The Caribbean World of Juan Ponce de León and His Discovery of Florida
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Introduction
In St. Augustine, Florida’s Plaza de La Constitución stands a bronze statue of Juan Ponce de León. An identical statue and pedestal stand before the Cathedral of San Juan on the Island of Puerto Rico. Many in Florida and the United States know of Ponce de León and his discovery of Florida. Fewer are familiar with the role he played in the early history of the Spanish contact period in the New World and in particular, his business and political involvement with the Spanish development of Puerto Rico, then known as the Island of San Juan Bautista. It was his involvement with that island that led directly to his voyage of discovery to Florida in 1513.

Early Life
Juan Ponce de León was born in the year 1474 in San Tervás del Campo in the province of Valladolid (Weddle 1985:39, Morison 1974:502). He was the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman and descended from a family that played a critical role in the re-conquest of Spain. Juan Ponce de León was born in a country at war and into a marshal culture. Though illegitimate he was still educated and received training in the use of arms. As a young boy, possibly at the age of ten (1484), he became the page of a Spanish knight named Pedro Núñez de Guzmán a leading member of the military order of Calatrava. As his squire at the age of 18 in 1492, Juan Ponce and Pedro Núñez de Guzmán participated in the historic capture of the Kingdom of Granada. This ended 800 or so years of Moorish Kingdoms and the culture of al-Andalus. During this early phase of his career Juan Ponce likely lived an austere military camp life as an active member of one of Spain’s principal military establishments. Thus Juan Ponce was able to observe and learn all aspects of Castilian military campaigning of the time.

Juan Ponce de León landed a place on one of the 17 ships traveling to the New World in 1493 on Christopher Columbus’ second voyage. This expedition established a permanent Spanish colonial presence in the New World. During the course of this voyage the fleet traveled along the south coast of Puerto Rico and anchored in a bay on the west coast to water. Columbus went ashore and claimed the island for Spain and, it should be added, for his personal political domain in the New World as well. It is possible Juan Ponce went ashore at this time thus sparking his interest in that island.

Early Years on Española
Columbus moved the fleet east along the coast of the island of Española and settled on a spot near a river called the Bajabonico. The settlement was named La Isabela in honor of Columbus’s primary benefactor, Queen Isabella of Spain. Here Juan Ponce de León went ashore with the rest of the Spanish. Though they came from southern Europe, they were unaccustomed to the tropical climate and to compound matters, the food supplies began to spoil. A shortage ensued. These factors conspired to thin the ranks of the Spanish significantly.

During this food shortage Columbus dispatched a large body of men inland leaving the majority of them there in a new fort under the command of Pedro Margarit, a comendador of the military order of Santiago (Floyd 1973:24-25). As a soldier formally attached to a member of the order of Calatrava Juan Ponce may have appealed to Pedro Margarit. It is likely that he was sent into the interior at that time which gave Juan Ponce a better chance of survival.

Juan Ponce had passed the first major test the New World set for Europeans—survival. He witnessed and participated in the founding of Spanish civilization in the New World. It was not a particularly graceful beginning by any means, but it was permanent. Being present at that time and surviving put Juan Ponce de León on a slowly ascending career path. Between 1494 and 1498 he likely lived with the native Taino Indians possibly moving about the interior of the island acculturating and acclimatizing. Juan Ponce likely learned a great deal about the Taino culture during this period including a certain amount of language, fighting techniques, agriculture, and food ways. All this information helped him succeed in future battles with the Tainos as well as in his future ranching, mining, and settling endeavors.
**The Big Brake**

Española’s eastern province of Higüey did not contain gold. It was however a rich land with a history of agricultural excellence. Following a Taino rebellion in 1502, a second war broke out in 1504. The second conflict came about as a result of Spanish treaty infractions and the general friction between the two cultures in the vicinity of the Spanish fort there. This led to the fort’s destruction by fire and the killing of the garrison with the exception of one man who escaped and carried the news to Santo Domingo (Las Casas, Vol. II 1986:258).

