

Title:

The Fountain of Hooey: Ponce de Leon in Florida

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575

Summary:

The legend of the Fountain of Youth may be a lot of hooey, but Ponce de Leon's trips to Florida are still very interesting.

Keywords:

Fountain of Youth, Ponce de Leon, Christopher Columbus, Old San Juan

Article Body:

It probably won't come as a surprise to too many people nowadays that the Spanish Conquistador Juan Ponce de Leon was not, in fact, really looking for a genuine fountain of youth on his explorations in Florida. This myth was most likely born in the 1560's after Ponce's death. The grain of truth that supposedly sits at the center of every tall tail may have to do with his metaphorical search for rebirth in finding new glories in the New World in the form of resources and wealth. These would certainly be the next best thing to a new lease on life to the world-weary chancer that took up the task of conquering the "Island" of Florida. Even without the mystical McGuffin embodied by the Fountain of Youth, Ponce de Leon's exploits, explorations and adventures in Florida are worth remembering.

Ponce de Leon was a veteran sailor and soldier of many years experience when he accompanied Christopher Columbus on his 2nd journey to the New World. He had fought the moors in Granada as a young man, and as such would prove a valuable asset to Spain's conquest of the America's in the violent years to come.

Ponce was the 1st European to land on Puerto Rico in 1508. He was made the Governor of Puerto Rico a year later, and his eventual capitol was named after his more pious namesake, San Juan. Local Indian tribes like the Tainos would have surely preferred San Juan over Governor Juan, who quickly enslaved them and forced them to work in the mines. In a familiar story, the indigenous peoples of Puerto Rico also died in droves from infectious European diseases that they had no natural immunity to.

Politics and legalities care nothing for the vastness of oceans, and that was true in Ponce's time as well. In 1512 Diego Columbus had pressed the Spanish

Crown to sign over the right to govern Puerto Rico as part of an earlier agreement the king had made with his father Christopher. As such Ponce was removed as governor.

Unsurprisingly, Ponce felt cheated. Determined to recover his glory and good name, Ponce equipped three ships (at his own expense) and set sail for the undiscovered countries to the North.

In 1513 Ponce de Leon was probably the 1st European to set foot on what is today known as Florida (or maybe not, as he supposedly met a Floridian Indian who spoke decent Spanish latter that year). The date of the landing was April 2, the Pascua Florida, or Flowery Passover a.k.a. Easter Season. It is from this holiday the region received its name.

Still lusting for glory, Ponce returned to Spain in 1514. There he received a commission to conquer the Caribs of Guadalupe. He attempted this in 1515, but was unsuccessful and returned to Puerto Rico. It would be another 6 years before he ventured forth again.

In 1521 Ponce was in his 60's, no mean feat for an explorer in the 16th century. If Florida really did have a fountain of youth, he surely would have done his best to find it. With his time to claim a land of his own quickly running out he tried his luck in Florida once more. It was one time to many. Native Americans attacked his party and Ponce received an arrow wound. He made it to Havana, Cuba before he succumbed. Juan Ponce de Leon was entombed in Old San Juan.