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Ponce de Leon's Second Voyage and Attempt to Colonize Florida

T. Frederick Davis

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PONCE DE LEON'S SECOND VOYAGE
AND
ATTEMPT TO COLONIZE FLORIDA

THE RECORDS

Following his voyage of 1513 Ponce de Leon sailed for Spain where he seems to have given a favorable account of his discoveries, for on September 26 (or 27), 1514, the King issued a patent to him to colonize Florida and Beniny, but first required his services against the Caribs, a fierce tribe of Indians inhabiting the Lesser Antilles. Returning to the West Indies Ponce de Leon proceeded against these Indians, but was severely repulsed by them. Mortified at his failure he returned to Porto Rico and remained in semi-retirement several years, apparently giving up the idea of colonizing Florida. In this period several expeditions visited the Florida west coast and one, that of Ayllon, discovered and partially explored what is now the Carolina coast. Juan Ponce was not roused by these more or less predatory expeditions, but when the fame of Cortes in Mexico began to spread through the West Indies he decided to take possession of Florida under the authority of his patent of 1514, issued by King Ferdinand, who had died, the Emperor Charles V being now on the Spanish throne,

This patent is found in *Documentos del Archivo de Indias*, XXII. 33. A translation of this interesting document was published by Dr. L. D. Scisco in American Catholic Historical Society's Record for December, 1912. The *Record* has been discontinued and I have been unable to reach Dr. Scisco to ask him for the use of his translation; but anticipating his permission it is used here with full credit to both.

THE PATENT

The agreement that was made by Our command with you, Juan Ponce de Leon, for the expedition to colonize the island of Beniny and the island of Florida which you discovered by Our command, in addition to the articles and agreement that were made with you when you took action for discovery, is as follows :

First, whereas, in the said articles and agreement made with you by Our command, concerning the discovering and colonizing of the said islands, I gave license and authority, for the time and limitation of three years to commence from the day of delivery to you of the said articles, to conduct at your cost and charge the vessels that you might wish, provided that you stood obligated to begin the expedition of discovery within the first year; and because until now you have occupied yourself in matters of Our service and you have not had time to start the voyage of discovery, it is My will and pleasure that the said three years may commence to run and be reckoned from the day you may embark on your voyage to the said islands.

Item, that as soon as you embark (sic) at the said islands you may summon the chiefs and Indians thereof, by the best device or devices there can be given them, to understand what should be said to them, conformably to a summons that has been drawn up by several learned men, the which will be given to you signed by the Very Reverend Father in Christ, the Bishop of Burgos, Archbishop of Rosario, Our chief chaplain and one of Our council, and by Lope Conchillos, Our secretary and one of Our council and attorneys, by all the ways and means you may be able to devise, that they should come into the knowledge of Our Catholic Faith and

should obey and serve as they are bound to do; and you will take down in signed form before two or three notaries, if such there be, and before as many witnesses and these the most creditable, as may be found there, in order that it may serve for Our justification, and you will send the said document; and the summons must be made once, twice, thrice.

And if after the aforesaid they do not wish to obey what is contained in the said summons, you can make war and seize them and carry them away for slaves; but if they do obey, give them the best treatment you can and endeavor, as is stated, by all the means at your disposal, to convert them to Our Holy Catholic Faith; and if by chance, after having once obeyed the said summons, they again rebel, I command that you again make the said summons before making war or doing harm or damage.

Furthermore, whereas in the said articles and agreement that I commanded to be made with you at the time that you were setting forth to discover the said island, I made a grant to the persons who should go to discover the said island of all that might be discovered therein; and that they should pay only a tax of the gold and other metals and things of profit they should find on the islands-the first year a tenth, the second a ninth, the third an eighth, and the fourth a seventh, and the fifth a sixth part, and the other years following a fifth.; according to and as it is paid in the island of Espanola ; therefore; by these presents I confirm and approve the aforesaid and it is My wish that it shall have effect for the time of the said twelve years, beginning as soon as they begin to colonize the said island.

Furthermore, that I shall give license and I do hereby give it to the said Juan Ponce de Leon to make and build houses in the said island, and villages of habitations of the sort that are made and

built in these realms, provided the foundations of such may be with one tapia height of stone and another of earth; and likewise to make whatever provision he sees fit for the raising of corn and grapes and fruit-bearing and non-fruit-bearing trees and whatever other things there may be afforded in the said region.

Item, that, after you may have made war on the said Caribs or protected the chiefs and Indians and brought them peace, you can go or send with the vessels and people of the said expedition to visit the said islands of Beniny and island of Florida, where there may not be need of your presence, and do concerning it what shall seem best for Our service.

