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Throwing the Explorer out with the Fountain: American History Textbooks and Juan Ponce de León

by Roger Chapman

Someone once critically categorized American history textbooks, perhaps unfairly, as “fat, dull boring books that mention everything but explain practically nothing.”¹ A cursory survey of US history textbooks on the treatment of Juan Ponce de León and the “discovery” of Florida would suggest historical content is like an ice cube melting in the sun.² Over a century ago the following account was offered in a history textbook by Elisha Benjamin Andrews, the one-time president of Brown University and later superintendent of Chicago Public Schools:

That same year [as Balboa’s discovery], 1513, Ponce de Leon, an old Spanish soldier in the wars with the Moors, a companion of Columbus in his second voyage, and till now governor of Porto [sic] Rico, began exploration northward. Leaving Porto Rico with three ships, he landed

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- 1 Gary J. Kornblith and Carol Lasser, “‘The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth’: Writing, Producing, and Using College-Level American History Textbooks,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1380.
- 2 This survey is based on American history textbooks as well as works on Florida history found at the libraries of Palm Beach Atlantic University and Florida Atlantic University as well as works accessed online from sites such as Project Gutenberg (<https://www.gutenberg.org/>).

on the coast of an unknown country, where he thought to find not only infinite gold but also the much-talked-about fountain of perpetual youth. His landing occurred on Easter Sunday, or *Pascua Florida*, March 27, 1513, and so he named the country Florida. The place was a few miles north of the present town of St. Augustine. Exploring the coast around the southern extremity of the peninsula, he sailed among a group of islands, which he designated the Tortugas. Returning to Porto [sic] Rico, he was appointed governor of the new country. He made a second voyage, was attacked by the natives and mortally wounded, and returned to Cuba to die.³

For what was known at the time, the above narration has some detail and is fairly accurate. The landing site remains contested among scholars and the date is now thought to be probably April 3.⁴ Andrews might be asked, however, to clarify the statement “much-talked-about perpetual fountain of youth”—did he mean the people of Juan Ponce’s day and time were doing the talking or was he referring to later historians and history buffs?

History textbooks produced today tend to abbreviate the story of the discovery of Florida. An example of this is George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi’s *America: A Narrative History*, a work that is required reading at my university for the American history survey. The current edition of Tindall and Shi is 2013, the same year as the 500th anniversary of Juan Ponce’s first Florida landing.

3 E. Benjamin Andrews, *History of the United States: From the Earliest Discovery of Americas to the End of 1902*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 69-70.

4 See Douglas T. Peck, “Reconstruction and Analysis of the 1513 Discovery Voyage of Juan Ponce de León,” in *The Voyages of Ponce de León: Scholarly Perspectives*, eds. James C. Cusick and Sherry Johnson (Cocoa: Florida Historical Society Press, 2012), 83-102, which argues that the landing site was slightly south of present-day Melbourne. Peck’s conclusion was based in part on his sailing the probable route. However, Jerald T. Milanich, “The Calusa Indians Amid Latitudes of Controversy: Charting Juan Ponce de León’s 1513 Voyage to Florida” (paper presented at the Florida Historical Society Annual Meeting & Symposium, May 2013), makes a persuasive argument that the traditional landing site, St. Augustine, is correct after all and that Peck erred in some of his research and calculations. A revision of Milanich’s paper is “Charting Juan Ponce de León’s 1513 Voyage to Florida: The Calusa Indians amid Latitudes of Controversy,” in *La Florida: Five Years of Hispanic Presence*, eds. Viviana Díaz Balsera and Rachel A. May (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 49-68. As for the probable date of April 3, see T. Frederick Davis, “History of Juan Ponce de León’s Voyages to Florida: Source Records,” in *Voyages of Ponce de León*, 65.

These authors render the expedition in a single sentence: "Juan Ponce de León, then governor of Puerto Rico, made the earliest known exploration of Florida in 1513."⁵ This condensed statement of eighteen words is hardly what one would describe as "narrative history," but it at least is followed by a map of Spanish explorations of the mainland. Anyone studying this map will be able to trace a red arrow, which marks the route of Juan Ponce from Puerto Rico to St. Augustine and then around the Florida Keys to the west coast of the peninsula, ending in Cuba. As for St. Augustine, Tindall and Shi explain later in the same chapter: "In 1565 a Spanish outpost on the Florida coast, St. Augustine, became the first European town in the present-day United States" The colony is described as having "a fort, church, hospital, fish market, and over 100 shops and houses—all built decades before the first English settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth."⁶

