

livestock, including cows, sheep, and goats; as well as seed for planting crops. His intent apparently was to return to the Calusa. But the expedition turned out to be a colossal failure. The meager accounts of the 1521 venture agree that a major land battle was fought with native warriors, resulting in large numbers of fatalities on both sides (one secondhand account, quoted in Davis, says “not less than eighty” of Ponce’s men were killed; another account says the number of Indians slain was more than twice the number of Spaniards killed). Juan Ponce himself was wounded with an arrow in his thigh. The expedition retreated to Cuba, where Ponce died of his wound.

The Calusa Indians after Ponce

Following Ponce’s failed 1521 expedition, other Spaniards intent on exploring the Gulf coast by sea and by land seem to have deliberately avoided Calusa territory. The land expeditions of Pánfilo de Narváez (1528) and Hernando de Soto (1539) went ashore north of southwest Florida at Tampa Bay, and Tristán de Luna y Arellano’s 1559 colonization venture was centered far to the north on Pensacola Bay.

After ousting the short-lived French settlement of Fort Caroline near the mouth of the St. Johns River in 1565 and establishing the town of St. Augustine (and a second town, Santa Elena, on the coast of South Carolina in spring 1566), Pedro Menéndez de Avilés decided that he needed the Calusa Indians as allies, part of a master plan to protect shipping lanes and secure Florida’s coasts against other European powers.

In February 1566 Menéndez sailed to the Calusa Indian capital on Mound Key off southwest Florida. He and two hundred of his men marched into the town with weapons drawn and harquebus match cords lit, accompanied by banners, fifers, drummers, three trumpeters, a harpist, a violinist, and a dwarf who sang and danced, all intended to impress the Calusa.²⁴

Menéndez sent a second expedition to the Calusa town later the same year for the purpose of placing a small garrison and mission station there. The Spanish outpost was christened San Antonio. In March 1567 Menéndez returned to the Calusa Indians a third time, bringing Father Juan Rogel, the aforementioned Jesuit missionary, who was to continue the task of bringing the Calusa to Catholicism and making them loyal subjects of the Spanish Crown.

But like the other mission outposts Menéndez established along the coast of Florida during that period, San Antonio was soon abandoned by the Spanish. The Spanish soldiers who manned the garrison clashed with the Calusa, leading to numerous problems. By mid-1568 there no longer was

a Spanish presence among the Calusa Indians. For a century and a third the Calusa would continue to live as they always had, outside the realm of Spanish colonization.

Even though they were relatively isolated, the Calusa could not escape the ravages of colonization. The same epidemics that decimated the mission Indians of northern Florida and coastal Georgia also made inroads among the Calusa. By the end of the seventeenth century their numbers had fallen from about twenty thousand people in 1492 to two thousand. Some Calusa Indians also took advantage of new trading and economic opportunities, and in 1688 are recorded as having traveled to Cuba.

Near the end of the seventeenth century the colonial powers of Spanish St. Augustine again decided to send Catholic missionary friars to attempt to convert the Calusa to Christianity and bring them into Spain's Florida colony. The demise of so many of the mission Indians in northern Florida had left the Spaniards with a greatly diminished Native American labor force to work in support of the colony. It was thought the Calusa, if Christianized, could be coerced to toil in support of the colony.

In 1697 Franciscan friars arrived at Calos, the same town where Juan Ponce had been in 1513. But the Calusa were no more willing to submit to the Spaniards than they had been in 1513, 1521, or the 1560s. The mission attempt failed spectacularly and the Franciscans literally were sent packing. Spanish documents record that the Calusa ridiculed the priests, throwing mud, soot, and excrement on them when they tried to preach. Some of the Calusa hecklers even "turned around and showed them [the priests] their buttocks."²⁵ The friars fled down the coast in canoes, hoping to make it to Cuba. Along the way they were harassed, their canoes were tipped, and their supplies and clothes were taken. The naked friars, nearly dead, made it to Matecumbe Key in the Florida Keys, where they were rescued by a Spanish ship.²⁶

Having thwarted the plans of St. Augustine officials, the Calusa were not so successful in countering a new threat, raids by Indians from the north who were armed with guns and against whom the Calusa and other South Florida Indians had little defense. Prior to 1704 the chain of Franciscan missions that stretched across northern Florida west from St. Augustine had served as a buffer against marauding Indians from Georgia, Alabama, and the Carolinas. But with the destruction of those missions, many of which had been protected by small outposts of Spanish soldiers, the entire peninsula was open to Indian raiders bent on causing general mayhem and capturing Florida Indians to sell as slaves to Carolinian colonists. The southern

Florida inhabitants, including some Calusa, fled to the Miami area or to the Keys to escape. Others were able to reach Cuba, where many died of disease.

After the Yamasee War, fought in South Carolina between Carolinian colonists and Yamasee Indians in 1715, the intensity of the raids lessened for a short time, only to begin again as armed Indians from Georgia and Alabama staged their own raids on the Calusa and their neighbors, the remnants of whom were pushed farther south. Over the next several decades the Calusa took a beating; some escaped to Cuba where again many died of disease; others lived in refugee villages in southernmost Florida.

Recognizing that the raids were severe enough to threaten Spain's hold on Florida, Spanish officials in Cuba laid plans for a mission settlement at the mouth of the Miami River at Tequesta, the same place Juan Ponce had visited in 1513. Such a settlement, it was thought, could provide defensive protection against the raiders, protecting Cuban fishing interests in the Florida Keys. In July 1743 the governor of Cuba wrote to the king, informing him of the plan. By that date two Jesuits, Fathers Joseph María Monaco and Joseph Xavier Alaña, had sailed from Havana to Tequesta. There they found 180 refugee Indians living in five large houses. Many of the men spoke Spanish as a result of having worked for Cuban fisherman. The Jesuits reported that among the refugees were Keys Indians, Calusa, and Boca Ratones (probably Tequesta Indians). Farther inland were another one hundred refugees made up of Mayaimies, Santaluces, and Mayacas, all southern Florida Indians. At Tequesta a church was built and christened Santa María de Loreto. Recognizing the precarious position of their mission, the missionary priests suggested to Cuban officials that a fort be placed there and manned with Spanish soldiers.²⁷

Cuban authorities, however, decided that the cost of maintaining a mission and constructing and manning a fort was too steep. The Jesuits soon left for Havana and Santa María de Loreto passed into history, leaving the refugee Calusa and other Indians behind. By 1750 these and perhaps other surviving southern Florida Indians had relocated to the Keys, probably all to Key West. On May 17, 1760, Creek Indians raided the refugees in Key West, burning their houses, boats, canoes, and fisheries. In a final evacuation slightly more than sixty Indians were taken to Cuba and resettled.²⁸ The Florida Calusa Indians, among whom Juan Ponce de León had landed two and a half centuries earlier, were gone. Several years later Spain would relinquish its La Florida colony to Great Britain, and the Spaniards who had followed Ponce de León would likewise be gone.