

Charting the Land of Flowers: Exploration and Mapmaking in Spanish Florida

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Produced by cartographers of many nations over the course of six centuries, maps detailing Florida and the North American continent tell tales of exploration, conflict, and change. Before 1492, Europeans were unaware of what existed on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. That reality is illustrated quite well on two maps that show the “known world” from the European perspective in the years preceding Christopher Columbus’s voyages: Hartmann Schedel’s *Liber Chronicarum* (Nuremberg Chronicle—Map of the World) published in 1493; and Martin Waldseemüller’s Strassburg Ptolemy, published in 1513 as a refinement of Claudius Ptolemy’s world map, but without information regarding the New World. With our twenty-first century hindsight, we see them as uninformed. However, the intellectuals of this period viewed themselves as extremely knowledgeable, and that knowledge is embodied in these two Old World maps.

By the turn of the sixteenth century, Spain and other powerful European countries were well aware of the New World and the incredible potential across the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus followed his initial 1492 expedition with cross-Atlantic voyages in 1493, 1498, and 1502. There was still an incredible amount to learn about this strange land, and no shortage of people eager to explore what lay outside the borders of Schedel’s and Waldseemüller’s maps. The names Juan Ponce de León and Hernando de Soto are well known. Those men, plus Pánfilo de Narváez, Tristán de Luna, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, Francisco María Celi, and many others, struggled to first explore, then dominate, and ultimately understand what we now know as the United States of America and the state of Florida.

A companion of Columbus on his second voyage, Ponce de León had heard

from the indigenous people of Puerto Rico that in the land to the north there was abundant gold. In the spring of 1513, he set out on a royally sanctioned exploration in an attempt to locate this northern land. On Easter Sunday, April 2, 1513, after traveling northwest from Puerto Rico for almost a month, Ponce de León and his crew finally caught sight of land. Known as Bimini by the native islanders in the Bahamas, he gave the landmass a new name. According to seventeenth-century historian Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, “thinking that this land was an island, they called it La Florida, because it was very pretty to behold with many and refreshing trees, and it was flat, and even: and also because they discovered it in the time of Flowery Passover (Pascua Florida), Juan Ponce wanted to agree in the name, with these two reasons.”¹ For the next century, most of North America east of

the Mississippi and south of the Great Lakes would generally be referred to as La Florida.² Ponce de León hoped that the new land would be rich in gold and silver and offer Spain a strategic foothold in eastern North America.

Other Europeans, likely slave hunters, had probably already landed on Florida’s shores, and at least three maps that pre-date Ponce de León’s first voyage may show the Florida coastline—Juan de la Cosa’s world chart, created around 1500, the Cantino Chart, dated ca. 1502, and Peter Martyr’s map from 1511. Additionally, when Ponce de León and his crew made landfall, they encountered at least one American Indian who understood Spanish.³

Some historians believe that after Ponce de León first landed near Melbourne Beach, he then sailed around the peninsula and northward as far as Charlotte Harbor, or possibly Tampa Bay. While repairing ships and gathering supplies, his party was attacked by Calusa Indians and forced to return to Puerto Rico. These native people may well have remembered or been told of Spanish slavers who had reached the west coast of Florida long before Ponce de León. In 1521, Ponce de León returned to Florida with a charter from the King of Spain to establish a colony. Historians estimate he landed near Sanibel Island in Charlotte Harbor, but was again driven off by the Calusa. In the battle,

he received a leg wound that became infected, leading to his death in Havana in July 1521.

Seven years later, a red-bearded, one-eyed fleet commander named Pánfilo de Narváez led the first known exploration of Tampa Bay. In 1527, he received permission from Emperor Charles V to conquer and colonize the lands between the Cape of Florida and the Río de Las Palmas in Mexico. Launching his expedition from Cuba in 1528, he landed on the Pinellas peninsula, marched overland to Old Tampa Bay and gave it the name Bahía de la Cruz (Bay of the Cross, later changed to Bahía de Espíritu Santo or Bay of the Holy Spirit). Soon after landing, Narváez led a violent confrontation against the Tocobaga over the perceived treatment of the remains of several Spaniards from a wrecked Spanish vessel. To rid themselves of the Spanish, the Tocobaga told Narváez that gold could be found to the north, in the land of Apalachen. Narváez started overland with 400 Spaniards and ordered his ships north in search of a good harbor.

