

Misconceptions and Myths Related to the Fountain of Youth and Juan Ponce de Leon's 1513 Exploration Voyage

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Juan Ponce de Leon was the first Spanish explorer to courageously venture forth from the well known and charted Caribbean Spanish Main discovered by Columbus. His epic seven months long 1513 exploration voyage into unknown waters in which he discovered *La Florida* set the stage for the European colonization of North-America. However, the real significance of Ponce de Leon's voyage and his discovery of *La Florida* were not recognized by Spain until the follow-on voyages of Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon discovered, charted, and opened up the eastern seaboard of the USA and Canada to European colonization (Hoffman 1990:34-83; Peck 2001:183-198). And Spain was not alone in the failure to recognize the importance of Ponce de Leon's discoveries. Our current Florida historians are also guilty of this oversight in that their reports of Ponce de Leon's epic voyage are so filled with gross errors and misconceptions that the true purpose and goal and the important accomplishment of the voyage is not reported accurately nor given the attention that it deserves.

The purpose and goal of Ponce de Leon's 1513 voyage were set forth in detail in a lengthy official Patent or Charter issued by the Spanish crown on February 2, 1512 (Navarrete 1855). The Patent was issued to Ponce de Leon at his request after he was relieved (without prejudice) as governor of San Juan (Puerto Rico). Juan Ponce lost some of his extensive land holdings in the legal intrigues attendant with loss of the office of governor, but he still retained the influential office of Captain-General and the wealth from several large plantations with assigned slaves and other valuable assets in houses and ships.

Ponce de Leon was apparently unhappy with his lot on San Juan and that coupled with the insatiable urge of Spanish conquistadors to obtain more wealth and prestige, he decided to move on to more exciting and profitable adventures. Herrera describes it thus: Juan Ponce de Leon finding himself without public office, because of those of the island of San Juan having been restored to, Juan Ceron and Miguel Diaz: and seeing he was rich, decided to do something with which to earn honor and increase estate: and as he had news that they found lands to the north, he decided to go explore in the direction of that region (Kelley 1991 :31-32).

The Patent or Charter from Ferdinand gave Ponce de Leon permission to seek and claim the new wealthy island, or lands, of Beniny (later Beimeni) at his own expense and be named Adelantado of those lands he conquered, and receive the honor and wealth from his successful ventures. The origin or source of the Indian land named Beniny or Beimeni is unknown, but it was general knowledge among the conquistadors in the Islands (Peck 1992:135-136). Bartolome Colon had petitioned the crown earlier to seek this land, but he was turned down in favor of Ponce de Leon. The Indians were ostensibly referring to the realm of the Maya on the Yucatan rather than the Bahamas or Florida (Peck 1993:22-23; 2003:37). The logs of both Columbus and Ponce de Leon contain evidence that the Taino Indians in the islands and the Calusa in Florida had knowledge of the sophisticated Maya civilization on the Yucatan (Peck 1992:151; Peck 1998:4).

There is no mention of seeking the fountain of youth or slaves, but the patent contained detailed instructions for accountability of the gold that he was expected to find in this wealthy



Juan Ponce de Leon

Figure 1: An early German engraving of Juan Ponce de Leon with his signature. The engraving was possibly made from a sixteenth-century family portrait, since lost. From the German biographical book, *Juan Ponce de Leon und die Guldekung von Florida*, (circa 1850).

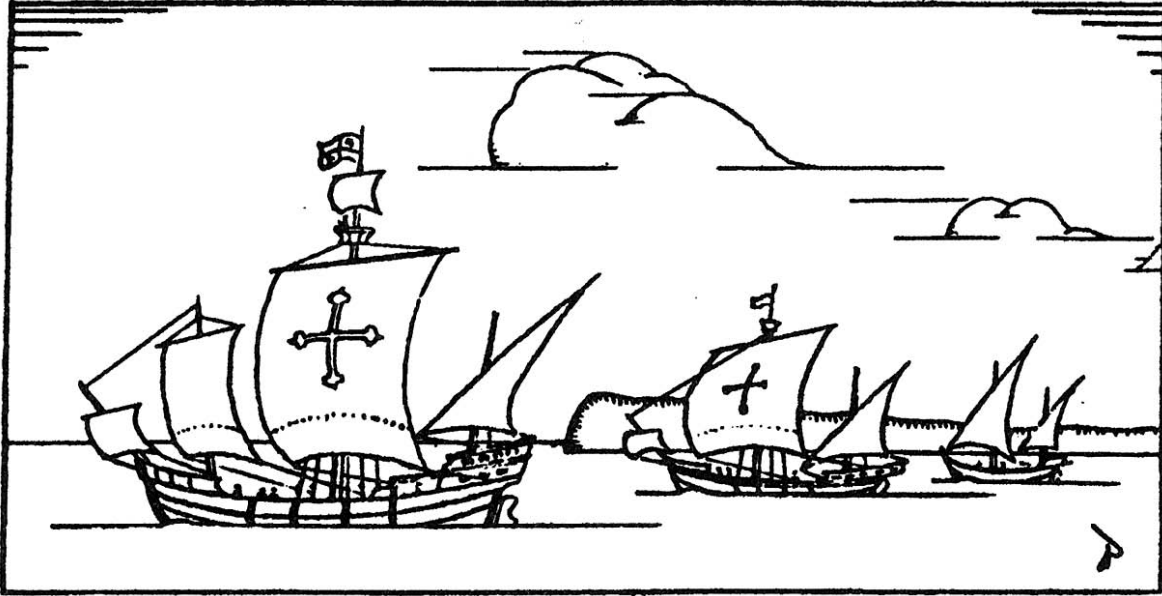


Figure 2: These three vessels are typical of the vessels used by Ponce de Leon on his voyage. The two caravels are on the left side and the bergantín is on the right. From Peck, *Ponce de Leon and the Discovery of Florida*.

new land. The title of Adelantado was a vast improvement in power, prestige, and potential wealth over that of a governor. The honor and prestige which would accrue from being the Adelantado of a wealthy new land that would (and did) extend the Spanish Empire were the real purpose and goal of Ponce de Leon's voyage and not just gold, slaves, or a fountain of youth as asserted in nearly all past and current literature. Gold was certainly one of the lesser goals of the voyage, and perhaps the principal interest of the crown, but Ponce de Leon was already an extremely wealthy conquistador and his plantations well supplied with slaves. Ponce de Leon's voyage was ostensibly geared to exploration to find a distant and unknown land to extend the Spanish empire and in which he would be the Adelantado..

