Courtesy: Metropolitan Cathedral of San Juan Bautista.



Juan Ponce de León
The great pioneer of Puerto Rico
and Florida

*Legend engraved on the tomb of Juan Ponce de
Leon in the Minor Basilica and the Saint Church
Metropolitan Cathedral of San Juan Bautista,
in San Juan (Puerto Rico).*



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CHRONOLOGY

1460-1474?	Juan Ponce de Leon is born in Santervas de Campos.
1493	He travels to Hispaniola on Christopher Columbus' second expedition to the Indies.
1504	Juan Ponce de Leon is born in Santervas de Campos.
1493	Nicolas de Ovando names him captain of Santo Domingo in the second Higüey war.
1508	He explores the island of Boriquen or San Juan (Puerto Rico today), and establishes the first settlement in the island, which would be named Caparra.
1509	Ovando signs the capitulations so that he is settled in San Juan and exploits the gold mines in a society with the Crown.
1510	Ferdinand the Catholic names him governor, captain and judge of San Juan, and Ponce arrests the men Diego Columbus, Juan Ceron and Miguel Diaz.
1511	Mutiny of the natives on the island of San Juan.
1512	The king signs the capitulation to “discover and populate” the islands of Bimini.
1513	Ponce de Leon discovers what he thinks is an island which he names Florida. The residence judge Sancho Velazquez sentences him to pay more than 1,350 reales to dissolve his company with the king without the consent of the monarch.
1514	The king names him adelantado of Florida and Captain of the armada against the Caribbeans.



1515	He returns to the Indies in charge of the armada against the Caribbeans and he suffers an attack on the Island of Guadalupe.
1516	He travels again to the Peninsula to assure his titles after the death of the king Ferdinand.
1517	He opposes to move the capital of San Juan from Caparra to the Puerto Rico Island.
1519	He brings a lawsuit against the ex-residence judge Sancho Velazquez for making him pay “against justice” more than 1,350 reales seven years ago.
1520	The residence judge Antonio de la Gama sentences Sancho Velazquez to refund these more than 1,350 reales. After his wife Leonor passes away, Ponce finds a husband for his daughters, one of which marries De la Gama.
1521	He travels for the second time to Florida with the aim to populate the land of his Adelantamiento. After being shot by an arrow to the thigh, he died in Havana.
1559	His remains are moved to the Santo Tomas Church in San Juan of Puerto Rico.
1909	The remains are moved to their current location in the San Juan Bautista Cathedral, in San Juan.

Gratitudes

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About the author

Manuel Trillo Lodeiro (Valladolid, 1972), is a journalist and writer. He has been working since 1994 for the **ABC newspaper**, where he has been in the position, among others, of politics editor of Castile and Leon, Delegate in Aragon, Digital Composition Chief, Society Section Chief **and correspondent in Miami**. Currently, he works in the International area, in addition, he is the author of numerous pieces of information and articles about the Spanish history in the United States. In 2015, he published “**La costa de los rebeldes**” (The rebels’ coast) (Stella Maris), the chronicle of a tour over the history through the North American Atlantic littoral from Boston to the limits of Florida, and in 2009 he made for The Hispanic Council the report “**De Florida a Alaska: tres siglos de legado español en Estados Unidos**” (From Florida to Alaska: three centuries of Spanish legacy in the United States).

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