The ships did not find a harbor north of Tampa Bay and returned to Cuba. The marchers were not so fortunate. Only four survivors reached Mexico after an eight-year ordeal. One of the survivors, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, wrote an account of the expedition. Another survivor, Estéban or Estevanico, was born in Morocco and enslaved by the Portuguese before being sold, in 1520, to Spaniard Andrés Dorantes de Carranza. He was probably the first person of African descent to travel across North America. Estéban traveled with Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes de Carranza, and Alonso Castillo Maldonado on their winding journey.

Inspired by the writings of Cabeza de Vaca, Hernando de Soto obtained a royal patent to explore Florida. In April 1538, de Soto's armada set sail from Spain to the New World. After a stay in Cuba, de Soto embarked for Florida on May 18, 1539. Historians disagree about where Hernando de Soto first landed. In 1939,

a congressional committee chose Shaw's Point in Bradenton; others now favor the area between the Manatee and Little Manatee River or even farther south in the area around Charlotte Harbor. The Uzita chief refused to meet with the conquistadors, saying he would rather receive their severed heads. Captured Indians, when asked where gold could be found, consistently directed the Spanish explorers north, toward a land where the shine of gold was said to rival the sun's glow.

De Soto and his men found more than just unhappy American Indians when they arrived on the shore just south of Tampa Bay. They also encountered Juan Ortiz, a crewmember on one of Narváez's ships that went back to Cuba but returned to Tampa Bay in 1529 looking for any trace of the lost expedition. Captured almost immediately, he lived as a captive among Florida's native people for 11 years. That knowledge would prove helpful to de Soto: Ortiz would serve as translator for the expedition.

The de Soto expedition strengthened the Spanish claim to Florida and provided an enormous amount of new information about the interior of the continent and the diversity of the native peoples. Indeed, a new map of the continent was created around 1544 by Alonso de Santa Cruz. Unfortunately, the expedition also left a trail of destruction. The Spaniards routinely entered towns, captured the tribal leader, and demanded tribute from the people.

Tristán de Luna followed closely on the heels of de Soto and attempted to establish a colony on Florida's northern gulf coast. The de Luna expedition was comprised of 13 ships, 500 Spanish military men and craftsmen, 900 settlers, over 250 horses, Mexican and Florida Indian guides and warriors, plus several native interpreters. The flotilla arrived in present-day Pensacola Bay on August 14, 1559. De Luna's colony was doomed from the start, with problems that occurred during the long voyage from New Spain (Mexico) soon compounded by problems

on shore. A hurricane struck the Florida panhandle a month after the colonists arrived. Aside from the loss of human life, the colony also suffered the destruction of 10 of the 13 ships (including the ship where most of the colony's food was stored). About half of the group's supplies were washed out into the Gulf of Mexico. Lack of food and tense relations among the colonists led to the eventual failure of this effort by the Spanish to establish a permanent settlement.

Other nations also showed an interest in Florida. French Huguenots, uneasy in their Catholic-dominated homeland, made an attempt to settle in Florida in 1564. Led by Rene de Laudonniere and Jean Ribuat, the colony of Fort Caroline, located near present-day Jacksonville, lasted about a year. During that time, an artist named Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues documented the people, flora, and fauna of Florida (dubbed New France by the settlers). He also created a map of Florida—all of which were engraved and published by Theodor de Bry in 1591.

The French colony came to a bloody end at the hands of Spaniard Pedro Menéndez de Avilés and his armada of 10 ships and over 1,000 soldiers and sailors. Menéndez's fleet arrived in Florida on September 8, 1565, and founded what is the oldest European settlement in the United States: St. Augustine. Menéndez attacked the French at Fort Caroline, then fought and killed all but a handful of survivors at an inlet just south of St. Augustine that bears the name of the action there (Matanzas, or "place of slaughter").

The French would later renew their efforts at settling a part of Florida, near Mobile Bay, and the English, who had begun to colonize the lands north of Florida, sent occasional excursions south into the Spanish territory. This increased interest in Florida by a variety of countries is reflected in map-making during this era.

On the heels of the sixteenth-century urge to set out and discover new lands,



Map 3 *Mapa del Golfo y costa de la Nueva Espana*, a manuscript map created by Alonso de Santa Cruz around 1544, is likely the only map that exists today that dates from, and shows the expedition of, Hernando de Soto. The original is held by the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, Spain.