His fleet consisted of two caravels, well provisioned for a long voyage, and one small bergantina for exploring shallow inlets and harbors (Figure 2). Juan Ponce's crew was divided between seamen and soldiers and he carried his mare aboard, probably for parade purposes only, to impress the king of the wealthy new land which he expected to find. His pilot was Anton de Alaminos, the most experienced pilot in the Indies, who was later to serve as pilot to Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba (1517), Juan de Grijalva (1518), and Hernan Cortes (1519) in the discovery of Mexico (*Nueva Espana*). Alaminos came to the Indies as a young apprentice seaman on Columbus's second voyage (1494) and stayed in the islands to become the most experienced pilot in the area. Alaminos would have learned only dead reckoning and pilotage from Columbus, since this is all that is needed for accurate navigation in the islands. Much of the confusion over Ponce de Leon's track and where he landed on the shores of Florida stems from the unfounded and mistaken belief that Alaminos was competent in the new and untried celestial navigation and that was what governed his latitude entries in the log. For a complete discussion of this point, see Peck, *Reconstruction and Analysis of the 1513 Discovery Voyage of Juan Ponce de Leon*, *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXXI, #2, (1992), pp. 136-137.

This impressive and expensive expedition was entirely financed by Ponce de Leon as he expected the goal of becoming the Adelantado of a wealthy new land would fully repay his efforts and investment. In the accounts of this extensive preparation there is no mention of the existence or interest in a fountain of youth. However, Ponce de Leon's alleged quest for the fountain of youth has become firmly embedded in current historiography and popular writing as one of the primary goals of the voyage. But this allegation is not supported by valid historical evidence.

Introduction of the Fountain of Youth Myth Into the New World and Into the 1513 Exploration Voyage of Juan Ponce de Leon

European historians were responsible for erroneously inserting the fountain of youth myth into the New World folklore and into Ponce de Leon's voyage. An examination of the fountain of youth myth in European literature and folklore reveals how and why this was a natural, though misguided, chain of events. The miraculous waters known as the fountain of youth is a Eurasian myth that can be found in the folklore of most ethnic cultures in Europe and the Middle East. The earliest record of a fountain of youth is in the Arabic epic romance of Alexander the Great, known throughout the medieval world from Libya to Syria. The myth of the fountain of youth appears to have originated solely in the Arabic lands of the Middle-East, as the Christian Bible and the early Greek and Roman literature contains no substantial reference to such a magical fountain. The Arabic romance of Alexander was introduced into European literature with publication of the epic Medieval French, *Roman d Alexandre*, circa. 1200-1300 (Meyer 1935; Lunde 1992:43-46). This French account of Alexander finding the magical fountain of youth reads in part:

“After passing through a land that was so hot that they were burnt by their saddles, they entered another land, which was full of beautiful flowers and green meadows, and there was the dear fountain [of youth] of sweet water that rejuvenated four times a day. The old warriors entered the fountain; more than forty-six bathed in it and when they came out they were age thirty and like the best knights. Then the other old men who had led the king and showed him all the marvels of the earth, came before him and said: King, good is the fountain we led you to. See how old and bent we are? We have lived more than a hundred years and now you will see us in another guise. They entered the fountain and bathed four times as prescribed. They left the fountain rejoicing, and when they returned to Alexander he could hardly recognize them, so young they were “ (Armstrong 1935:210-213).

The wonders of Asia and the Middle East and its folklore (to include the fountain of youth) were also spread throughout Europe in the anonymous and apocryphal *Letter of Prester John*, which first appeared in 1165, and was republished in many versions during the Middle Ages (Wright 1925). The early published Letter, told of a legendary Christian Prince, who lived in an area generally associated with Ethiopia or the Far East. A 13th century elaboration of the letter reports that: “The miraculous spring is located on an island in the extreme meridian of the world, where long-lived people drew from its waters lasting health and renewal of youth” (Wright 1925 :88). Placing the miraculous spring (or fountain of youth) on an island in the extreme meridian of

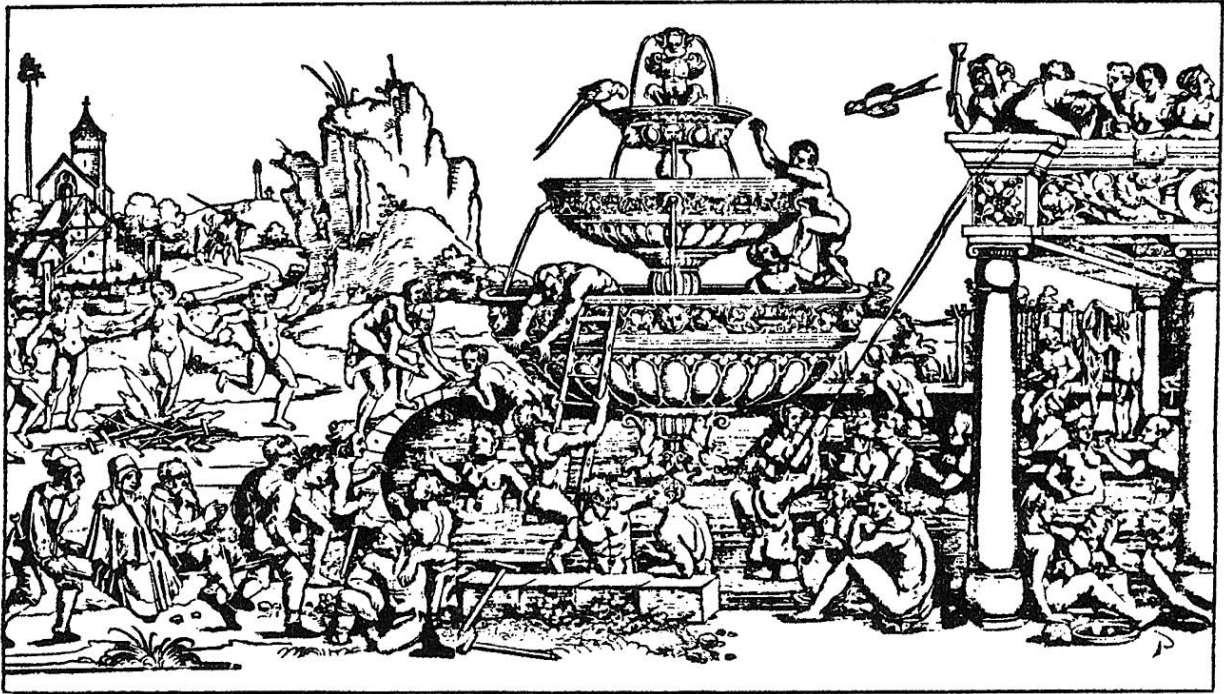


Figure 3: The romantic sixteenth-century European image of the Fountain of Youth as portrayed in a German woodcut by Hans Sebald Bechan. From Peck, *Ponce de Leon and the Discovery of Florida*.

the world would point to the islands of the New World discovered by Columbus. The fountain of youth appears in different accounts as a fountain, river, spring, or miraculous and rejuvenating waters. The fountain is primarily associated with sensual, erotic love, and either drinking or bathing in the waters could restore youthful sexual performance lost with age. And this is a powerful force for keeping an apocryphal myth alive, as witness the current multimillion dollar business of selling aphrodisiacs based entirely on myth.