Item, for surety that you, the said Juan Ponce, and the members of your expedition are now doing and will fulfill, and that there will be fulfilled, looked after, and paid all that is contained in these articles which it belongs to you to look after and to fulfill, before you make the said voyage (you may give) full and approved guaranties to the satisfaction of Our officials residing in the said island of Santiago (sic) .*

For which, you, the said Juan Ponce, fulfilling all that which is stipulated and each feature and part of it, and having given the said guaranties and looking after and paying the things aforesaid, I promise you and I swear to you by these presents to command and look after and fulfill all that which is contained in these articles and each feature and part of it; and I command Our officials in the island of San Juan that in our name, conformably to the aforesaid, they maintain with you the said agreement and articles and receive the said guaranties; and for your despatch I command Don Diego Colon, Our

*Should be island of San Juan-Scisco.

admiral, viceroy governor of the island of Espanola, and Our judges of appeal there, and Our officials in the said island of San Juan, and all the justices, that they give you all favor and aid of which you shall have need, without there being put upon you any hindrance in it or in any manner or part of it.

Done in Valladolid on the twenty-sixth [or twenty-seventh] of September, one thousand, five hundred and [fourteen.]

I, The King

LETTERS TO THE EMPEROR

JUAN PONCE DE LEON TO CHARLES V. *Documentos ineditos de Indias*, Vol. XL. 50-52:

Porto Rico, February 10, 1521.

“Among my services I discovered, at my own cost and charge, the Island Florida, and others in its district, which are not mentioned as being small and useless; and now I return to that island, if it please God’s will, to settle it, being enabled to carry a number of people with which I shall be able to do so, that the name of Christ may be praised there, and Your Majesty served with the fruit that land produces. And I also intend to explore the coast of said island further, and see whether it is an island, or whether it connects with the land where Diego Velasquez is, or any other ; and I shall endeavor to learn all I can. I shall set out to pursue my voyage hence in five or six days.”¹⁹

DE LA GAMA TO HIS MAJESTY. *Documentos ineditos de Indias*, Vol. XL. 54:

Porto Rico, February 15, 1521

“The Adelantado Juan Ponce de Leon starts from this island [Porto Rico] on the 20th of this month, with another expedition, to settle Florida, and make discoveries in the adjoining country.”²⁰

¹⁹ This translation by Dr. John Gilmary Shea will be found in his “Ancient Florida” in Windsor’s Narrative and Critical History of North America, Vol. 2, p. 234. “The land where Diego Velasquez is” refers to Mexico.

²⁰ Translation and reference by Henry Harrisse, *The Discovery of North America*, p. 158.

AUTHORITIES ON THE VOYAGE

There appears to have been no official report of Ponce de Leon's second voyage to Florida. For information concerning it we must turn to the accounts of the Spanish historians who were in a position to obtain their information first-hand from the survivors of the expedition. Of them only one offers details of the voyage, **GONZALO FERNANDEZ DE OVIEDO** (1478-1557), who was in the West Indies soon after the event collecting material for his history. His account was contemporaneous and though a "memory" record it has every appearance of being reasonable and authentic. His original manuscript was not published in full until the 1850's.

Herrera, whose main dependence was official documentary evidence, did not give an extended account of this voyage ; his record is contained in a summarized farewell to Ponce de Leon and is evidently based. in part on Oviedo's account.

Other Spanish historians of the 16th century, namely, Las Casas, Gomara, Torquemada, Garcilaso, and later Barcia, mentioned the voyage, but their accounts are extremely brief, often confused, and add nothing new to the subject. For these reasons they are not included here, except an item from Garcilaso.

The translations of the Oviedo and Herrera records herein were rendered for and contributed to this work by Dr. C. L. Crow, Head of the Department of Spanish, University of Florida,. These scholarly translations by Dr. Crow make available to students of Florida's history valuable historical information which has hitherto remained generally unknown to them.

OVIEDO, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* . . . Madrid, 1853, Vol. 2, Part 2, Book 36, Chapter 1, pp. 622-623:

... not exhausted by his outlays and labors, he [Johan Ponce] fitted out anew with more care and at greater expense, and equipt and put in order certain ships, ²¹ so as to reach along the Mainland on the shores lying to the North, that coast and point which projects into the sea about a hundred leagues in length and fifty in breadth. And it seemed to him that in addition to what could be learned and known of the islands which are to be found there, also on the Mainland could be learned other secrets and important things, and [that] those peoples could be converted to God to the great profit of himself in particular and in general for all those who were accompanying him, for, as has been said, two hundred men and fifty horses were in the ships. And before placing this fleet in readiness, he spent much : and passed over to that land during the month of . . . of the year one thousand and five hundred and twenty: ²² and as a good colonist, he took mares and heifers and swine and sheep and goats and all kinds of domestic animals (and) useful in the service of mankind: and also for the cultivation and tillage of the field[s] he was supplied with all [kinds of] seed, as if the business of colonization consisted of nothing more than to arrive and cultivate the land and pasture his livestock. But the temperature of the