Tindall and Shi, it can be charitably acknowledged, at least include Juan Ponce in American history and do so without gratuitous ridicule. They credit him with the Florida discovery and show how it led to Spanish colonization in North America many years prior to the English settlement attempts. This can provide a sense of perspective, as Michael Gannon explains, "Not until the year 2055 will an American flag have flown over Florida as long as did the flag of Spain."⁷

When compared with other explorers of his day, Juan Ponce is admittedly less well known. Even so, history textbooks could better inform readers of this man's importance in American history: (1) He was a crew member of Christopher Columbus's second voyage to the Western Hemisphere and was on hand for the European discovery of San Juan Bautista (Puerto Rico), which is now an unincorporated territory of the United States; (2) he later colonized San Juan Bautista and as the provincial governor helped establish the city of San Juan, which today boasts the oldest European-made structures on United States territory; (3) on April 3, 1513, he became the first European to officially set foot on land that is now part of the state of Florida (whatever spot that may have been); and (4) during the 1513 Florida voyage he was the first recognized

5 George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, vol. 1, 9th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 34.

6 *Ibid.*, 36.

7 Michael Gannon, *Florida: A Short History*, rev. ed. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 4.

European to discover the Gulf Stream.⁸ In certain respects, American history begins in Florida, as Robert Fuson explains: “By the time that Saint Augustine was settled, the entire Atlantic coast of America, from today’s Florida to southern Canada was known as La Florida, or to the French as La Floride.”⁹

Yet there are cases in which American history textbooks omit the Spanish conquistador, even though he was the first European to *officially* set foot on the continent of North America. Anna Chase Davis, in her 1896 American history, left out Juan Ponce and Florida altogether. The principal of Hamilton Hall School in Salem, Massachusetts, Davis apparently preferred an uncluttered narrative with as little mention of the Spanish as possible. The early chapters of her work include: “Life among the Indians,” “The Norsemen,” “Coming of Columbus,” “Americus Vesputius and Balboa,” “Sir Francis Drake,” and “Captain John Smith and Virginia.”¹⁰ Davis, like other authors, may have been unconsciously guided by an anti-Spanish bias. Sometimes even when the Spanish get credit, such as in the 1967 edition of *The History of the American People*, a negative slant prevails: “In Florida, St. Augustine was the only important town founded by the Spanish; it had a population of about 5,000 when the English took possession of it in 1763.”¹¹ A single “important” town on a continent does not sound like much, but a truer perspective is offered in the 1944 text by Charles Beard and Mary Beard:

Though they had not found more gold and silver in regions above Mexico or the elixir of youth sought in Florida by Ponce de Leon, by 1550 the ruler of Spain, Charles V, could claim as his property many islands in the Caribbean; Mexico by right of conquest; all of South America except Brazil, which the Portuguese had seized; and an immense area, if indefinite as to the boundaries, north of the Gulf of Mexico and the Rio Grande.¹²

8 Robert H. Fuson, *Juan Ponce de Leon and the Spanish Discovery of Florida* (Blacksburg, VA: McDonald & Woodward Publishing Company, 2000), 219-224.

9 *Ibid.*, 177-178.

10 Anna Chase Davis, *Stories of the United States for Youngest Readers* (Boston: Educational Publishing Company, 1896), 7-72.

11 Harry J. Carman, Harold C. Syrett, and Bernard W. Wishy, *A History of the American People*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 13.

12 Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *A Basic History of the United States* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1944), 2; Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Beards' New Basic History of the United States*, ed. William Beard (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, 1968), 19.

Interestingly, Tindall and Shi skip over “the elixir of youth,” that is the Fountain of Youth. Any discussion of Juan Ponce that fails to include the Fountain of Youth would be on par with someone writing a travel guide about Orlando, Florida, without mentioning Disney World. On the other hand, Tindall and Shi can be credited for not repeating the ritual of reducing the Spanish explorer to a Disney-like cartoon character, as so often has been the case in other historical works. For instance, in the 1893 text by D.H. Montgomery, *The Beginner’s History of America*, one reads, “Ponce de Leon, a Spanish soldier who was getting gray and wrinkled, set out to find this magic fountain, for he thought that there was more fun in being a boy than in growing old.”¹³ When Prescott Holmes, in his 1900 work, writes that the explorer “wandered around in search of a fountain of youth,” the reader would not be faulted for thinking that the figure was a crazed fanatic or a Quixote-like figure.¹⁴ Also, Tindall and Shi can be credited for not using the Fountain story for the purpose of mocking Juan Ponce as an old man who was on a quest for the equivalent of the Viagra of his day. They also avoid rendering moral accusation. Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, in their 1962 text, describe the Spanish conquistador as “pretty well used up” and thus interested in a fountain “which restored youth and vigor to the old and impotent.”¹⁵ “World-worn, disease racked” is how Burton Stevenson’s 1909 work refers to Juan Ponce, which could be read as insinuating that the explorer was in need of a cure for a sexually transmitted disease.¹⁶ Thomas Bailey and David Kennedy, in the very popular *The American Pageant*, harshly write, “Debauched by high living, he was seeking the mythical Fountain of Youth.”¹⁷ These writers were undoubtedly influenced in some measure by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who wrote in 1535 that Juan Ponce (a father of four