There were other Eurasian myths, such as Amazon warriors and the Seven Cities of Cibola, that were transplanted to the New World as unfounded romantic fiction by historians and writers of the early sixteenth-century. Amazon warriors first appeared in Greek mythology when Herodotus in 450 BC reported fierce warrior women called Amazons living in an area north of the Black Sea (Davis-Kimball 1997:44-48). Marco Polo placed the realm of the Amazons in an island of the Indian Ocean, and the Arab geographer Al-Idrisi (circa 1150) located the Amazons on an island in the Atlantic (Marsden 1948; Lunde 1992:43-46). The Amazon myth quickly found its way into the New World from Columbus's *Diario* or log of his first voyage in 1492-1493. On three occasions in his log (January 6, 15 and 16, 1493) Columbus reported the Indians told him of a nearby island inhabited only by women. In other log entries, the Indians stated the name of the island was Matinino and it lay somewhere east of Espanola (Dunn-Kelley 1989:315,331,339,343). Columbus, who was well read in the early Greek and Arab classics (and Marco Polo) was quick to interpret the island of Matinino as an island of Amazons. And later (1518), Juan de Grijalva reported that, the Yucatan was an island inhabited only by women, believed to be of the race of the Amazons (Wagner 1942: 31). It was this same propensity exhibited by Columbus and Grijalva to believe that Amazons were present in the New World, which led other Spanish explorers and historians to believe that the alleged fountain of youth was

also to be found in the New World. Another Eurasian myth transported to the New World was the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola sought by Coronado, but of these several European myths and legends, that were believed to exist in the New World, it is only the fountain of youth that has been associated with the Ponce de Leon voyage. There are six sixteenth-century historians that are primarily responsible for introducing the fountain of youth myth into the New World, and four of these name the search for it as the purpose of Ponce de Leon's voyage.

Peter Martyr (Pietro Martire d'Anghiera) was the first to introduce the fountain of youth myth into the New World, but he did not tie it to the goal of Ponce de Leon's voyage, although many historians attempt to do so. Peter Martyr, was a learned Spanish court entrepreneur and historian who made it a point to question all the early explorers in order to write his commentary and history of the Indies published in his *Decades de Orbe Nova*. Martyr would certainly have questioned Ponce de Leon at the time of his return to Spain and to the court in 1514 following his discovery voyage. Martyr first mentioned the existence of the magical fountain in the New World in the Second Decade of his *Decades de Orbe Nova*. In his account of the voyage of Juan de Solis; Martyr stated: "Beyond Veragua the coast bends in a northerly direction, to a point opposite the Pillars of Hercules; that is, if we accept our measures certain lands discovered by the Spaniards, more than three hundred and twenty-five leagues from the north coast of Hispaniola. Amongst these countries is an island called by us Boinca [later Boyuca], and by others Aganeo; it is celebrated for a spring whose waters restore youth to old men" (McNutt 1970:274). In a note on this page, McNutt states that the countries referred to is Florida, but Solis at this time was on the coast of Honduras and more than 1000 miles from Florida. This error was perhaps caused by misunderstanding Martyr's confusing attempt at giving the location tied to the latitude of the Pillars of Hercules and 325 leagues from Espanola, but was more likely influenced by McNutt's knowledge of Martyr's later unrelated (and unfounded) account of an Indian slave who reported a magical fountain in Florida.

Martyr does not give a precise geographical location for the fountain (spring) on Boinca (Boyuca) or Ananeo, but from the navigational data given it is clear that it was in the Bay of Honduras (which Solis visited after leaving Veragua), rather than the Bahamas or Florida. The distance given of 325 leagues from Espanola is more than 1000 nautical miles, which approximates the distance to the Bay of Honduras in the Solis voyage, rather than the Bahamas or Florida which are less than 200 nautical miles (about 60 leagues) from Espanola. The length of the Spanish league is in contention among Columbian scholars and varies from 2.67 to 3.40 nautical miles. The most commonly accepted figure of 3.20 nautical miles was used for this computation. Most historians, without foundation and with unethical literary license, change the name of Martyr's island of Boinca (Boyuca) to Bimini and insert the unwritten (and incorrect) words that the island of Bimini in the Bahamas was thought to be the location of the fountain sought by Ponce de Leon. Bimini is the modern name for a small island in the Bahamas opposite Miami that has no valid geographical relationship to the islands or land of Beniny or Beimeni sought by Ponce de Leon. In his seven months long voyage through the Bahamas with Indian guides, Ponce de Leon identified twelve islands, none of which bore the name of Boinca, Boyuca, or Ananeo, the islands named by Martyr as the location of the fountain of youth (Peck 1992:133-154).

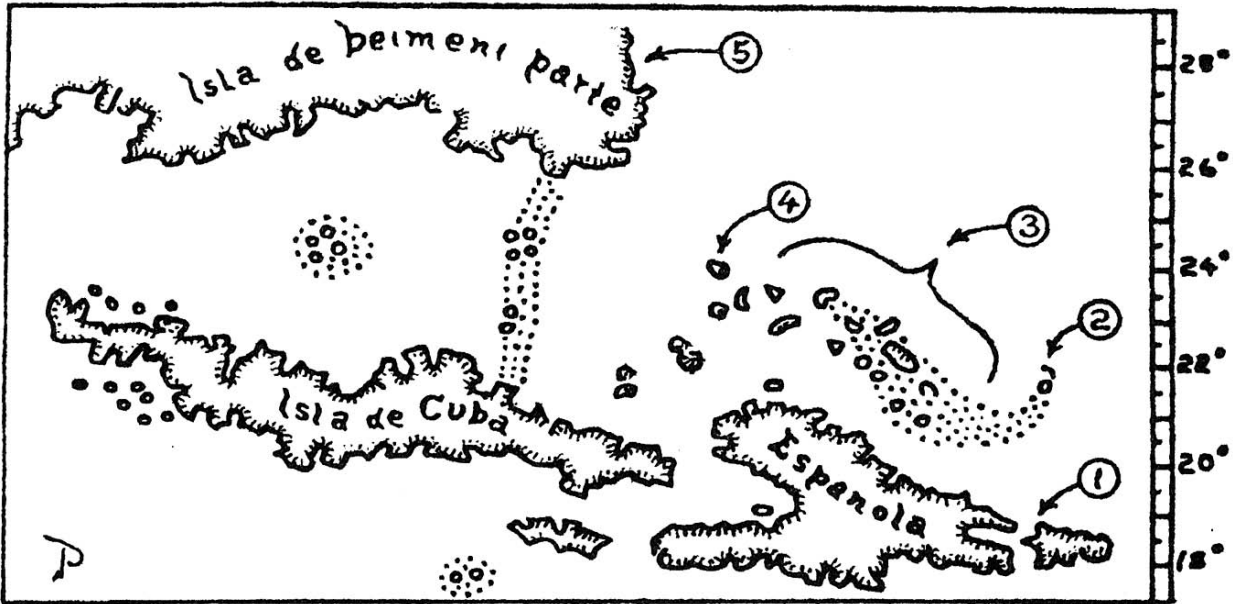


Figure 4: A scaled detail of the northwestern portion of Peter Martyr's 1511 map of the Indies. Extrapolated latitudes and the numbered arrows related to Ponce de Leon's voyage have been added. From *Revista de Historia de America* (Peck 1998).

