

Ponce de Leon and the Fountain of Youth

What Was Ponce de León Really Searching for?



Ponce de León

Juan Ponce de León was a Spanish explorer who is best known for exploring the coasts of Florida in search of the Fountain of Youth. For hundreds of years, people all over the world searched for the legendary Fountain of Youth. It was believed that if you drank the water from the Fountain of Youth, you would become young again or live forever.

As with many historical events, the story of what happened changes over time as people retell it. It seems that this was the case with Ponce de León's search for the Fountain of Youth because both the fountain and his search for it are a myth. Historians can't find any evidence that Ponce de León was actually searching for the magical fountain and believe the story was made up long after his death.

So what was Ponce de León really searching for if not the Fountain of Youth? He was searching for the next best things: power, fame, and fortune.

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Ponce de León was born in 1460 in Spain. Historians believe that he got his start as an explorer when he joined Christopher Columbus's second expedition to the West Indies in 1493.



Fast-Forward 10 Years

Ponce de León is a governor on the Island of Hispaniola (present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti). He hears rumors that there is a lot of gold to be found on a nearby island, soon to be named Puerto Rico. Ponce de León gets permission from the King of Spain to explore the island from 1508–1509. He takes 50 soldiers and one ship and sails to the island where he finds a settlement near present-day San Juan.

Ponce de León hit the power, fame, and fortune jackpot with his expedition to Puerto Rico. Not only did he find lots of gold (fortune) on the island—which he gave to the King and Queen of Spain—the Spanish royal couple was so pleased with him (fame) that they made him governor of Puerto Rico (power).

The Spanish crown greatly enjoyed the profits of Ponce de León's exploration. They urged him to do more and more exploration in hopes of getting even more gold.

The Myth Part of the Story

Ponce de León heard of a magical Fountain of Youth on nearby Bimini Island. He set sail for the island, but ended up on the coast of Florida instead. He landed in Charlotte Harbor near present-day St. Augustine where he searched up and down the coast for the mythical fountain.

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The True Part of the Story

Ponce de León landed on the east coast of Florida in March of 1513 around the time of the Christian holiday, Easter. In Spain, Easter was known as the “feast of Flowers.” In honor of the holiday, Ponce de León named this new land Florida, which means “Flowery.”

Ponce de León stayed in Florida for several months, but there is no evidence that he was searching for the mythical Fountain of Youth. He was most likely searching for more gold for the Spanish crown. He never found it. But the Spanish king was pleased anyways and appointed Ponce de León governor of Bimini and Florida.

In February 1521, Ponce de León returned to Florida to explore the western side of the peninsula. His expedition spent several months exploring but was attacked in July 1521 by native warriors. Ponce de León was injured in the fighting and many believe he was shot in the leg with a poison arrow. Shortly after, the expedition sailed to Cuba, where Ponce de León died later that month at age 61.



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A statue of Ponce de León in St. Augustine, Florida