13 D.H. Montgomery, *The Beginner’s History of America* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1893), paragraph 28, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18127/18127-h/18127-h.htm> (accessed August 1, 2015).

14 Prescott Holmes, *Young People’s History of the War with Spain* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 1900), 173-174.

15 Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steel Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 27.

16 Burton Stevenson, *American Men of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 38.

17 Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 4th ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath & Company, 1971), 7. This same passage is found on page 10 of Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy, *The American Pageant*, vol. 1, 9th ed. (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath & Company, 1991). However, the mention of the Fountain of Youth is in lowercase lettering.

children, incidentally) was searching for a cure for impotence.¹⁸ But Frederick Dau observes, “He [Juan Ponce] was only fifty-three on his first voyage to Florida to find the Fountain of Youth, and again sixty-one on his second voyage when he met his death, yet strange to say he has always come down to us in history as an old worn-out man.”¹⁹ Agreeing, A. Hyatt Verrill writes, “And in his day men of fifty-three were not regarded as old, nor were they, as a rule, greatly concerned with the march of time and the problems of advancing age. Rather, they were hale and hearty ... ready to lay siege to a maiden’s heart....”²⁰ The biographer Robert Fuson, who thinks the explorer was far younger, writes, “Juan Ponce was only thirty-eight years old when he signed the contract to sail for Bimini and he was not yet old enough to need rejuvenation.”²¹

There are those who now wish to avoid mentioning the Fountain of Youth when discussing Juan Ponce and early Spanish activity in Florida, presumably to err on the side of caution and to maintain a scholarly footing. In the history textbook *Unto a Good Land*, the Fountain story is left out while the authors timidly suggest “possible motives” for Juan Ponce’s explorations: gold, slaves, and land.²² The contract between Ferdinand and Juan Ponce for the exploration of “Benimy” (which led to the discovery of Florida) is clear, so the motives are obvious. Of the seventeen articles, none refers to the Fountain of Youth. But the tenth and thirteenth articles refer to the gathering of gold; the eighth and ninth articles to the subjugation of natives (“repartimiento [allotment] of Indians”); and other articles to land.²³

In his debunking of Juan Ponce and the Fountain legend, Douglas T. Peck disapprovingly quotes Robert Weddle, who wrote, “That the Fountain of Youth legend influenced Ponce de León’s discovery has long been accepted as fact.” Peck retorts, “That is certainly a true statement, but does it constitute an intellectually

18 Douglas T. Peck, “Anatomy of an Historical Fantasy: The Ponce de León-Fountain of Youth Legend,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 123 (January-December 1998): 72.

19 Frederick W. Dau, *Florida Old and New* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1934), 21.

20 A. Hyatt Verrill, *Romantic and Historic Florida* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935), 7.

21 Fuson, *Juan Ponce*, 119.

22 David Edwin Harrell, Jr., Edwin S. Gaustad, John B. Boles, Sally Foreman Griffith, Randall M. Miller, and Randall B. Woods, *Unto a Good Land: A History of the American People*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 15.

23 An English translation of the contract is found in Fuson, *Juan Ponce*, 92-95.

rational reason for historians to view this ‘long accepted fact’ as historical truth? Hardly!”²⁴ Such criticism betrays a purist position, which ultimately does a disservice to the cause of history if textbook writers become more and more inclined not to bring up the Fountain of Youth when presenting Juan Ponce. Since the explorer has long been identified with the Fountain legend it makes no sense in the name of scholarship to ignore the fountain in the room. According to George Fairbanks in his 1871 Florida history, the story about the Fountain of Youth “may well admit of doubt.”²⁵ In a 1948 work by Kathryn Hanna a similar caution is expressed: “The fountain fables, legendary in more places than the New World, were doubtless known to him [Juan Ponce]; but there is no real evidence that they influenced his decision”²⁶ Fairbanks and Hanna offer a rightful approach; that is to critically evaluate the sources while not ignoring the Fountain.