- (1) Departure from *Punta Aguada* on the western end of Puerto Rico, 5 March 1513.
- (2) *El Viejo* (Grand Turk), first island encountered on the Banks of the Babueca.
- (3) Passed and identified (from his Indian guides) six islands in the Lucayans (Bahamas).
- (4) Stayed 10 days on *Guanahani* (San Salvador). Prepared for ocean passage to Beimeni (Beniny).
- (5) Landing on the coast of Florida at 28 degrees latitude (Melbourne Beach), 2 April, 1513.

Well before Ponce de Leon's 1513 voyage the conquistadors in the Indies were aware of the Taino's exotic island of Beimeni in their mythology (Peck 1992:135-136; 1998:70-71). In his 1511 map, Martyr arbitrarily placed the Indian's mythical land of Beimeni in the only unexplored region north of Cuba, but Martyr did not associate Beimeni with the fountain of youth which he had previously located on other islands in the Bay of Honduras (Peck 1998:70-71; 2003:37). Figure 4 shows how the track of Juan Ponce through the Bahamas can be related to the 1511 Martyr map. Alaminos and the Indian guides identified seven islands on the northbound passage and five more were identified on the return passage through the same general area. The modern island of Bimini in the Bahamas across from Miami was identified as *La Vieja* in Ponce de Leon's log (Peck 2002:73) and it has no relationship to the land of Beimeni (Beniny) that he was seeking, even though our school text books currently record that erroneous identification. The detailed entries in the log describing the islands contain no hint concerning a possible fountain of youth. When Ponce de Leon was seeking his fabled land, he landed on the shores of what he thought was an island in the exact position of Beimeni (Figure 4), but naturally he did not believe it was the exotic land of Beimeni, and naming it *La Florida* continued his search. However, historians with only a superficial knowledge of sixteenth-century navigation have misinterpreted the data in the log which has resulted in the confusion over the location of the alleged Bimini and the location of Ponce de Leon's landing on the shores of Florida.

Much later than his 1511 map and after Ponce de Leon's discovery of *La Florida*, Martyr gave an apocryphal and patently fictitious account of a fountain of youth relayed to him by

Fernando Figueroa who stated: “A Lucayan servant [slave] called Andreas, says that when his father was broken by age, he left his native island near Florida, attracted by the report of the power of that spring and the hope of prolonging his life. He set out for the desired spring, where he made a stay of some time, drinking, and following the treatment indicated by the bathers. He returned home strengthened and with his manhood renewed, for he married again and had sons” (McNutt 1970:294). This later and unrelated report by Martyr of another fountain of youth, this time in Florida, was again made with no mention or association with the voyage of Ponce de Leon. However, it was Martyr’s initial and earlier report of a fountain of youth in the New World that set the stage for the later romantic, fictional, and completely unfounded reports by Spanish explorers and historians that follow.

The next historian to mention the fountain was Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo in his *Historia General*, published in 1535. There is no English edition of Oviedo’s works; for a Spanish edition see (Oviedo 1944). Oviedo was the official chronicler for the Casa de Contratacion de Indias in Seville and traveled extensively in the New World to write his official history. Oviedo, in briefly mentioning the fountain, was the first to give that as the purpose of Ponce de Leon’s voyage. Oviedo obviously had a rather jaundiced opinion of Ponce de Leon since he spoke of his (Ponce’s) vanity in seeking the fountain of youth as a cure for his *el enflaquecimiento del sexo*, or sexual impotence. For an extract translation of this comment, see (Morison 1974 :503).

It was this one unfounded, unsubstantiated, untrue, and almost casual remark by Oviedo, that became the initial source for falsely inserting Martyr’s fountain of youth into the Ponce de Leon voyage that persists to this day!

Oviedo’s history was published long after Ponce de Leon’s death, so the conquistador could not object or set the record straight. Oviedo’s comment has been accepted (and repeated) by succeeding historians as valid, but a severe scrutiny of extant source documents reveals that the comment does not deserve to be accepted as historical truth. Oviedo’s picture of Ponce de Leon vainly seeking a cure for his sexual impotence hardly stands up to Ponce de Leon’s active macho life as a conquistador and the son of a father who had sired twenty-one illegitimate offspring (Arnade 1967:29-57; Murga Sanz 1971:23). Another overlooked and unreported, but significant factor related to his alleged sexual impotence is that Juan Ponce took his mistress, Juana Jimenez, along on the voyage (Peck 1993:25-26; 1998:73). And it should also be noted that Ponce de Leon had sired four children from his wife Leonor during this period in which Oviedo suggests he was seeking a cure for his impotence.

A primary factor that supported the legend that Ponce de Leon was seeking a fountain of youth was the mistaken belief that he was an old man at the time of his voyage. Samuel Eliot Morison in 1974 was the first to document that Ponce de Leon was born in 1474 and was only 39 years old on his discovery voyage (Morison 1974:502-516). Before 1974, the historians most often cited as authorities on the subject (Scisco 1913; Davis 1935; Lawson 1946; Olschki 1941) carried Ponce de Leon in his 50’s which lent a false credence to his alleged search for a fountain of youth. After Morison’s documentation of Juan Ponce’s younger age, many historians have tried to defend their previous stand with the unlikely and strained theory that Ponce de Leon was actually seeking the fountain for the aging Ferdinand. Ferdinand was indeed at an advanced age (61) at the time of Juan Ponce’s voyage but there is no indication that Ferdinand specified that as a goal of the voyage, and any serious student of history would know that the proud aristocratic Ferdinand would never admit that his manhood needed bolstering.. In fact both Oviedo and later

Herrera made it clear (but without foundation) that Ponce de Leon was vainly seeking the fountain for his own personal use. Yet the latest account by the respected Florida historian, Robert Fuson, follows other Florida historians and alleges that Ponce de Leon was seeking the fountain of youth for the aging Ferdinand (Fuson 2000:118-119).

Oviedo's patently false and degrading remark clearly smacks of being a politically inspired slap at the powerful Ponce de Leon family who were rivals of Oviedo for court favors. However, Oviedo was the official historian appointed by the crown, so his tendentious and unfounded remark has been regarded as authentic which insured that succeeding historians faithfully copied, and embellished this falsehood in all subsequent histories down to the present time.

Following Oviedo by nearly three decades is the Spanish historian, Francisco Lopez de Gomara, who was the next to mention the fountain of youth in the New World (Gomara 1941; Weddle 1985:38). Gomara reported that both the fountain of youth and Amazon women were in existence on the island of Guanahani in the Bahamas. Gomara's report, which is tied to Columbus and not Ponce de Leon, is obviously fictitious nonsense and is completely at odds with known historical facts of the Taino Indian peoples and their culture in the Bahamas.

