

provide the great majority of the ethnohistorical detail available for the first-contact era throughout Florida's lower gulf coast.

### **The Juan Ponce de León Expeditions, 1513–1521**

The years 1511–13 were tremendously significant for the indigenous inhabitants of southern peninsular Florida and likewise in aftershock for the rest of the North American continent. In 1511, Spanish forces under Diego Velázquez landed on the eastern end of Cuba in pursuit of the rebel chief Hatuey, who had fled with his followers from the island of Hispaniola. Thus began the military conquest of Cuba, initially culminating with the execution of Hatuey, followed by the subjugation of the remainder of the island and the establishment of several Spanish towns before 1515 (Wright 1970: 23–37; see also Pichardo Viñals 1986; Pichardo Viñals and Portuondo 1947; Sauer 1966; D. Davis 1974). As a result of the Velázquez expedition and others that followed, the island of Cuba was instantly converted from an isolated potential haven for Caribbean Indian refugees into an emergent Spanish colony that ultimately served as an early launching ground for expeditions to Mexico and other mainland locations and later as a way station for treasure-laden ships returning to Spain. Perhaps not long after that initial conquest, at least a small number of indigenous Cuban Indians may have begun to flee northward toward Florida, perhaps even accompanied by some of those who had earlier fled from Hispaniola to Cuba. Whether these refugees from the Spanish conquest arrived in successive waves or in a single migration, at some point they were formally granted permission by the Calusa chief to settle in a single community within the broader Calusa domain in Southwest Florida (Escalante Fontaneda, n.d.c). The location of this refugee village of Cuban Indians has yet to be documented or found, but their presence in Southwest Florida is attested by the fact that at least one of these refugees who spoke a little Spanish was already resident among the Calusa by the summer of 1513, when Spaniards finally made formal landfall along the western coast of Florida.

The earliest documented Spanish expeditions to make direct contact with the indigenous inhabitants of Florida's lower gulf coast were those led by Juan Ponce de León in 1513 and 1521 (e.g., T. Davis 1935; Lawson 1946; Weddle 1985: 38–54; Peck 1992, 1998). Ponce's initial discovery of Florida was actually the unexpected result of a chain of events that led back to political difficulties with allies of Christopher Columbus's son Diego, who upon obtaining the title of admiral and viceroy in the New World in 1511, removed Ponce from his 1509 appointment as the governor of San Juan del Puerto Rico, which he himself had

taken the lead in conquering for the Spanish Crown (Spanish Crown 1511; Herrera y Tordesillas 1601; Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés 1851, 1853). Unceremoniously deposed and replaced by his political enemies, Juan Ponce de León subsequently sought and obtained a new royal contract for the exploration and settlement of the rumored island of Binini (Bimini), which had previously been the subject of similar though unfulfilled discussions between Bartholomew Columbus and the Spanish monarch (Spanish Crown 1512b).

One persistent tradition regarding the Ponce de León expedition deserves additional exploration here: the Fountain of Youth. As can be seen in the narratives in this book (Herrera y Tordesillas 1601; Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés 1992; Las Casas 1875; López de Gómara 1554: 37v–39r; Escalante Fontaneda, n.d.c), as well as several other sixteenth-century accounts (Martire d’Anghiera 1530, 1912b; Castellanos 1589: 139–44), the association between Juan Ponce de León and the mythical Fountain of Youth began very early and was fully embedded in the secondary literature and popular consciousness about the discovery of Florida by the end of the sixteenth century. This association seems to have originated in early confusion regarding both the identification of Bimini and Florida and the purported location of the legendary Fountain of Youth. As is detailed later, there is presently no evidence of a connection between the rumored island of Bimini and the legend of a Fountain of Youth prior to Ponce’s 1513 discovery of Florida (and some evidence to the contrary), and subsequent documentary references dating to the first decade after Florida’s discovery maintain the distinction between all three locations (Bimini, Florida, and the Fountain of Youth). However, beginning no later than 1526, Florida was interpreted by at least one author, Peter Martyr (Pietro Martire d’Anghiera), to have been the location of the Fountain of Youth, and by 1535, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés asserted that the location was Bimini. Moreover, by no later than 1519, Alonso Alvarez de Pineda, a mapmaker, concluded that Florida was identical to the Bimini of earlier reports, and in 1561, yet another important author, Bartolomé de las Casas, posited that Ponce de León had invented both names (Florida and Bimini) for the same landmass. Finally, about 1575, Florida shipwreck survivor and longtime captive Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda reported the presence in South Florida of Cuban Indians who had come to Florida in the early sixteenth century seeking the Fountain of Youth (which he called the River Jordan). In light of all these sources (including a subsequently lost ship’s log or detailed report of the original Ponce de León expedition), Spanish chronicler Antonio de Herrera published his own seminal overview of the expedition, stating unequivocally that in addition to his primary goal of acquiring new lands for the Spanish Empire, Juan Ponce de León set out in search of both the

Fountain of Youth in Bimini and the River Jordan in Florida. In modern times, all this has been consolidated into the single popular legend that Juan Ponce de León came to Florida in search of the Fountain of Youth. A more detailed review of this documentary trail is instructive.