Journalist T.D. Allman, on the other hand, is too shrill. In the chapter “The Fort, Not the Fountain” of his recent book on Florida, Allman wishes to emphasize Pedro Menéndez de Avilés’ 1565 slaughter of the Huguenots at the French outpost near present-day Jacksonville. He argues, “If you take Ponce and the Fountain myth as the beginning [of Florida’s colonial history], events forever after seem nothing but a series of disconnected, rather silly events.”²⁷ Elsewhere, Allman asserts that the Fountain story was “concocted” by Washington Irving.²⁸ This is a strong dismissal of Irving’s work on the conquistadors, of which only one section is devoted to Juan Ponce.²⁹ Allman seems to be unaware of, or simply wishes to ignore, the fact that Irving spent seven years in Spain where he conducted research at the national archives in Madrid while engaging with the Spanish historians of his day.³⁰ Absurd as it may be to put the

24 Peck, “Anatomy of an Historical Fantasy,” 64. Here Peck is quoting from Robert S. Weddle, *The Spanish Sea: The Gulf of Mexico in North American Discovery, 1500-1685* (Fort Worth: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 38.

25 George R. Fairbanks, *History of Florida: From Its Discovery by Ponce de Leon in 1512 to the Close of the Florida War in 1842* (1871; reprint, Philadelphia: Heritage Books, 2003), 17.

26 Kathryn Abbey Hanna, *Florida: Land of Change* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 6.

27 T.D. Allman, *Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013), 36-46. Quote is on page 45.

28 T.D. Allman, “Ponce de León, Exposed,” *New York Times*, op-ed, April 2, 2013, A19.

29 Washington Irving, *Voyages and Discoveries of the Companions of Columbus* (1828; reprint, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1960), 322-354.

30 Van Wych Brooks, foreword to Irving, *Voyages and Discoveries*, vii.

Fountain of Youth at the beginning of Florida's history, this is no reason to throw out the explorer with the fountain.

Any assertion that Irving "concocted" the story that Juan Ponce had searched for the Fountain of Youth is to ignore the old Spanish sources. This is not to say these sources are accurate, but there is an ethical obligation to not totally blame Irving if his narrative was based on materials found at a national archive. Rather, if Irving is to be faulted, then it should be based on how he analyzed and utilized the texts.³¹ Neither Irving nor Allman knew the Spanish explorer, but Oviedo did.³² There is also Antonio de Herrera y Tordesilla, a chronicler who authored *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas y tierra firma del mar Océano*, a four-volume work published in Madrid beginning in 1601.³³ Although "Herrera gives the search [by Juan Ponce] for the fountain secondary importance," there is mention of the Fountain all the same.³⁴ Some have theorized that Herrera's information about the Fountain search is based on unsubstantiated information from Pietro Martire d'Anghiera (Peter Martyr), a priest and humanist at the Spanish court, a contemporary of Juan Ponce, and another chronicler of early Spanish exploration. Martyr, in fact, wrote about the Fountain myth; however, none of his writings link it with Juan Ponce's voyages.³⁵

The question of how to handle the Fountain legend with respect to Juan Ponce should be obvious: do not ignore what has been said, especially by those who were contemporaries of the explorer. Acknowledgment does not have to mean agreement, of course. And any critical analysis would surely keep in mind that Herrera published decades after the fact.³⁶ On the other hand, as T. Frederick Davis suggests, the distance in time from the event and the history handed down matters less if there is a strong possibility that primary sources were used: "[Herrera's] official position

31 Washington Irving comes under such criticism in Peck, "Anatomy of an Historical Fantasy," 79. Peck is also more critical than is warranted. Of the eight short chapters Irving, *Voyages and Discoveries*, devotes to Juan Ponce, only one strictly focuses on the search for the Fountain (343-345).

32 Fuson, *Juan Ponce*, 57.

33 See Frederick T. Davis, "The Record of Ponce de Leon's Discovery of Florida, 1513," in *Voyages of Ponce de León*, 15-23.