Nicolas de Ovando, the governor of Española, levied troops from the four principal villas, or towns, of Santiago, Santo Domingo, Concepción, and Bonao. He placed them all under the command of Juan de Esquivel of Santiago. Juan Ponce was made the Captain of the contingent from Santo Domingo placing him at the top of the military hierarchy of this campaign and in a role that was of interest to the chroniclers of the period (Las Casas, Vol. II 1986:258). This is his first known appearance in the historical records of the time.

Ponce’s organizational skills may have extended to that of running a real, or military camp. At the very least, he had to command and organize his own contingent within the various camps of the campaign. His time in the military camps of the reconquest back in Spain gave him a level of experience in these matters that may not have been common among the majority of the Spanish then resident on Española. It is possibly these skills and his years of experience on the island and in numerous island military campaigns may have qualified him in Ovando’s eyes as a provincial administrator. Ponce was both competent and experienced in island fighting and as fortune would have it, also politically well connected. These were a powerful combination of factors that made his big break possible.

Following its conquest, Juan Ponce was made Lieutenant of the province and was tasked by Ovando with the founding of two villas, or settlements, within the conquered territory. Santa Cruz de Aicayagua was the inland settlement, and the second, located near the sea on the Yuma River was Salvaleón de Higüey. Likely included among Juan Ponce’s duties and rights was that of repartidor, or distributor, of the conquered Indians. These he assigned in family groups and chieftainships as was the custom on Española to those who fought in the campaign as well as to friends, associates, and possibly to some in the colonial government of Nicolas Ovando and a few of the King’s absent favorites in Spain (Las Casas, Vol. II 1986:269).

The post gave Juan Ponce the perks and the power to do very well for himself and his loyal followers. His estate produced the principal products of the region--cassava bread and livestock. Juan Ponce was in fact a dedicated cattleman (AGI, Contaduría 1072, ff9-63, Tanodi 1971:64). This and the agricultural production of yuca for cassava bread were essential to the mining industry. And being in the mining business himself, this meant he could produce his own comestible supplies thus keeping down his mining costs. The products of his estate permitted him to supply his own expeditions to a large degree.

**Puerto Rico and the Initiation of Spanish Colonial Expansion from Española**

After 1505, a year long period followed the conquest of Española during which the newly founded villas and encomiendas in both western and eastern Española developed both infrastructure and markets. The island had been divided up and parcelled out to political favorites and those who had merited it through notable military action. It no longer offered opportunities for gaining wealth through the use of the sword. Many of the rank and file of the conquest of Española who had not done well, or well enough in their opinions, were ready for new horizons. All the necessary factors for colonial expansion from the island of Española were in place. Juan Ponce de León began the process.

At some point Juan Ponce obtained information from Taino Indians traveling from the island of Puerto Rico that gold was abundant there (Las Casas, Vol. II, 1986:356). Juan Ponce consulted with governor Ovando, and a prospecting expedition was organized. There were two principal voyages carrying settlers and followers to the island. The first occurred in 1506, the same year Christopher Columbus died, and the second took place two years later in 1508.
On June 24th, 1506, Juan Ponce arrived at Puerto Rico with four naos and a caravel with some one hundred men and supplies. They landed at the mouth of the Guaroabo River (today’s Rio Grande de Añasco) on the west coast of the island. They initially settled in a nearby Indian village they called Mapo el Grande (later La Aguada). This settlement was the primary base from which the island was explored. In the months that followed, Juan Ponce and his overland party was guided by Taino Indians to the northeastern coast where a spacious harbor sheltered by a large island were identified as very promising for a settlement site. This bay today is known as Bahía de San Juan in the capital of Puerto Rico, San Juan. Successful gold prospecting in the adjacent hills and mountains were the final necessary elements that led to the area being chosen as the principal location for a settlement. The combination of a good harbor, fertile lands, and gold deposits provided all the required elements for a successful Spanish colonial settlement (Tió, 1961, 87-89).