Don Hernando d'Escalante de Fontaneda was the next historian to write about the Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend (True 1944). Fontaneda was shipwrecked on the Florida Keys about 1549. Probably because of his youth (13 years) the Indians did not murder him as they did most shipwrecked sailors and he lived among them for 17 years until he was finally rescued on the west coast of Florida by Pedro Menendez de Aviles in 1566. At a later date (circa 1575) he wrote the memoirs of his life among the Indians which contained the account of Ponce de Leon's search for the fountain of youth.

Fontaneda asserted in his memoirs that it was the Jordan River in southern Florida that Ponce de Leon was looking for in order to earn greater fame or become young from bathing in such a stream. Fontaneda adopted the same derisive tone as Oviedo (no doubt borrowed from him) when he stated: It is cause for merriment that Juan Ponce de Leon went to Florida to find the River of Jordan (True 1944: 28-29). There never was a Jordan River in southern Florida and there is no indication that Ponce de Leon was looking for it. There was however a Jordan River on the coast of South Carolina associated with the 1520 exploration of the east coast organized by Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon. This river, named Jordan because it was discovered on the feast day of John the Baptist, was probably known to Fontaneda when he wrote his memoirs. Herrera is the source of the erroneous idea that the river was named for a crew member lost while exploring the river (Herrera 1934:III, 327-34). Fontaneda also reported a migration of Indians from Cuba to Florida early in the sixteenth-century who he alleged were looking for the miraculous waters sought by Ponce de Leon. This movement of the Indians did occur, but it could hardly be called a planned migration as these were Indian slaves who had escaped from the inhumane and harsh treatment of their Spanish overlords in Espanola or Cuba and were given refuge in south Florida by the Calusa Indians! The Spanish speaking Indian Ponce de Leon encountered in southwest Florida was undoubtedly one of these refugees. However, Fontaneda as a loyal Spanish subject (and Herrera who quoted him) could hardly be expected to give this true politically incorrect reason for the migration so it has become one more invalid report to support the false Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend.

Garcilaso de la Vega in his *Florida of the Inca*, mentions Ponce de Leon's voyages in his account (circa 1580) of the exploration of Hernando de Soto (Vega 1951). Garcilaso stated only that Ponce de Leon in his voyages sought a fountain which rejuvenates the aged. This casual hearsay mention of Ponce de Leon's voyage does not constitute valid historical evidence, but has

also been used by succeeding historians as one more sixteenth-century authority to support the Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend.

Next in order is Spain's official historiographer Antonio de Herrera who published his history in 1601 containing the summary of Ponce de Leon's log. An accurate and unbiased interpretation of key portions of Herrera's account is vital to the study and resolution of the Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend. Herrera, writing 80 years after the event, inserted numerous comments of his own that were not in the original log, and this has caused some consternation among scholars in trying to sort out which are Ponce de Leon's words and which are Herrera's inserted words. Herrera's account of Ponce de Leon's voyage is contained in his, *Historia General de los Hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas y Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano*, published in Madrid, 1601-1615.

Used in this study were three English translations of Herrera's chapter on Ponce de Leon's voyage, by Florence P. Spofford, in (Davis 1935:1-49); L. D. Scisco (Scisco 1913:721-735); and James E. Kelley Jr. (Kelley 1991:31-65). The Kelley translation and commentary is the most thoroughly researched and accurate of these and includes the English translation adjacent to the original Spanish script. Kelley's work is also more accurate and authentic because it is made from the original 1601 publication (rather than later modern Spanish translations) and contains copious footnotes explaining possible differences in interpretation of sixteenth-century script and word definitions and usage. In his thorough investigation to insure an accurate translation, Kelley analyzed (and critiqued) the modern Spanish translations of Altolaguirre (1934), Gonzales (1944), Murga Sanz (1959), and Tio (1972), then did the same for the English translations of Davis-Spofford (1935), Scisco (1913), and Stevens (1725). Use of Kelley's superior translation and commentary has been a major factor in pointing out the errors in the writings of previous and current Florida historians who are tied to the outdated 1935 Davis-Spofford translation and commentary.

In Herrera's detailed account, derived from the log of Ponce de Leon's seven months long voyage through the islands, and in the detailed accounts of the encounters with the Indians in Florida, there was *not one mention of the Indian guides, or Indians encountered along the way, either reporting or being asked about the rejuvenating fountain!* It is only at the end of the report of the seven months long voyage, that Herrera inserts a brief comment that Ponce de Leon did not find the miraculous spring he was seeking. It is not surprising that Herrera would feel compelled to insert that remark even though Ponce de Leon's log ostensibly contained no such remark. Elsewhere in his *Historia*, Herrera had reported Fontaneda's spurious account of Ponce de Leon seeking the miraculous river Jordan in Florida as though it was a confirmed historical fact. This together with the fact that as official historian for the crown, he would be compelled to accept the unfounded remark of Oviedo (his predecessor as official historian) as true historical fact, and thus would feel that his inserted remark was justified, needed, and accurate. While the remarks of Oviedo and Fontaneda are easily identified as fiction, it is not that easy in the case of Herrera's summary of the log because of the respect accorded Herrera as a historian and the mistaken belief that every remark of Herrera came directly from the log. Herrera obviously had access to Ponce de Leon's log, but historians are too quick to assume the information concerning the Indian miraculous fountain or spring came from the log, when the manifestly logical facts indicate it was inserted hearsay evidence derived from Oviedo and Fontaneda.



Figure 5: Title page from Decade IV of Antonio de Herrera's *Historia de las Indias*, which contains his account of the 1513 exploration voyage of Juan Ponce de Leon.

Although Herrera is perhaps the key witness in this study, there are others that should be considered. Fray Bartolome de Las Casas had written a comprehensive history of the Indies prior to the histories of both Oviedo and Herrera. Las Casas lived with the Indians as a missionary on Espanola and Cuba for many years and was fluent in their language (Las Casas 1951; 1974). Unlike Herrera, he was personally acquainted with Ponce de Leon during this period. His history reported in detail the life style, customs, religion, myths and folklore of the Indians, but made no mention of an Indian legend or myth of a fountain of youth, nor of Ponce de Leon seeking it! It can be argued that just because Las Casas did not mention it, does not mean it did not exist. However, Las Casas was a close colleague of Martyr, Oviedo and others who had an interest in the fountain, so it stands to reason that he would have mentioned it if the Indians had reported its existence.

Another account of the myths and folklore of the Taino Indians in the islands comes from a Jeronymite priest named Ramon Pane. Fray Pane came to the islands with Columbus on his second voyage (1493) and remained in the islands to become one of the first of the Spanish missionaries. He stated in his manuscript that Columbus had instructed him to learn the language of the Indians and investigate their customs and beliefs. Fray Pane reported that the Taino myth of creation was in some respects like the Judeo-Christian tradition in that they believed in one Supreme Being who created the earth and all living creatures and his name was unknown. The creation myth also includes a great flood in which the creation of fishes is attributed to the son of the Supreme Being. Although water plays a prominent role in all New World Indian mythology, neither the account of Fray Pane or secondary writings about myths of the Indians of the islands contain any mention of the rejuvenating fountain that Ponce de Leon is alleged to have heard about and was seeking (Stevens-Arroyo 1988:89-90).