34 Charles B. Reynolds, *The Landing of Ponce De León: A Historical Review* (Mountain Lakes, NJ: s.n., 1934), 10.

35 Peck, "Anatomy of an Historical Fantasy," 69-71.

36 See Amanda J. Snyder, "Scholars' and Storytellers' Visions of Juan Ponce de León: Two Centuries of Work," in *Voyages of Ponce de León*, 133-134.

allowed him access to original and secret papers, many of which have since been destroyed no doubt.³⁷ A recent history of the Atlantic world by Martin Sandler exemplifies the approach that should be taken:

According to long-standing legend, Ponce de León came to the mainland seeking not only slaves for the Spanish sugar plantations and untold riches but also the Fountain of Youth, a spring whose restorative waters had been written about long before the European Age of Exploration. While he may have heard of the supposed Fountain of Youth, there is no hard evidence that Ponce de León was either motivated by or indeed searched for the fabled spring. It was only after his death in July 1521, particularly in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535) (*General and Natural History of the Indies*), that such a story arose.³⁸

When Tindall and Shi and others entirely leave out the legend of the Fountain, they are perhaps overlooking an important truth about "two impulses" of Spanish exploration. As explained by Carlos Fuentes (no pun intended in citing his last name, which means "fountains"): "The conquistadors were driven not only by the lust of gold ... but by fantasy, illusion, imagination."³⁹ This is an important observation because it shows how the Fountain story associated with Juan Ponce is indicative of his culture and in harmony with his compatriots who in New Spain chased the myth of the Cíbola or the "Seven Cities" and in South America searched for Eldorado, the Amazons, the Houses of Sun, and so on.⁴⁰ Stories about the myths and legends that inspired the Spanish explorers may seem absurd and idiosyncratic to a modern readership, but they nonetheless humanize the Spaniards by highlighting their curiosity and sense of wonder.

But over the years American historians have shown little natural inclination for humanizing the Spanish. As presented in the third edition of *Created Equal* (2009), the Fountain story is scoffed

37 Davis, "Source Records," in *Voyages of Ponce de León*, 30.

38 Martin W. Sandler, *Atlantic Ocean: The Illustrated History of the Ocean That Changed the World* (New York: Sterling, 2008), 113.

39 Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 139.

40 Pedro González, ed., *Discovering the Americas: The Archives of the Indies* (New York: Vendome Press, 1997), 89.

at as a cover for evil. “Despite later tales that he sought a fountain of youth, he actually hoped the nearby land, which he named Florida, would yield new gold and slaves. But the peninsula’s Indians were already familiar with Spanish raiders. They turned Ponce de León away after he claimed the region for Spain.”⁴¹ In Lyle N. McAlister’s monograph on Spanish and Portuguese exploration, Juan Ponce’s vicious dog, Bercerillo, gets the most attention: “It was said of Bercerillo that he could distinguish at a distance between hostile and friendly natives, and for his aggressiveness in combat he received one-half of a crossbowman’s share of the booty.”⁴² Regardless of the factuality of these two excerpts, they offer only a flat dimension of the man. Typically when Juan Ponce is humanized, it is in the vein of the comedian Rodney Dangerfield’s “I don’t get no respect.” For instance, *The American Pageant* seemingly admits of a perverse pleasure in the irony of a quest for “the mythical Fountain of Youth” ending “instead [with] death—from an Indian arrow.”⁴³ Woodrow Wilson, in the first of his five-part history of the United States, describes the explorer as a “gallant” figure who was “baffled” by Florida and “lost both his hope and his life in the enterprise” of searching for the Fountain of Youth.⁴⁴ Such remembrance of Juan Ponce, so unflatteringly framed, perhaps betrays a blind spot of many American historians: Hispanophobia.⁴⁵

Dislike of Spain is practically an American birthright. This is a legacy of the rivalry between Spain and England during the colonial period. The rivalry was not only over land but also religion since the English world more or less represented the Protestant faith whereas Spain was staunchly Catholic. In Jeddiah Morse’s 1790 geography text, the sectarian spirit is undisguised where he describes the Roman Catholicism of Spain as being “of most bigoted, superstitious, and tyrannical character.”⁴⁶ Furthermore,

41 Jacqueline James, Peter H. Wood, Thomas Borstelmann, Elaine Tyler May, and Vicki L. Ruiz, *Created Equal: A History of the United States*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2009), 25.

42 Lyle N. McAlister, *Spain and Portugal in the New World 1492-1700* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 98. This passage is an obvious borrowing from Irving, *Voyages and Discoveries*, 338.

43 Bailey, *The American Pageant*, 7.

44 Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1902), 13. Wilson was the president of Princeton University at the time of this work’s publication.

45 See David J. Weber, “The Spanish Legacy in North America and the Historical Imagination,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (February 1992): 4-24.