The second settlement voyage was carried out in 1508, this time landing on the south coast of the island in the region near the modern city of Ponce. These expeditionaries were primarily from Salvaleón de Higüey as were those of the 1506 voyage. From 1506 to 1509 Juan Ponce developed the principal settlement in the northeast that became the mining town of Villa Caparra. Here, as in Salvaleón, he built a strong stone house. He supplied the settlement with provisions by sea from the island of Mona that lies in the straight that separates the islands of Española and Puerto Rico. Most likely, he used products of his estate in Salvaleón de Higüey as well. During the initial course of the exploration and settlement of Puerto Rico up until when the Columbus political faction returned to power, the Spanish under Juan Ponce treated the Tainos considerably better than they were treated on the island of Española.

All was going well until August 1509 which saw the arrival of Diego Columbus, eldest son and heir of Christopher Columbus, and the new governor of the Indies (Turner 1998:397). He was raised in the court of Ferdinand and Isabella and became the head of their household guard. One would expect such an intimate relationship to result in the pursuit of political goals mutually beneficial to both parties. This was not the case. Puerto Rico had been discovered by Diego’s father and therefore by contract, should have been under Columbus’ administrative control. Diego was incensed that King Ferdinand had agreed to Ovando’s contract with Juan Ponce. This essentially violated the contract drawn up between the monarchs and his father at Santa Fe previous to the voyage in 1492.

By the capitulations with the monarchs, Columbus had the right to appoint political officials in those lands he discovered during his voyaging. It was an enormous dominion and the details of the contract gave incredible power to Columbus and his heirs. It was too much. The King decided to circumvent the contract. The lands discovered by Columbus were vast and apparently rich and too much for a single man—unless he was a King.

Diego Columbus appointed his own officials to the island of Puerto Rico, Juan Cerón and Miguel Díaz de Aux. These arrived in Puerto Rico in October 1509, with more than a hundred followers intent on gaining wealth through mining and other businesses with Indian labor held in the familiar encomienda system. Juan Cerón carried out the first repartimiento of Indians in November 1509.

The King responded to the situation by appointing Juan Ponce governor of Puerto Rico. The decree was placed secretly on a vessel in Santo Domingo by Miguel de Pasamonte, the King’s treasurer, without the knowledge of Diego Columbus and taken to Puerto Rico and delivered. After waiting for his principal supporters to be in Caparra, Juan Ponce chose his moment with care and read the King’s proclamation to the assembled residents. Juan Cerón was adamant that the King had no authority to appoint the governor and so would not acknowledge Ponce as governor. Consequently, he had Cerón and Miguel Diaz and a third official, Morales, detained and sent to Spain under arrest to explain their attitude to the King in person.

Juan Ponce’s tenure as governor was short. Diego Columbus sued the King in the Cortes, or advisory council, over numerous issues including that of appointing political officials in lands discovered by his
father. Diego won on a number of counts including that of his right to appoint political officials. While this case developed in Spain, the train of events initiated by Diego Columbus’s settlement venture on Puerto Rico culminated in the Taino Indian rebellion of 1511. Most of the Spanish in the west and south of the Island were killed. The remainder of the Spanish population made their way to Caparra where Juan Ponce’s stone house became the last Spanish bastion on the island.

Juan Ponce counterattacked making a seaborne landing on the south coast that caught the Tainos unaware (Floyd, 1973:102-103). There were a number of other pitched battles between gathered hosts in which Juan Ponce emerged the victor. A semblance of military control was reestablished on the island but an alliance between the Tainos and the Carib Indians, a bellicose Indian culture on adjacent islands with longbow technology, meant that Puerto Rico would be in varying states of war for decades to come.

The settlement of La Aguada at the site of Mapo el Grande was one of those destroyed in the Taino rebellion. It was re-founded somewhere in the vicinity in early 1512 by Miguel Díaz upon his return from Spain as the port town of San Germán (Floyd 1973:106-107).