Map 4 Another manuscript map held in the Archivo General de Indias is *Plano de la Gran Bahia de Tampa* by Francisco María Celi. Celi's survey of Tampa Bay, which he undertook in the spring of 1757, was the first extensive survey of the bay on Florida's gulf coast.

Europeans began to establish settlements, towns, and cities in the New World. Immense treasures of gold, silver, and copper were found in Mexico, Peru, and other locations. Though Florida lacked these precious metals, the Spanish still

guarded their possession tightly. They also began to study and explore Florida with an eye toward converting the indigenous people to Catholicism. This led to the establishment of a series of missions stretching across north Florida, from St.

Augustine westward toward Pensacola. Still, the pursuit of gold, silver, and glory continued to thrive in Florida and throughout the Caribbean. This is illustrated beautifully in Pierre Mortier's richly hand-colored 1703 map of the



Map 5 Pierre Mortier's 1703 map of the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico

Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico (above). In addition to its practical use as a very competent map of the time, it tells an exciting adventure story about galleons and sea battles, with the routes of Spain's treasure fleets off the Florida coast clearly marked, and a colorful picture of a treasure chest in case anyone should miss the point.

In addition to general maps of Florida and its place in the Caribbean and North America, the Spanish were interested in specific locations within their colony. This is well illustrated by the 1757 expedition of Francisco María Celi. Celi's chart of Tampa Bay represents the culmination of his survey work along the west coast of Florida. His work was the most detailed up to that point. In fact, it was among the first to focus on Tampa Bay, occurring just one year after Spanish naval draftsman Juan Baptista Franco's brief survey of the bay area's timber resources.

Celi's expedition arrived at the entrance to Tampa Bay in the morning on April 13. At 9:00 a.m., the ship's crew dropped the anchor on the east side of Egmont Key, which Celi named La Isla de San Blas y Barreda. He and the other members of the surveying team spent the next five days examining Egmont Key and the opening into Tampa Bay. From there they moved around the coast, using a longboat as their main mode of trans-

portation with his ship anchored nearby.

Celi's accomplishments, as a surveyor, mapmaker, and artist, are evident in his 1757 map of Tampa Bay. Though it is possible that a fellow member of his crew, Don Juan Franco, added some of the more decorative elements to the chart, the piece as a whole still stands as a testament to the abilities of Celi and the perseverance of he and his crew.

Events in Europe and the Caribbean during this era had a profound effect on Florida. During the French and Indian War (1756–1763), Great Britain captured Havana, Cuba, from the Spanish, who were allied with the French against their Protestant enemy. The Spanish government desperately wanted Havana back, so they traded the Floridas (Florida was divided into peninsular East Florida and the panhandle West Florida during this time) to Great Britain for the Cuban city. The British Floridas remained loyal to the Crown during the American Revolution, and possession of them returned to the Spanish with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

The maps from this era reflect the change in ownership of Florida, as well as a better understanding of the topography and overall shape of the peninsula. Spanish mapmakers, plus cartographers from other European powers, surveyed Florida's coastline, bays, and inlets. The Spanish hydrographic office

performed several surveys of the gulf and Atlantic coasts, but despite this apparent interest in Florida, Spain was quickly losing its grip on the peninsula. The Second Spanish Period would last until the Adams-Onís Treaty was ratified between Spain and the United States in 1821. American survey crews built on the knowledge gained by their Spanish predecessors, but it would take several more decades before most of Florida's interior could be surveyed. However, evidence of Florida's long Spanish history can still be seen in its architecture, its place names, and its oldest city—St. Augustine. 🌐

Notes

1. Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, translated by James E. Kelley, Jr., in "Juan Ponce de León's Discovery of Florida: Herrera's Narrative Revisited," *Revista de Historia de America* 111 (January–June 1991): 42.
2. Some interesting examples showing Florida as the dominant, and sometimes only, name attached to what is now the United States, see Sebastian Munster's 1540 map, *Novae Insulae, XVII - Nova Tabula* and Girolamo Ruscelli's *Nueva Hispania Tabula Nova* from 1561. Other maps, such as Abraham Ortelius's *La Florida* (1584) and Cornelius van Wytfliet's *Florida et Apalche* (1597) show the name Florida as covering the southeastern United States.
3. Michael Gannon, ed., *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 16.

All maps were provided by the J. Thomas and Lavinia Witt Touchton Collection.

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