46 As quoted in John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks: Spelling, Grammar, Reading, Arithmetic, Geography, American History, Civil Government, Physiology, Penmanship, Art,*

whenever Spain's religious history is examined, the Inquisition is readily recalled. The perceived brutality of the Inquisition goes hand in hand with the reputation of the conquistadors with respect to how they dealt with the indigenous people of the Americas. English settlers, though far from innocent in how they treated the Indians, could be depicted, relatively speaking, as being more humanitarian than their Spanish counterparts. More often than not, this is a perpetuation of the "black legend" (*La leyenda negra*), which is grounded in a body of literature "that criticizes the people, history, and national character of Spain, in part for cruelty in the conquests of native America."⁴⁷ The way the black legend works, "negative aspects are accentuated and their positive ignored."⁴⁸

Philip Wayne Powell observes, "The Black Legend dogmas are ... generally frozen into our schoolbooks and educational structure, where they constitute a perennial disparagement of Hispanic culture, both past and present."⁴⁹ That viewpoint aligns with the content analyses of American textbooks. Early textbooks as a rule depict the Spanish explorers as "harsh" and "cruel."⁵⁰ Ruth Miller Elson, in her review of early American textbooks, observes:

Most of the information about Spain in all textbooks centers around its conquest and administration of Latin America, and there is an enormous amount of such material in all books. The colonial activities of Spain are so prominent because America is of first importance in these books, and also because the Spanish conquest can serve as a foil for the English settlement. The English policy of taking away the land of the Indians becomes almost altruistic when compared to the Spanish policy of taking their gold, silver, and labor. That both policies were cruel and disastrous to the Indian is obscured by highlighting the Black Legend. Differences are specifically noted: "The atrocities exhibited by the Spaniards contrast with the settlement

Music—As Taught in the Common Schools from Colonial Days to 1900 (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 1961), 212.

47 Charles Gibson, introduction, *The Black Legend: Anti-Spanish Attitudes in the Old World and New*, ed. Charles Gibson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 4.

48 Lino G. Canedo, review of *Tree of Hate: Propaganda and Prejudices Affecting United States Relations with the Hispanic World*, *The Americas* 29, no. 3 (January 1973): 398.

49 Philip Wayne Powell, *Tree of Hate: Propaganda and Prejudices Affecting the United States Relations with the Hispanic World* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 145.

50 Nietz, *Old Textbooks*, 245.

of the United States.” By contrast we are blessed in our ancestry: “It is fortunate for our country that Spaniards ... first landed at the South—leaving the Atlantic coast of North America to be settled by the English. The Spaniards were cruel and avaricious: they did not come to America to till the soil, and follow honest labor, but with extravagant hopes of becoming suddenly rich from mines of gold and silver.... But the English were an industrious people, who loved liberty and humanity, and earned success by energetic toil in the fields and on the sea.”⁵¹

Thus, Americans came to regard themselves as culturally and politically superior to the Spanish. In the words of George Washington, “Spain appears to be so much behind the other Nations of Europe in liberal policy that a long time will undoubtedly elapse before the people of that kingdom can taste the sweets of liberty and enjoy the natural advantages of their Country.”⁵² Abraham Lincoln described Spain as “one of the worst governments in the world.”⁵³ The rationale John Quincy Adams, as Secretary of State, had for wresting Florida away from Spain was that it was a lawless land leading to problems spilling over the border. The Monroe Doctrine, issued in 1823, was largely a policy aimed at Spain, a country viewed by the United States as an enemy of freedom.⁵⁴ The negativity toward Spain enabled Americans to rationalize the annexation of Texas and later the Mexican War, even though Mexico was by this time independent of Spain.⁵⁵ Later, in 1898 when

51 Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 153-154. The quotes, in order, are from: T. Strong, *The Common Reader*, 2nd ed. (Plainfield, MA: Denio and Phelps, 1819), 46; D.M. Warren, *The Common School Geography: An Elementary Treatise on Mathematical, Physical, and Political Geography* (Philadelphia: Cowperthwaite, 1869), 27.

52 George Washington, letter to David Humphreys, Philadelphia, July 20, 1791, in *The Papers of George Washington*, vol. 8, ed. Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 358.

53 Abraham Lincoln, speech to the Springfield Scott Club, Springfield, Illinois, August 14 and 26, 1852, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, vol. II, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 153.