The Voyage of Discovery
Forced by the Cortes to remove him from the office of governor, the King granted Juan Ponce de León a license to explore and discover the lands reputed to lie to the north and in particular the Island of Bimini. Always competitive and jealous of the King’s efforts on Juan Ponce’s behalf, the Columbus faction made a counter proposal for the same voyage of exploration and discovery. They proposed that Bartolomé Columbus, Diego’s uncle and one of Christopher Columbus’ younger brothers, undertake the voyage on terms more financially favorable to the King. However, preferring to support Juan Ponce rather than facilitate the agenda of his problematic governor of the New World, the King declined the offer (Murga Sanz, 1971:100).

The Lucayos, the island group today called the Bahama Islands along with the Turks and Caicos Islands, were first discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Since that time they had become a source of Taino slaves for the mines, ranches, and farms of Española. By 1513 they had been virtually depopulated by Spanish slavers (Keith, 1989:288).

During the course of one of these slaving voyages by a mariner named Diego de Miruelo, a large land to the north had been accidentally discovered when his vessel was driven north in a storm. There he traded with those he encounters but took no captives (Vega, 1956:14). Shortly thereafter, slavers went directly to this new land in search of slaves. Thus the initial discovery in the north became common knowledge that ultimately led to Juan Ponce’s licensed voyage of discovery in 1513.

The fountain of youth myth for which Juan Ponce is so famous was in fact a Taino Indian legend. A spring was said to exist on the island of Bimini, and a river in what became known as Florida, that would restore youth to those who bathed in their waters. Many Tainos from Cuba were said to have gone to the lands of Florida to look for this river not too long before the arrival of the Spanish in the New World. These were said to have stayed there and founded a settlement (Herrera, 1935:327). Such contact would explain the development of trade between Florida Indians and the islands to the south.

This interesting and powerful myth made an impression on the Spanish of the day and generations since. It seems natural that when exploring a land said to contain such a wonder one might look for it. The myth has been exaggerated and romanticized to the point that many believe that the search for the “Fountain of Youth” was Juan Ponce’s principal objective during his voyage. It was not. It was gold he sought. But it’s a fun legend never the less!

Juan Ponce’s fleet consisted of three vessels. These were the caravels Santiago and Santa María de la Consolación, of which the Santiago had been brought over from Spain possibly with the voyage of exploration in mind. The third vessel of the fleet was the San Cristóbal. The fleet assembled in San Germán in early February of 1513. Some three weeks were taken to make preparations and await
favorable sailing conditions. In the afternoon of March 3, 1513, the small fleet left port and sailed to Aguada, the westernmost extension of Puerto Rico and consequently an excellent navigational landmark (Herrera, 1935:318, Chavez, 1983:285). This lay just up the coast. They spent the next day making final preparations and departed to sea that evening on a course of northwest by north. They raised the first of the Lucayo Islands on March 8. They sighted and explored a number of islands until March 11 when they anchored and made repairs at an island called Amaguayo. Three days later, on the 14, they arrived at Guanahani, the first landfall of Christopher Columbus in the New World (Herrera, 1935:318). The true identity of this island is still debated today and so its use as the departure point for the last leg of Juan Ponce’s voyage of discovery to Florida is problematic. Here they carried out work to prepare one of their vessels for crossing the windward gulf. Departing the island they steered a course to the northwest.

On Easter Sunday, March 27, land, described as an island, was sighted to the west. This was the first sighting of the Florida coast. In Antonio de Herrera’s account of the voyage, taken from the now missing log, the land was not recognized by any of the expedition pilots or crew. The statement is interesting because it shows that Juan Ponce had mariners on the expedition who were completely familiar with all the Lucayo Islands. This should not come as a surprise since the entire island group had been nearly depopulated by Spanish slavers. The fleet sailed along the coast maintaining their heading to the northwest paralleling the land.