It may well be that the wide acceptance of the romantic image of Ponce de Leon seeking a fountain of youth owes more than a little to a book originally published in 1831 by Washington Irving (Irving 1849). Irving was in Spain when he became aware of original source documents such as Herrera's *Historia*. Eight chapters in Irving's book deal with Ponce de Leon. The fountain of youth myth is stressed as the hidden reason for his voyages, and Ponce de Leon is presented as a shallow and vain conquistador who failed in his quest. Irving's fictionalized picture of Ponce de Leon (which was accepted as true history by the lay public) was in reality more in the mold of his fictional creation of Rip Van Winkle in the lore of New York State, rather than true and accurate Spanish history.

This study shows that the Indians did not have a fountain of youth myth or legend, and it was romantic fiction introduced by the early Spanish explorers and historians. Yet some of the reports appear to be first hand reports by people who were there, and they infer the information came from the Indians. There is a valid explanation for this seeming incongruity. The early Spanish explorers made no effort to learn the language of the Indians so the Indians were forced to try and interpret what these Spaniards were asking them. With the limited vocabulary of the Indians, which certainly would not contain such esoteric words as miraculous or rejuvenating, it is not surprising that when asked the location of a miraculous fountain that could rejuvenate old men, they would merely indicate the location of one of their numerous sources of water, and the gullible Spaniard would think (and report) that the Indian was telling him about a fountain of youth. It is significant that every Spaniard put the fountain or spring or river in a different location and gave it a different name. Just this fact alone would indicate that the Indians did not understand the Spaniards when they inquired about a miraculous fountain, so their answers were meaningless. And the explanation put forward by some scholars that the Indians may have

invented the story, to induce the Spaniards to leave in search for it, is so illogical and improbable that it hardly requires a comment.

For several centuries after Herrera, the Ponce de Leon voyage was overshadowed in historical writing by the epic voyages and discoveries of Spanish, English, French, and Dutch explorers in opening up new lands in both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. It was not until 1913, occasioned by the 400th Anniversary of the discovery of Florida, that writers turned their attention to the 1513 discovery voyage of Ponce de Leon. This revival of interest in the 1513 voyage of Ponce de Leon produced a body of historical literature, both academic and popular, that carried forward and legitimized the distorted and inaccurate views of the sixteenth-century historians.

The Ponce de Leon-Fountain of Youth Legend in Twentieth-Century Literature

There was a proclivity among historians of the sixteenth-century to accept previously published historical events without question. Then, having accepted the event as valid, many less than candid historians had embellished the brief initial report with fictional details, which seems harmless enough, but resulted in strengthening the authority of the initial report by seeming to corroborate it from a different and valid source. An examination of accepted twentieth century historians reveal that they have continued this flawed academic license in writing of the Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend.

L. D. Scisco was the first to translate Herrera's account of Ponce de Leon's voyage into English (1913) and make it readily available to American scholars. His commentary was centered primarily with where Ponce de Leon landed on the shores of Florida and he endorsed but was relatively noncommittal on the accepted Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend (Scisco 1913:721-735). Scisco named Ponce de Leon Inlet as the landing site based on the unlikely theory that the inlet was given that name because it appeared as the landing site on an early Spanish map or document since lost.

In 1935, T. Frederick Davis wrote a scholarly study of the Ponce de Leon voyage that has become the standard and unquestioned bibliographical authority in the academic community for more than half a century (Davis 1935:1-49). Davis's undocumented and unsupported description of the fountain under the heading; Purpose of the Voyage reads : "According to an Indian legend of the West Indies there existed an island called Bimini (supposed by the Spaniards to be one of the Lucayos, or as we call them now, the Bahamas), which contained a spring of running water having the quality of restoring youth to the aged; and to this lure, the usual modern account attributes Ponce de Leon's voyage." Davis apparently falls into the trap of quoting some unnamed historian predecessor when he places the fountain (spring of running water) on Bimini in the Bahamas without investigating the several primary source documents which indicate otherwise. Thus, Davis's account is fundamentally flawed because he failed to properly interpret primary source documents. Several geographical locations (reported earlier in this study) are given by the primary sources: Martyr (from Solis) first locates the fountain in islands off the coast of Honduras, and later (from Figueroa's slave) in Florida. Gomara gives Guanahani in the central Bahamas, and Fontaneda gives southern Florida as the location of the fountain. Herrera as a later secondary source cites Fontanada with the Florida location. The current popular location of the alleged Indian mythical fountain of youth on Bimini in the Bahamas, as asserted without supporting argument by Davis, is historically unfounded and without merit. Yet this erroneous view has been accepted without question by Florida historians and is contained in current

textbooks, encyclopedias, and academic and popular literature.

Leonardo Olschki followed Davis in 1941 with a comprehensive paper on the fountain of youth legend which gave the pros and cons of its being an Indian legend that may have influenced Ponce de Leon's voyage (Olschki 1941:361-385). In the mass of well documented source data presented, Olschki established the fact that there is no valid evidence that the Indians believed in or reported the existence of a fountain of youth, but he is ambivalent on whether the European myth was a factor in Ponce de Leon's voyage.

Edward W. Lawson produced a biography of Ponce de Leon in 1946 followed by a pamphlet on the limited subject of the Florida landing site (Lawson 1946; 1956). Lawson's works have been widely quoted to establish both the fact that Ponce de Leon was seeking a fountain of youth and that he found it after allegedly landing at St. Augustine. Lawson placed the landing site inside the harbor at St. Augustine in spite of the fact that the log clearly shows that Ponce de Leon looked for, but did not find a harbor or inlet at the landing site. Lawson goes to great pains with many footnoted testimonials to show that a large Indian village existed on the site (even though Ponce de Leon reported there were no Indians at the landing site) and that the site had an abundant spring of sweet water which from earliest times had been known as the fountain of youth. A buried stone cross allegedly dating to the time of Ponce de Leon's voyage was also found on the site. This shallow poorly researched and error-filled document should have no interest to the serious student of history, yet Lawson is cited by current Florida academic historians as one of the prime authorities (together with Davis) on the voyage of Ponce de Leon.

The Hispanic historians, Abbad y Lasierra (1970), Aurelio Tio (1972), Eufemio Lorenzo Sanz (1984), Vicente Murga Sanz (1959), and Manuel Ballesteros Gaibrois (1960), also produced works during this period that mention the Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend. However, all of these works are largely of a biographical nature centered on his governorship of Puerto Rico, and the brief secondary treatment of the Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend contributes nothing new and is not considered significant.

The next significant report of Ponce de Leon's voyage was contained in Samuel Eliot Morison's widely read history of the European discovery of America published in 1974. Morison has embellished the few terse and casual words of Herrera with fictional details which inordinately seems to strengthen the authority of Herrera's original unfounded and questionable comment. Morison is guilty of this unethical and inaccurate historiography in his account of the voyage. One example of this is Morison's description of the voyage along the shores of Florida which reads in part: "[Ponce de Leon] went ashore wherever he saw signs of a native village to inquire about the rejuvenating fountain" (Morison 1974:510). *Every case reported in the log* where Ponce de Leon put men ashore, it was to *get firewood and water and trade with the Indians*. In the detailed report of the seven months long voyage through the islands and along the shores of Florida, *there is not one single mention of inquiring about the rejuvenating fountain!* Yet Morison has put those untrue words in Ponce de Leon's mouth just as was done by Oviedo originally, then Herrera and all historians to follow.