54 Joyce P. Kaufman, *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 39.

55 As explained by Raymund Arthur Parades, in “The Image of the Mexican in American Literature” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1973), “The United States, as a cultural satellite of England, inherited the mother country’s scorn of Spain’s culture and people, and later transferred these attitudes—with certain modifications—to ... Mexico” (v).

the United States rushed to war against Spain after the explosion of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor, public figures such as Theodore Roosevelt believed it was the thing to do since Spain represented a “medieval tyranny.” When President William McKinley annexed The Philippines at the end of the Spanish-American War, he believed that Americans would be able to offer liberation from Spanish legacies, political and religious.⁵⁶

During World War I, the terrible influenza pandemic was dubbed “Spanish influenza” and “the Spanish Lady,” which unfairly linked Spain with the spread of disease.⁵⁷ Prior to and during that war, the United States experienced conflict with Mexico—i.e., American intervention in the Mexican Revolution, including tensions at the border with Pancho Villa, and the Zimmerman telegram’s audacious suggestion for Mexico to invade the American Southwest—stirring latent Hispanophobia.⁵⁸ For a large part of the twentieth century, Spain was under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco, following a civil war between, from the perspective of most Americans, twin evils: fascism and communism. The United States was anti-Franco and concerned about “Spanish fascism” influencing Latin America. During World War II, despite Spain’s official neutrality, “Fascist Spain” (namely its pro-Axis orientation) was the topic of an American propaganda film.⁵⁹ Considering all of this negativity, it is understandable why some authors of American history textbooks would continue to treat conquistadors less favorably than the Anglo-Saxon colonists.⁶⁰

56 Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), argues that the black legend was behind a racist American foreign policy toward Spain during and after the Spanish-American War (58-68). María DeGuzmán, *Spain’s Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), adds that along with the black legend influence was a type of Orientalism depicting Spain as “Other” (139-186).

57 Antoni Trilla, Guillem Trilla, and Carolyn Daer, “The 1918 ‘Spanish Flu’ in Spain,” *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 47, no. 5 (September 2008): 668.

58 All this occurred under the watch of President Woodrow Wilson, who seemed to have a moral rectitude against not just Mexico but Latin America in general. As pointed out by James W. Lowen, in *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, rev. ed. (New York: Touchstone, 2007), during the Wilson administration “the United States intervened in Latin America more often than any other time in our history” (16).

59 Stanley G. Payne, *The Franco Regime, 1936-1975* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 279, 332.

60 Case in point: Robert V. Remni, *A Short History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), characterizes the Spanish conquistadors as “tough, ruthless soldiers who spared no life” (6), adding the “Spaniards swarmed over the Americas” (7). In contrast, he describes those who came to the New World

Hispanophobia aside, properly remembering Juan Ponce would perhaps be a simple matter if the only dispute was over the Fountain. There is also the problem of dates. First, a number of works incorrectly cite 1512 as the year of Juan Ponce's initial landing in Florida.⁶¹ This is due to an error in the Herrera text that was spotted in the 1880s after someone surmised that an Easter landing could have occurred in 1513 but not 1512.⁶² Inexcusably, as late as 1964 the University of Florida Press published a work citing the incorrect landing date of 1512.⁶³ An American history textbook, published in 1994, carelessly provides a landing date of 1515.⁶⁴ A second issue, related to the first, is the story of how Florida was named. Older textbooks, for the most part, explain that the Easter Day landing had something to do with the naming of the territory. For instance, Edward Channing's 1908 American history textbook states, "On Easter Sunday, 1513, he anchored off the shores of a new land. The Spanish name for Easter was La Pascua de los Flores. So De Leon called the new land Florida. For the Spaniards were a very religious people and usually named their lands and settlements from saints or religious events."⁶⁵ Complicating matters, Irving's work recorded the day as being Palm Sunday and influenced other writers to make the same mistake.⁶⁶ Not surprisingly, the faith-focused textbook *Unto a Good Land* (2005) is careful to tell readers about this Easter connection, but the current trend, perhaps due to the increasing secularization of American culture, is for textbooks to leave out this detail.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the writer Peter Parley, in his 1860 history and geography textbook, left out Easter, but instead wrote that Florida "received its name

from Britain as "colonists" under the sponsorship of "adventurous English merchants" (10).