²¹ There were two main ships : Juan Ponce to Adriano-Harris, *Discovery of North America*, p. 158; Wm. R. Shepherd, *Guide to Materials for the History of the United States in Spanish Archives*, p. 68 (July 4, 1523) ; Herrera, *Torquemada*, Barcia.

²² This is obviously a "memory" error in the year; the deletion of the month is in the original text.

region was very unsuitable and different from what he had imagined, and the natives of the land [were] a very austere and very savage and belligerous and fierce and untamed people and not accustomed to a peaceful existence nor to lay down their liberty so easily at the discretion or alien volition of other men, nor at the determination of those monks and priests by whom he was accompanied for the exercise of religious rites and the service of the church, nor even though they preached as much as they wished, could they be understood in as short a time as was imagined by them and by him who led them there, if God with his absolute power did not cause them to be understood by those very barbarous peoples and idolatrous savages (and) laden with sins and vices. I mean, that altho, as in truth all which seems difficult is easy for God to do, when it pleases him, it is well for us to reflect that we are not deserving of that facility, nor are those trout caught with so little effort: and he desires first the reformation of the fishermen, so that those who are to hear and follow them may come to a knowledge of the truth. Notwithstanding that with this captain went religious persons and [ones] of sound doctrine ; but inasmuch as everything went wrong, and the fleet was lost ²³ and the captain and the season and plantation jointly and within a few days, it is to be believed that God was not served nor the time come for the conversion of that land and province to our holy Catholic faith, since he permits the devil still to keep those Indians deceived and for his own, and the population of hell to be augmented with their souls.

²³ Evidently after the arrival of the ship at Havana. It is said that one of the vessels made port at Vera Cruz, Mexico, but there are reasons for doubting the accuracy of this. (Read in connection with text paragraph following.)

This fleet arrived at that land in the year that has been mentioned: and then the adelantado Johan Ponce, when he disembarked, gave order, as a prudent man, that his men should rest: and when it seemed to him proper, he moved forward with his retinue and attacked by land and entered into a skirmish or battle with the Indians, as he was a valiant captain and was among the first, and not so adroit [in battle] in that land as on the islands, so many and such of the enemy charged, that his men and his courage did not suffice to withstand them. And finally they defeated, him and killed a number of the Christians, and more than twice as many Indians died, and he escaped wounded grievously by an arrow; and he decided to go to the island of Cuba to be cured, if it were possible, and with a greater retinue and more strength to return to this conquest. And so he embarked and arrived at the island [and] at the port of Havana, where after he had arrived, he lived a short time: but he died as a Catholic and after having received the sacraments, and also died others who were wounded, and others of illnesses.

HERRERA, *Historia General de los Hechos*. . . ., 1601, Decade 3, Book 1, Chap. 14, pp. 30-31:

The reputation of Hernando Cortes kept spreading and his fame gaining more repute, which aroused the ambition of many of the foremost senior captains of the Indies to undertake deeds of daring ; because they, being of the generation of Hernando Cortes, considered themselves as no less [worthy]. One of these was Governor General Juan Ponce de Leon, who from the year twelve, when he discovered Florida, and went seeking that sacred fountain, so renowned among the Indians, and the river, whose

waters rejuvenated the aged: and after the Caribs of the island of Guadalupe treated him ill, had remained in retirement. Now he determined to fit out on the island of San Juan de Puerto-Rico, where he had his residence, two ships, on which he spent a large part of his fortune; went with them to Florida, which was still considered an island, in order to satisfy himself in passing, as to whether it was mainland, as he says in his letters, which he wrote this year ²⁴ to the Emperor, to Cardinal Adriano, governor of these realms, at that time, and to Secretary Samano. And when he had set foot on land in Florida, after having suffered many hardships during the voyage, the Indians sallied out to oppose him, and fighting stubbornly against him, killed some of his men, and he, wounded in a thigh, returned, with the survivors, to Cuba, where he ended his days, and the King, in consideration of his services, gave his jurisdiction, and the other concessions which he held, to his son, Luis Ponce de Leon.

