

THE CALUSA AND THE FIRST FLORIDA COLONIZER



The Seminole ancestors the Spanish called the Calusa thrived along the coast and the keys in what is today southwest Florida. The ancestors had flourished on the peninsula for nearly 15,000 years when Europeans first intruded into their homelands in the early 1500s. The very first of these were a group led by Juan Ponce de León, who, according to legend, came in search of the Fountain of Youth. It's unlikely that Ponce de León was really looking for a magical fountain, but his own records show he was motivated by mainly by greed and the hope of finding gold.

What Ponce de León was not hoping for was trouble. And yet, in May of 1513 as his fleet sought fresh water along Florida's gulf coast, they encountered Calusa warriors. Desperate for fresh water, the Spanish attempted to trade with the Calusa. The Calusa, however, saw the Indigenous Caribbean people the Spanish held captive and forced into labor, recognized the threat. Soon eighty war canoes met Ponce de León's fleet. Eventually, the Spanish realized they were no match for the Calusa warriors and retreated, beginning their journey back to Cuba.

Eight years later, in 1521, Ponce de León returned to the coast of southwest Florida, prepared to set up a colony and "claim" the land of the Calusa and their ancestors for Spain. The Calusa were prepared. Determined to defend their homeland against the intruders, the Calusa fought off the Spanish once more, this time inflicting a mortal wound. Ponce de León was hit in the thigh by a Calusa warrior's arrow, which had been dipped in the deadly sap of the manchineel tree. Defeated, the Spanish fleet limped back to Cuba where Ponce de León died of the wound two weeks later. The Spanish had learned a hard lesson. As one Spaniard put it, the Calusa "were not accustomed... to lay down their liberty so easily".

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Above: Engraving of Ponce de Leon at the Fountain of Youth, from *Pictorial History of the United States*. Philadelphia: John Winston Company, 1907