- 61 John Clark Ridpath, *History of the United States Prepared Especially for Schools* (1876; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1974), 21; Joel Doorman Steele and Esther Baker Steele, *A Brief History of the United States* (New York: American Book Company, 1900), 27; Dexter Perkins and Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *The United States of America: A History*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 8.
- 62 Davis, "Record of Ponce de Leon's Discovery," 14-15.
- 63 George M. Barbour, *Florida for Tourists, Invalids, and Settlers* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1964), 209.
- 64 Gary B. Nash, Julie Roy Jeffrey, John R. Howe, Peter J. Frederick, Allen F. David, and Allan M. Winkler, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994), 27.
- 65 Edward Channing, *A Short History of the United States for School Use* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), chapter 2, paragraph 11 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12423/12423-h/12423-h.htm#II> (accessed August 1, 2015).
- 66 Davis, "Record of Ponce de Leon's Discovery," 15.
- 67 Harrell, Jr., et al., *Unto a Good Land*, 15.

from the abundance of wild flowers that flourished upon its soil.”⁶⁸ Actually, this is in harmony with the findings of James E. Kelly, Jr., who argues that Herrera’s account of the Florida landing has been misinterpreted: Florida was named *La Florida* (after flowers) and not *Pascua Florida* (after Easter).⁶⁹ If the naming of the land is discussed, writers will typically take a cautious approach, as does Martin Sandler: “Ponce de León named the land Florida (the Spanish word for “flowery”) either because he arrived during *Pasqua Florida* (Spanish for ‘Flowery Passover” or Easter season) or because he was taken with the vibrant vegetation he encountered.”⁷⁰

A less controversial topic is the Gulf Stream, but one would be hard pressed to find a textbook that credits Juan Ponce with this immense discovery. Impressively, in the Florida state history produced by the Federal Writers Project, part of the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) program, there is a reference to this current that became vitally important for early Atlantic shipping: “After a six months’ vain quest for gold and the Fountain, he [Juan Ponce] returned to Puerto Rico, on the way making the valuable discovery of the Bahama channel, later used by fleets plying between the Colonies and Spain.”⁷¹ As explained by Robert Fuson, the Gulf Stream “became the oceanic highway from America to Europe and remained such until the middle of the nineteenth century.”⁷² Years later even Michael Wood would fail to make note of this, only crediting the explorer with the land discovery: “After Ponce de Leon’s voyage of 1513, there was no doubt that a large landmass extended north of Cuba and west of the Bahamas.”⁷³

According to Douglas Peck, historians largely ignored Juan Ponce de León until 1913, the 400th anniversary of the European discovery of Florida.⁷⁴ Over the years the European explorer was overshadowed by other conquistadors who achieved more, had more interesting adventures, and left in their wake more historical

68 Peter Parley, *The First Book of History, Combined with Geography; containing the History and Geography of the Western Hemisphere* (Boston: Swan, Brewer and Tileston, 1860), 93.

69 James E. Kelley, Jr., “Juan Ponce de Leon’s Discovery of Florida: Herrera’s Narrative Revisited,” *Revista de Historia de América*, no. 111 (January-June 1991): 34.

70 Sandler, *Atlantic Ocean*, 113.

71 Federal Writers Project, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 48.

72 Fuson, *Juan Ponce de Leon*, 223-224.

73 Michael Wood, *Conquistadors* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 21.

74 Peck, “Anatomy of an Historical Fantasy,” 79.

documents. The limited record on Juan Ponce was not always handled judiciously as the top scholars focused their attention on other conquistadors. Textbook writers looked over the shoulders of other textbook writers, passing on the same mistakes, sometimes with embellishment, to the next generation of students.⁷⁵ Between 1913 and 2013 attempts have been made to fill in the gaps on Juan Ponce, but much of the effort has been spent debunking what previous historians have written and quibbling over the translation of pertinent documents from Spanish into English. The story of Juan Ponce's interest in finding the Fountain of Youth has come under great criticism, to the point that some might be surprised to know that this story was not produced out of thin air by American writers but was drawn from sixteenth-century Spanish texts. The hermeneutic hullabaloo over those sources has perhaps led some textbook authors to abbreviate what is written about Juan Ponce—fewer details, fewer chances for mistakes. Students who may have heard about the legend of the Fountain of Youth will be puzzled to read about the explorer associated with this story and find no mention of it. As J. Michael Francis concedes, the Fountain of Youth is “Florida’s most enduring myth” and is a tale that has even “transcended myth.”⁷⁶ Inversely, history textbooks seldom credit the explorer for his important discovery of the Gulf Stream. Most significantly, by giving Juan Ponce de León short shrift American history textbooks miss an opportunity to show that at one level America’s oldest European roots are actually Spanish.

75 Ibid., 81.

76 J. Michael Francis, “Juan Ponce De León and the Fountain of Youth: History, Myth, and the Commemoration of Florida’s Past,” in *Voyages of Ponce de León*, 132.