GARCILASO DE LA VEGA, *La Florida del Inca*, Madrid, 1723, Book 6, Chapter 22, page 266:

Text decidedly confused but from which may be gathered that in the battle with the Indians at the time of the attempted settlement not less than eighty of Ponce de Leon's men were killed or died of their wounds. [This indicates either an ambushade or an overwhelming force of Indians.]

²⁴The year is not stated in the text, but is given in a running-head at the top of the page as 1521.

REVIEW

PLACE OF THE ATTEMPTED SETTLEMENT. The clue to the coast of Florida on which Ponce de Leon attempted to plant his colony is found in his letter to Charles V: "And I intend to explore the coast of said island further, and see . . . whether it connects with the land where Diego Velasquez is. . . ." Juan Ponce had ranged the east coast of Florida throughout its length on his first voyage and it is evident that on this, second voyage, he intended to follow the coast line westward to Mexico, where Velasquez at the time was involved. For this purpose he would naturally select a place on the west coast to plant his settlement and proceed from there to examine the coast westward. Now where on the west coast did he attempt to plant his colony?

Referring to the first voyage it was proven that the only place visited by Ponce de Leon on the west coast was the Charlotte Harbor region. He remained there three weeks and examined the locality and its harbor, apparently with the thought of future settlement. There was the only place where he heard of gold in Florida among the Indians—a lure at which these early Spaniards never failed to bite, and a circumstance having a bearing on the question in hand. We know today—and the natural situation has not changed since Ponce de Leon's time—that the locality furnishes everything that could be required for a place of settlement such as he contemplated. With a situation fulfilling all requirements already known to him, is it reasonable to suppose that Juan Ponce, having a cargo a part of which required prompt landing, would spend time unnecessarily in looking for another location? And finally after he landed we see a strong similarity in the conduct of the Indians with that experienced by

him with the Carlos Indians at Charlotte Harbor on the first voyage. Oviedo's statement that Juan Ponce experienced a temperature different from that expected can be reconciled to the Charlotte Harbor section, for in the cool waves of early spring it is not unusual for the temperature to fall into the 40's Fhrt., which to one acclimated to the West Indies would be considered very cold-there were no thermometers in that day to determine the actual temperature.

The direct evidence furnished by these records is not sufficient to permit the positive statement that Juan Ponce on his second voyage to Florida attempted to plant his colony at Charlotte Harbor; but it can be said that all inferences point that way.

FIRSTS OF HISTORY

This voyage produced a number of "firsts" of history for the North American continent: The first attempt to plant a bona-fide self-sustaining colony; the first effort to implant the Christian religion among the Indians²⁵; the first monks and priests assigned for permanent residence; and the first purposed agricultural, horticultural, and stock-raising enterprise.

²⁵ Mexico excluded. Cortes was in Mexico at this time, but that expedition was one of exploration that developed into a military conquest which was still in progress; however, there were two ecclesiastics with the expedition.

PONCE DE LEON CHRONOLOGY

FIRST VOYAGE, 1513

- March 3: Embarked from Porto Rico.
March 14: Arrived at San Salvador, Bahamas.
March 27 (Easter Sunday) : Passed Abaco Island, Bahamas, sailing northwest.
April 2 (Saturday) : Discovered Florida in latitude 30° 8'.
(Approximately 18 miles south of mouth of St. Johns River.)
April 2-8: Between these dates landed and took possession.
(Somewhere on the 12-mile stretch of beach north of 30° 8'.)
April 9: Sailed south-southeasterly following coast line.
April 20: Anchored off Indian town below Cape Canaveral.
May 8: Off Palm Beach (Cape Corrientes).
May 13: At Biscayne Bay (Chequescha).
May 15: Along the Florida Keys (The Martires).
May 18c: Passed The Tortugas, sailing northerly.
May 23: Reached the west coast near Charlotte Harbor.
May 24-June 15: At Charlotte Harbor and immediate vicinity.
June 21-24: At The Tortugas again.
June 26-July 1: Along the northern coast of Cuba.
July 3: Along Florida Keys-to Biscayne Bay (Chequescha).
July 18: At La Vieja (Old Woman's I.), Bahamas.
July 25-September 27: Among Bahamas in quest of Bimini.
September 28c: Sailed for Porto Rico.
October 19c: Arrived at Porto Rico.

THE SECOND VOYAGE

February 20, 1521*: Embarked from Porto Rico for Florida.

This is the only date indicated in the records of the second voyage. Ponce de Leon's death apparently was in the following May or June.

*Date as mentioned in the De la Gama letter, page 57. Whether the year corresponds to 1522 when considered in relation to our modern calendar depends upon the date from which the year was reckoned by the Spanish calendar at the time—a question that I have not been able to determine with historical certainty.

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