This sighting of the Florida coast on March 27 is where many writers on the subject of the discovery of Florida go amiss. This stems from a simplistic approach to the Herrera text. Because the land is described as an “island” they assume that it must be one of the numerous Bahama Islands. The theories regarding the identity of this “island” include Great Abaco, Grand Bahama, Man of War Cay, and Eluthera (Weddle, 1985:41, Fuson 2000:114, Lawson, 1946:24, Peck, 1993: 36, Morison, 1974:506, Scisco, 1913; 724). This is not to say that all scholars of the subject make this assumption. Henry Harrisse (1969:147), writing in the last quarter of the 19th century, interprets Herrera to mean the first sighting of the coast of Florida occurred on March 27. Florida was considered to be an island for years after the official discovery in 1513 and it was not until some years later that it was determined to be part a greater land mass. This sixteenth century misunderstanding of geography continues to confuse scholars to this day. Since the island group had been depopulated by 1513, it seems a little naive to believe that some of these islands had remained unexplored and un-plundered. If Juan Ponce de León was off the coast of Florida on March 27 rather than in the northern Bahamas, how does this impact the theories of those who believe the land of March 27 was an unknown Bahama island? My guess is that it puts them in doubt with particular regard to the site of the first landing in Florida.

The small fleet continued to sail to the northwest along the Florida coast for three days until beset by foul weather on March 30. After two days of storm on April 2, Ponce’s fleet moved in close to shore to establish a navigational fix which they took in nine fathoms of water (54 feet) one league, (about 3.43 nautical miles) from the coast. The noon sighting of the sun was taken with either a quadrant or mariner’s astrolabe and checked against navigation tables to arrive at a latitude reading of 30° 8’. This reading represents the most scientifically accurate 16th century fix for Ponce’s first close approach to land along the northern Florida coast (Herrera:318-319). The fleet sailed to the north for the balance of the day anchoring that evening in 48 feet of water.

The given latitude of 30° 8’ lies at the northern end of today’s Guana Tolomato Matanzas NERR (National Estuarine Research Reserve) just to the north of St. Augustine. Navigational observations taken with sixteenth-century navigational instruments were sufficient for the day but not so precise as to allow us to pinpoint any particular spot with the sub-meter accuracy of today’s best GPS units (global positioning system). Observations could be further complicated if taken from a moving ship. Since the fleet traveled for the balance of the remaining daylight hours away from that latitude location, anyone who claims to know the exact spot of Juan Ponce’s landing is unwisely going out on a limb.
Juan Ponce and some of his company went ashore, presumably during the early daylight hours of the next day—April 3. The land was found to be flat and well foliated and since the Easter season, called *Pascua Florida* had just past, Juan Ponce named the land *La Florida*. The fleet remained at their anchorage until the 8th of April. Whether a party camped on land for five days or explored inland is unknown. No mention of what occurred during that time besides the act of taking possession is mentioned in Herrera’s account extracted from the expedition log. Conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the native Timucua population at the first landing site. It seems likely that over the course of five days some human beings would have been encountered. However, if they had no gold and were not hostile and showed little in the way of something beneficial to the Spanish they may have received little in the way of a description in the log or may have been left out by Herrera for the same reason.

A number of important discoveries were made during the course of this exploratory voyage of Florida. These included the powerful Gulf Stream, the Florida Keys, a native group called the Calusa along the west coast of Florida who wore imported gold ornaments called *Guanines*, the Dry Tortugas, and an unexplored section of western Cuba. It was the gold *Guanines* however, that would influence Juan Ponce’s choice for a settlement site in Florida.

**The Last Settlement & Death**

Juan Ponce de Leon was a soldier, cattleman, gold miner, and a settler. He was present and participated in the founding of Isabela in 1493. He saw numerous settlements grow on Española and founded his first, Salvaleón de Higüey in 1504. In 1506 he established a foothold on the west coast of Puerto Rico and shortly thereafter founded the mining settlement of Caparra in northeastern Puerto Rico. His settlement in Florida was his only failure.