The earliest reference to the “island” called Beinini (more commonly appearing later as Binini, Bimine, and the modern Bimini) prior to the Ponce de León expedition seems to be the woodcut map in Peter Martyr’s 1511 book (*Martire d’Anghiera 1511: 45v*), which gives that name to the large landmass drawn to the north of Cuba, presumably based only on oral accounts obtained directly and indirectly from Caribbean Indians. Peter Martyr also provides the earliest explicit reference to the Fountain of Youth in the first three decades (sets of ten chapters) of his *De Novo Orbe*, published by 1516, which locates the legendary spring some 325 leagues north of Hispaniola on an island called Boiúca or Agnanéo and which mentions neither Bimini nor Florida (*Martire d’Anghiera 1530: 35v; 1912a: 274*). At this early date, there is no evidence that Bimini was believed to be the location of the Fountain of Youth, especially since the same author was responsible for both named locations.

Over the next few decades, however, the island of Bimini was conflated with that of Florida, and the legend of the Fountain of Youth came to be connected to both the island of Bimini and Florida. As is clear from the Herrera narrative, which is evidently based on a detailed account or log of the first voyage, Juan Ponce de León clearly considered Bimini to be distinct from Florida and, indeed, sent one of his ships separately to identify its location during his return from discovering and exploring Florida (*Herrera y Tordesillas 1601*). Herrera even says that the ship succeeded in finding the island called Bimini, and though they failed to find the fabled Fountain of Youth on it, the island was described as large, possessing fresh water and trees. Furthermore, Ponce’s 1514 contract and title as adelantado specifically noted both islands as distinct by name (*Spanish Crown 1514b, 1514c*), although his 1521 letters refer only to Florida as the goal of his colonization effort, suggesting he envisioned better colonial prospects there (*Ponce de León 1521a, 1521b*).

The distinction between Florida and Bimini is further confirmed on the Freducci map of 1514–15, which labels one of the islands off Florida’s southeastern coast “Beiminy,” consistent with Herrera’s later narrative based on Ponce’s log (*True 1944a; Milanich and Milanich 1996*). Peter Martyr also clearly distinguishes Florida from Bimini in the subsequent decades of *De Novo Orbe* written after 1516 but before his death in 1526 (*Martire d’Anghiera 1912b: 251*). Moreover, Alonso de Chaves’s *Espejo de navegantes*, penned between 1520 and 1538, clearly places Bimini exactly in its modern location, along the far western edge of the Bahamas Islands and just twenty leagues across the Bahama Channel

from the Florida coast (1977: 21, 89). There seems little doubt that in the immediate aftermath of Ponce de León's 1513 expedition, Florida and Bimini were recognized as distinct from one another, clarifying Martyr's previous 1511 map that portrayed only the then-legendary "Beinini" to the north of Cuba.

The first conflation of the newly discovered Florida with Bimini appears in the 1519 map of the Gulf of Mexico by Alonso Alvarez de Pineda, whose label for the Florida peninsula reads, "Florida, which was called Binini, which Juan Ponce discovered." A later account of Ponce's expeditions was penned by Fray Bartolomé de las Casas before 1561, in which he also equated Bimini with Florida, incorrectly attributing both names to Ponce de León, though failing to mention the Fountain of Youth at all (1875: 459–61).

In addition to the early conflation of Florida and Bimini, several sixteenth-century authors made attempts to identify the location of the legendary Fountain of Youth. Before his death in 1526, Peter Martyr completed five additional decades of *De Novo Orbe*, and in the seventh decade, he explicitly (and for the first time in print) identified the Fountain of Youth that he had previously written about as located in Florida, reporting anecdotal evidence of an elderly Lucayan Indian who had visited the fountain in Florida and returned rejuvenated (Martire d'Anghiera 1530: 97v–98v; 1912b: 293–95). Although Martyr's complete work was not published until 1530, by 1535 Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1851, 1853) completed his own account of the voyages, in which he asserted specifically that on his first expeditions Juan Ponce de León had gone in search of what he called the "fountain of Bimini," which was said to restore youth, and although he found these "islands of Bimini" (though not the fountain), while on this expedition he obtained news of the mainland and ultimately named it Florida, where he later returned to settle. Oviedo's work formed a basis for Juan de Castellanos's (1589: 139–44) later poetic expansion on the Ponce de León narrative. In 1554, however, Francisco López de Gómara seems to have blended Martyr's earlier accounts with those of Oviedo, interpreting that Ponce had originally set out in search of the island of Boyuca, where the Fountain of Youth was said to be located, and after failing to find this island, he entered Bimini and also discovered Florida (1554: 37v–39r).

Though the Fountain of Youth was not mentioned in Bartolomé de las Casas's 1561 narrative about Ponce's discovery of Florida, the ca. 1575 account by Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda (n.d.c) recounted the tradition noted previously that during the early sixteenth century, the Indians of South Florida had received many Cuban Indians who traveled north to Florida in search of the miraculous rejuvenating waters of the "River Jordan" and that they and their descendants, as well as the