James E. Kelley's published translation of Herrera; "Juan Ponce de Leon's Discovery of Florida: Herrera's Narrative Revisited," followed a period of nearly two decades in which there was little interest in the subject. As noted earlier Kelley's superior translation was done at my request to support my research and empirical reconstruction of Juan Ponce de Leon's 1513 exploration voyage. My research was published as: "Reconstruction and Analysis of the 1513 Discovery Voyage of Juan Ponce de Leon," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. LXXI, #2, (1992:133-154), followed by an expanded version of my FHQ article published in the trade

book; *Ponce de Leon and the Discovery of Florida* (1993).

In 1996 Jerald T. and Nara B. Milanich published an article in *The Florida Historical Quarterly* titled; “Revisiting the Freducci Map: A Description of Juan Ponce de Leon’s Voyage?” In Milanich’s analysis of the map it was determined that it was made from Juan Ponce’s log and showed his landing site on a small island off the South Georgia coast. The reasons given for this unlikely conclusion are nebulous and reveal a lack of knowledge of ocean navigation, marine geography of the area, as well as the well-published historiography of early sixteenth-century cartography including numerous works on the Freducci Map by well-known scholars in the discipline. Davis, Lawson, and Morison are listed as other “authorities” on the landing site, with no mention of the published works of Kelley or Peck. In my later work: “The First European Charting of Florida and the Adjacent Shores,” *The Florida Geographer*, Vol. 34, #1, (2003:82-113), I show that the Freducci map was made long after Juan Ponce’s voyage and of the nineteen place names listed, only six can be directly related to his voyage. The other thirteen place names can easily be traced to much later voyages and later cartography; thus the map is not a “Description of Juan Ponce de Leon’s Voyage,” and Milanich’s conclusions have little merit.

The latest account of Ponce de Leon’s search for the fountain of youth is contained in Robert Fuson’s biographical styled book on Juan Ponce’s life and voyages to Puerto Rico and Florida. There is no new research in this book related to Juan Ponce’s 1513 voyage and it only quotes from and repeats the errors and misinformation of previous outdated published works on the subject. Without clearly stating the purpose and goal of the voyage, Fuson gives the search for the fountain as a secondary but important motive and follows the unlikely and historically unfounded consensus of predecessors that the search was to find the magical fountain for the aging king Ferdinand (Fuson 2000:118-119). Fuson located the landing site at Palm Shores just a little south of St. Augustine and “speaking from authority” offers no creditable evidence or argument to support the site. And like Milanich; Fuson does not refer to the relevant published research of Kelley or Peck in either the text or bibliography.

In addition to the historians previously discussed, the several historians used as a source (or authority) by our encyclopedias and school textbooks have had a profound effect in establishing the several historical errors concerning the Ponce de Leon 1513 voyage. The account in *Encyclopedia Americana*, authored by M. M. Lasley (University of Florida), reads: “On March 3, 1513, Ponce de Leon departed Puerto Rico in search of Bimini and, as legend has it, the reported miraculous fountain of youth On April 11 [in error by 8 days], he discovered what he believed to be an island, which he named La Florida near what is now St. Augustine. In *Collier’s Encyclopedia*, Franklyn G. Palmer reported: Ponce de Leon proposed an expedition to the island of Bimini in the Bahamas because of reports by natives of a fountain there which rejuvenated all who bathed in it still in search of the fountain of youth, Ponce de Leon discovered Florida, landing near the present site of St. Augustine. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* has the same distorted and historically inaccurate account but does not name a source.

Currently one of the latest and most widely read and referenced sources for historical information on Ponce de Leon’s voyage is the one that is the most filled with gross inaccuracies and errors. This is Microsoft’s multimedia *Encarta Encyclopedia* (1998). Microsoft does not name a particular source for their data on Ponce de Leon, stating only in their preface that their data is from currently accepted academic sources. This would certainly cast a shadow on the accuracy of the currently accepted academic sources related to the Ponce de Leon voyage. The several historical errors in Microsoft’s *Encarta Encyclopedia* are these:

- (1) The first error is listing Juan Ponce de Leon’s date of birth as 1460. It should be 1474.

(2) The second error in the text is where it is reported that “Ponce de Leon heard tales of an island called Bimini, located north of Cuba, and having also heard tales of a fountain of youth existing on Bimini, and believing these tales to be true, decided to seek this fountain of youth.” As indicated in this study, Juan Ponce was not looking for a fountain of youth, and Bimini is the modern name of a small island in the Bahamas that has no geographical relationship to the legendary land of Beniny or Beimeni, which was the true goal of the voyage.

(3) Another serious error is the statement that: “On March 27 he sighted the eastern shore of the present state of Florida, which he believed to be the legendary Bimini.” On March 27 Juan Ponce sighted Eleuthera, which he could not identify, and was nearly 300 miles from his sighting and landing on the shore of Florida (Peck 1992:142-143). Further, Juan Ponce did not believe that Florida was the legendary Beniny or Beimeni (misnamed Bimini), which is the reason he named it *La Florida* and continued his search for Beimeni (Peck 1992:143).

(4) The date for landing on Florida is correct, but the geographical location is wrong by reporting: “He landed north of the site of present day St. Augustine on April 2 and named the region Florida. Juan Ponce actually landed 125 miles south of St. Augustine near Melbourne Beach, which is fully substantiated in previously published historical research (Kelly 1991:55-56; Gannon 1996:17-20; Peck 1992:144-147). The published scientific research which has established the landing site south of Cape Canaveral near Melbourne Beach has been widely accepted by the National and International academic community including the National Geographic Society in their *Millennium Map of World Exploration*, February, 1998), but is apparently unknown to Florida historians who are the accepted academic sources used by Microsoft and other media publications.

It would be easy to blame Microsoft for these errors, but the real fault lies with the currently accepted academic sources, cited in this study, and which Microsoft accepted in good faith as authorities on Florida history. And these gross errors in Florida history will continue as long as the Florida academic community adheres to the outdated and discredited views of Davis, Lawson, and other scholars rather than accept recent thoroughly researched historical research by recognized and published independent historians.

A graphic presentation of how the early Eurasian fountain of youth myth progressed in succeeding published literature from the sixteenth-century to modern times is shown in Figure 6. This graph traces the fountain of youth myth from its source and graphically illustrates how the Eurasian fountain of youth myth became a legend embedded in the Ponce de Leon voyage. The graph also emphasizes how a single false statement from a respected historian can attain a legitimacy that it does not deserve because of repetition and embellishment by numerous succeeding historians.