Very little is known about the last voyage of Juan Ponce and his ill-fated settlement. This may be in large part because it failed. The documentation was never made because its principal, Juan Ponce de León, was feverishly fighting what became a fatal infection in his thigh—the result of an arrow wound. While he was ill and spending his final days in western Cuba, he organized his last will and testament as well as a power of attorney to set up a final business venture to make money for his heirs. He planned to ship horses and his settlement supplies to Cortés in Mexico. He had other things on his mind besides documenting his disaster.

After his voyage of discovery to Florida in 1513, Juan Ponce returned to Spain for an audience with the King. He was made Captain General of Puerto Rico, a military appointment, and charged with defending the island against attacks by the Carib Indians among other things. His duties in Puerto Rico occupied him for a number of years. Having fulfilled his obligations in Puerto Rico and having married off his daughters, Juan Ponce organized his second and last expedition to Florida.

This voyage was organized in a very similar manner to the first logistically speaking. A good deal of the underwriting, some 6,000 pesos worth, and procurement was done on Española by Pedro de la Mata, an associate of Juan Ponce who obtained expedition personnel, the ships, and supplies (Murga Sanz, 1971:240). While on Española in the run-up to the voyage, Juan Ponce probably found expeditionaries in Salvaleón de Higüey where he still had properties and influence from his earlier years there.

Juan Ponce and his vessels departed Española, probably Salvaleón de Higüey and sailed to San Germán on the west coast of Puerto Rico. There, additional personnel and supplies were brought on board. The vessels departed San Germán the 26th of February 1521 (Murga Sanz, 1971:247, Weddle, 1985:48).

As mentioned previously, there is very little known about this final venture. The duration of the expedition is difficult to judge. The vessels left San Germán on February 26, 1521 and are presumed to have followed sailing routes established during the previous journey in 1513. Depositions years later by some of the participants yield some information about this final venture. Some 250 horses were taken as well as cattle, pigs, sheep and goats. Agricultural stock and tools were said to have been taken also (Murga Sanz, 1971:248). Some 200 hundred expeditionaries went along including priests and friars to convert the Indians and establish missions.
Some time after the initial landing a battle in the interior took place with the local Indians generally considered to have been Calusa (Lawson, 1946:55). These were the people who were found to have gold guanines during the 1513 voyage. Ponce and some of his men fought with a very large number and had not the strength of numbers to persevere. During this action many were also wounded including Juan Ponce who was struck by an arrow in one of his thighs. The expedition retired to the coast and took ship for Cuba in order to heal from the action and regroup for another attempt. Juan Ponce's nephew, who had accompanied him and been injured in the action died on the voyage to Cuba and was buried at sea (Murga Sanz, 1971:240-241).

The expedition arrived at the new settlement that would become Havana. There a number of the injured expeditionaries died of their wounds. Juan Ponce put his affairs in order and left instructions and power of attorney for one of his men to purchase horses and take the vessels and their cargo to New Spain where the supplies were desperately needed by Cortés and would consequently fetch a high price. The money from the sale was to go to his heirs on Puerto Rico. What occurred was something different.

Juan Ponce de León died of his wounds in July of 1521. Completely disregarding Ponce's wishes and his assigned power of attorney, the receiver of goods of the deceased in Havana aided by a justice of the peace confiscated the vessels and equipment. From these they purchased what they wanted, no doubt at a very good price, then sent the vessels and the remainder of goods to New Spain where all were sold (Lawson, 1946:100-101). Then they pocketed the money. There were two royal decrees one in the 1523 and the other in 1524 requesting that the authorities see that justice was done on behalf of his heirs. The final results of these decrees are unknown to this author. His grandson, Juan Ponce de León the Second had Juan Ponce’s remains exhumed in Cuba and brought to the island of Rico and kept in the church of St. Thomas in the capital (Murga Sanz, 1971:242). They have resided in a sepulcher in the San Juan Cathedral since 1913.
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