



Finding the Fountain of Youth: Ponce de Leon and Florida's Magical Waters

Rick Kilby

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“Just seeing the nostalgic advertisements, postcards, and photos is enough to make readers reclaim their own youth, no matter how far removed from it they may be.”—Tim Hollis, author of *Selling the Sunshine State*

“Tells the story of how a myth became so pervasive in Florida culture—to the point that Fountains of Youth sprang up all over.”—Lu Vickers, author of *Weeki Wachee Mermaids*

Juan Ponce de León reached the shores of Florida on April 2, 1513. Although historians have long debunked the myth of the conquistador’s search for the Fountain of Youth, his fabled quest remains inextricably tied to the image of the Sunshine State. Even today, Florida’s mythical, magical waters—some reputed to have healing powers—remain a potent part of the state’s appeal for tourists and residents alike.

Featuring reproductions of eye-catching postcards, vintage advertisements, vibrant photos, and other “Ponceabilia,” *Finding the Fountain of Youth* reveals how Florida itself has been transformed into a veritable Fountain of Youth, a paradisiacal playground, a utopia of rejuvenating springs and beautiful mermaids.

More than a collection of nostalgic kitsch, however, the book also addresses the very real problem of protecting Florida’s fragile springs. These pristine waters—numbering more than 700—were once revered by the Timucua and Calusa and celebrated by a variety of writers, including William Bartram and Harriet Beecher Stowe. In time, some became known as Panacea Springs or Epiritu Santo Springs, new names meant to extol their sacred nature to visitors in polka-dotted bathing suits and Panama hats. Today, world-famous sites such as Silver Springs, known for crystal-clear underwater photographs and iconic glass-bottomed boats, are cloudy; others are on the verge of disappearing altogether as new housing developments and businesses draw down the underlying aquifer.

Through five hundred years of history, the search for water has defined Florida. That is no less true for today’s residents as it was for mid-twentieth-century tourists or even Ponce de León himself. *Finding the Fountain of Youth* is a delightful reminder of journeys past—and a peek at those to come.

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