**Myths, mysteries abound 500 years after Ponce de Leon's voyage to Florida**

By Jon Busdeker, Orlando Sentinel *6:44 p.m. EDT, March 31, 2013*

Florida history is as murky as an alligator-filled swamp.  
  
Five centuries after Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León stepped foot on the eastern shore of what is now called Florida, much about his voyage remains a mystery.  
  
The 500th anniversary of Ponce de León's landing will be observed Tuesday, continuing a yearlong celebration called Viva Florida. But before you don your conquistador outfit for the festivities, there are a few myths and misconceptions we need to straighten out.

**Who found Florida?**

**Popular belief:** Ponce de León discovered Florida in 1513.

**What experts say:** Ponce de León, a former governor of Puerto Rico who was given the authority to search for new lands, may not have been the first European in Florida. Maps from as early as 1511 — two years before his voyage — show a landmass north of Cuba, said Sam Turner, director of archaeology at the St. Augustine Lighthouse and Museum and an expert on maritime history.

"It was very possible Florida was discovered in 1509 ... or 1510," Turner said.

Other historians have suggested that traders may have traveled to Florida before 1513 but that it was Ponce de León who claimed it for [**Spain**](http://www.orlandosentinel.com/topic/intl/spain-PLGEO00000056.topic).

**Fountain of Youth**

**Popular belief:** The fabled Fountain of Youth drew Ponce de León to Florida.

**What experts say:** The official charter of Ponce de León's voyage never mentioned the Fountain of Youth, said author and University of Central Florida history instructor Jim Clark. And no one during Ponce de León's lifetime (1474-1521) connected the explorer's travels to the mystical waters.

The myth that Ponce de León traveled in search of the Fountain of Youth — the fabled waters that supposedly brought eternal youth to those who drank or bathed in them — began after his death.

Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernández de [**Oviedo**](http://www.orlandosentinel.com/topic/us/florida/seminole-county/oviedo-PLGEO100100414070000.topic) "wanted to show Poncé as an idiot … a bumbling fool," said University of Florida professor Jack Davis, an expert on the state's early history. "It is unclear why he [Oviedo] did, but probably because he was aligned with [Christopher] Columbus and his son, Diego."

Ponce de León, like most New World explorers, was probably looking for gold, silver and slaves, Davis said.

**Where he landed**

**Popular belief:** Ponce de León landed near [**Cape Canaveral**](http://www.orlandosentinel.com/topic/travel/tourism-leisure/cape-canaveral-PLREC000051.topic). Or … Ponce de León landed in Melbourne Beach … or St. Augustine.

**What experts say:** The original ship's log from Ponce de León's voyage to Florida has been lost, so the exact spot where his crew landed isn't known. Some historians think Ponce de León landed somewhere between present-day Melbourne Beach and Daytona Beach.

But Turner disputes those claims. He said Ponce de León more than likely came ashore north of St. Augustine. According to Turner's research, Ponce de León spotted Florida on March 27, a week before what many historians say. Turner said Ponce de León traveled along the coast for almost a week and probably didn't come ashore until April 3.

But unless Ponce de León's logs are found, no one will ever know exactly where he and his crew landed.

**Naming Florida**

**Popular belief:** Ponce de León called the land he found "La Florida" — a Spanish term meaning "feast of flowers" — because of the lush vegetation along the coast.

**What experts say:** Davis argued that no matter where Ponce de León had landed — even, say, Delaware — the explorer probably would have called the place "La Florida" because of the timing.

"La Florida" is a reference to the [**Easter**](http://www.orlandosentinel.com/topic/religion-belief/religious-festivals/easter-12014002.topic) season, and Ponce de León's landing coincided with Easter. Davis said it makes sense that Ponce de León — exploring for the Catholic country of Spain — would have given the land a name related to the holy day.

**A hero? Really?**

**Popular belief:** Ponce de León became a hero because of his travels to Florida — a region that benefited the Spanish crown for almost 300 years.

**What experts say:** In 1521,Ponce de León led an expedition to southwest Florida, near present-day Port Charlotte. The group encountered the native population, a battle broke out and Ponce de León was struck with an arrow. He died in Havana. Florida wasn't settled for an additional 44 years, when St. Augustine was founded in 1565.

From the 1500s to the 1800s, Spain "never made a profit" on Florida, Clark said. The Spanish controlled Florida for so long, many historians say, to protect the Gulf Stream — the trans-Atlantic current, discovered by Ponce de León and his crew, that originates near the tip of Florida and flows out to sea. Spanish ships carrying treasures from Mexico used the Gulf Stream to cut travel time to Europe, Turner said.

Many historians argue that Ponce de León's real "discovery" wasn't Florida but rather the Gulf Stream.