Having cited the numerous errors in current encyclopedias and in academic publications introduced by leading Florida historians, I hasten to point out that the entry for; “**Ponce de Leon, Juan (1471-1521)**” in the recently published; *Oxford Companion to Exploration*, is the only academic publication that is historically accurate. The historically accurate entry for Juan Ponce de Leon reads in part: “The native inhabitants of the New World did not have a fountain of youth in their legends nor was Ponce de Leon looking for it (Peck 1993). And contrary to current consensus he landed at Melbourne Beach, 125 miles south of St. Augustine, the generally accepted landing site on the shore of Florida (Gannon 1996; Peck 1993). The Arabic legend of a fountain of youth was introduced into European literature by the epic, medieval French, *Roman de’Alexandre* (Armstrong 1935). Peter Martyr (Pietro Martire d’Anghiera) later associated the Eurasian legend of a fountain of youth with the New World locating it in the Bay of Honduras,

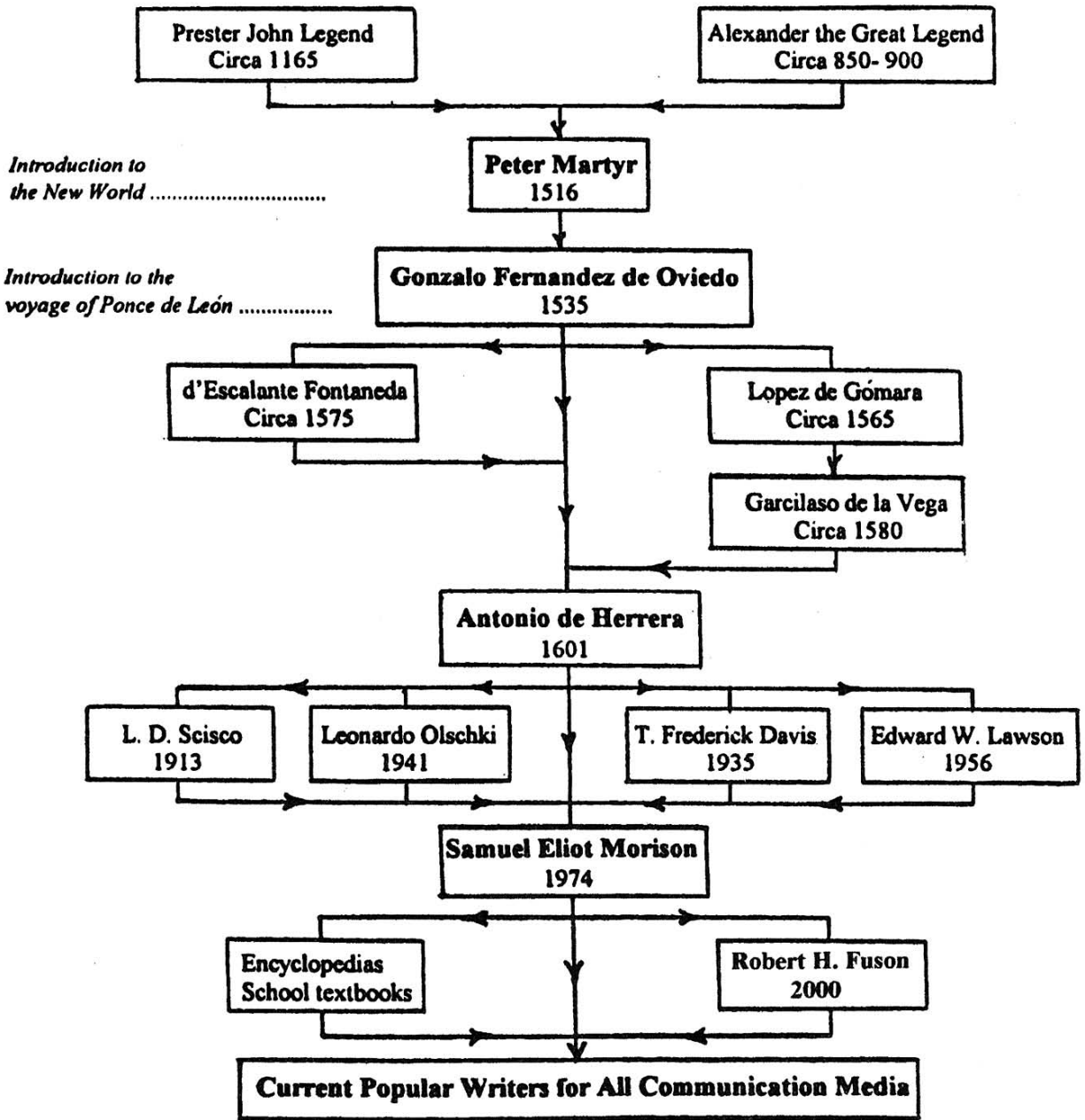


Figure 6: Schematic chart of the Fountain of Youth showing progressive history from its inception to its incorporation in past and current media literature.

but did not tie it to Ponce de León's voyage (McNutt 1970). The sixteenth-century historian Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo was solely responsible for attaching the legend to Juan Ponce's voyage and to Florida adding an unfounded comment that the relatively young and viral Juan Ponce was looking for a fountain of youth to cure his sexual impotence" (Buisseret 2006).

The primary misconceptions and errors in current historiography and literature concerning the purpose and goal and significant accomplishments of Ponce de León's 1513 exploration voyage are summarized in these five conclusions:

(1) The real purpose and goal of Ponce de Leon's voyage was to attain the honor and prestige which would accrue from being the Adelantado of a wealthy new land (Beimeni) that would (and did) extend the Spanish empire, and not just gold, slaves, or a fountain of youth as asserted in nearly all past and current literature.

(2) There is no valid indication that the Indians believed in a fountain of youth or that it was contained in their mythology. The various reports of an Indian fountain of youth legend or myth were nothing more than unfounded romantic fiction, based on the Eurasian myths of the period, and introduced artificially into the New World by historians and writers of the early sixteenth-century. The Indians could not have placed the alleged fountain of youth on an island in the Bahamas because they knew that the Lucayans (Bahamas) were not exotic lands with advanced inhabitants, but were low unproductive islands occupied by primitive natives like themselves.

(3) The current popular notion that the Indians located an alleged Indian mythical fountain of youth on Bimini in the Bahamas is historically unfounded and without merit.

(4) Oviedo's unfounded, untrue, and tendentious statement in his *Historia*, that Ponce de Leon was seeking the fountain of youth as a cure for his sexual impotence (*el enflaquecimiento del sexo*) is the initial source of the historically false Ponce de Leon-fountain of youth legend that persists in Florida written history to date.

(5) The location of Ponce de Leon's landing on the shore of Florida was at 28 degrees latitude in the vicinity of Melbourne Beach, 125 miles south of the generally accepted site near St. Augustine Florida

(6) Juan Ponce de Leon's legitimate and significant seven months long 1513 exploration voyage into unknown and uncharted waters should be returned to its proper place in history as the epic Spanish discovery voyage that broke out of the confines of the Caribbean Spanish Main and led to the European colonization of North America.

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