

FOUNDATION AND REMOVAL OF THE CITY OF
San Juan of Porto Rico.

By Angel Paniagua.

The Island of Porto Rico, called "Bonriquet" by the indians, was discovered on Saturday the 16th of November, 1493, by the distinguished Admiral Christopher Columbus who took possession thereof on behalf of the Catholic Kings on the following Tuesday, the 19th, and gave it the name of Island of San Juan in honor of prince Don Juan who was the son and heir of the Catholic Kings; but his premature death prevented him from ruling his kingdom and snatched away from him the glory of wearing on his forehead and for the first time the two royal crowns of Castille and Aragón.

Though the illustrious Spanish navigator, Vicente Yañez Pinzón, secured a royal charter to conuer and populate this Island, his right was forfeited owing to his inability to fulfill the conditions stipulated with the Catholic Kings, and thus this Island was left unexplored or visited by any navigator for a term of 15 years after its discovery, until the illustrious Juan Ponce de León, a nobleman, native of Santervas de Campos, in the kingdom of León, who had been residing in Hispaniola (Santo Domingo) since 1493, and was governing with success as captain at arms the province of Higüey, had news about the wealth treasured in the soil of our Island and conceived the idea of conquering and populating it at his own expense. For this purpose he held a conference with the Governor of Hispaniola who was ^{Don} ~~Don~~ Nicolás de Ovando, Commander of Lares in the Order of Alcantara, and under and by virtue of the covenants then and there entered into, he sailed from the port of Salvaleón of Higüey, accompanied by forty-two men of arms and service, on a vessel the crew of which consisted of eight sailors, bound for this Island, and after a somewhat tempestuous voage, landed on our shores, at the Port of Guánica, on the 12th day of August, 1508, a famous day on which we must find the genesis and the beginning of christian civilization in our small country, as a tender leaf, as a gentle branch, of the secular tree of our mother country.

Juan Ponce de León was a man experienced in the treatment of the indians Hispaniola and, having a profound knowledge of their idiosyncrasy, began his task by entering into an agreement with the principal indian chief of the Island whose name was Aguebaná and who had his seat in the neighborhood of the afore-

said port of Guánica at which Ponce de Leon had landed.

By the celebration of the aforesaid agreement both were "coupled"; that is to day, the captain and the chief exchanged names, which was the greatest honor and the most solemn ceremony among the indians which served to seal an oath of mutual loyalty. This agreement which bound the christians to protect and not to harm the indians, and the latter to render all kind of voluntary aid to the former, was faithfully lived up to by both parties while Agueybaná lived and while Ponce de León governed.

Ponce de Leon began to explore the Island in company with his faithful Agueybaná, and continued his trip by sea around the Island, following all the South and East coast until, rounding the Cape of Cabezas de San Juan, he finally discovered the port of this city which he found to be so marvelously beautiful that he called it "Puerto Rico", a name which through a fortuitous succession of special circumstances has come to substitute that of San Juan, given by the discoverer to our Island and which had been finally adopted to designate this city.

Ponce de León was so enchanted with the port that he had discovered, and found so beautiful, that he was loath to leave it; and he sailed to and fro, and all around in his vessel seeking a landing place, but failed, as all the shores were covered with mangroves which prevented him from landing, and, to his great sorrow, he had to abandon it and pursue his exploration by landing a few leagues to the west of the said port, where he provisionally established himself at two different places and finally decided to return overland to "Puerto Rico" where at last he found an adequate place to suit his purpose - not precisely on the mangrove swamps of the port but about half a league towards the interior, where he erected a strong house, seven tapias in height, with a barrier fronting the door and crowned with turrets. There he founded, in October or November, 1508, the village of Caparra, a name given to the town by order of Governor Ovando, which the Governor remembered from a Roman city in his own country, and which had existed not far from Cáceres, his native town; but this name, destined to disappear, lasted only the time necessary for Ferdinand the V, Catholic King, to receive the report on the exploration and work done by captain Ponce de León, when, by the King's order, it was substituted by the name of Puerto Rico (with title as a city and a municipal orga-

nization), the name of the beautiful port discovered by Ponce de León.

Anyone knowing the place where that city of Porto Rico was situated, and which ever since that time has been designated as the "City of San Juan" in a document as important as that of the Bull for the erection of the diocese (1511), can do no less than to acknowledge that the said site was well selected, especially from the view point of the colonizer, which was the only view for Ponce de León to take; and it must be so viewed today impartially by whoever looks upon it in going over the new road leading to Bayamón and crossing through the seat of the ancient city.

It must be admitted, however, that the change to the Island where the city is now situated was a necessity demanded by other really great interests and the removal of the city to the picturesque place upon which it now stands had to be effected - especially for strategic purpose - thanks to which the city was able to withstand victoriously the repeated attacks of so many enemies as sought to take it, failing only once, and then because of circumstances not necessary to relate here.

This is, therefore, the historical fact which we commemorate today, and to which, strictly speaking, no certain date can be assigned, as the removal of the city from its original place to the Island where it is now located, became necessary in the years 1520 and 1521, as to enable the residents gradually to construct their houses, many of which were of masonry; yet, the Historian of Porto Rico, Dr. Cayetano Coll y Toste, is very much in the right in assigning as a date of departure, the date of the order of the fathers Jerónimos directing the said removal, issued on the 4th of July.

The action of Juan Ponce de León in opposition to the said removal for powerful reasons is no bar for this leader to figure conspicuously in the performance of the said removal. The Catholic Kings, as an acknowledgment of his merits, rewarded him by vesting in him honors and dignities, military titles and offices of the Republic, granting him the dignity of "Adelantado of Florida and Bimini" because of his famous discovery, appointing him governor of this Island, independent from the authorities of the Hispaniola, and maintaining him in that position while there was a doubt as to whether or not it came within the jurisdiction of the Admiral; appointing him Sea and Land Captain (Captain General), an office which he held all his life; perpetual al-

derman of the city of Porto Rico; commander of the first fortress that there might be and, meanwhile, his house was considered to be such first fortress; guardian of the Royal and Public Treasury, with armed men under him; captain of the Navy against the Caribs; distributor of commanderies of Indians, and charged by the King with the duty of dividing the Island into two districts; namely, Puerto Rico and San Germán. He should have been entrusted also with the duty of making the survey of the city and the apportionment of lots among the neighbors because, as stated by Oviedo, he was a man wont to populate and to construct; and, being perpetual alderman, he was the fittest for the purpose. This was a fact because it was he who turned over to the Dominican fathers the large lot on which this intelligent religious congregation built their royal convent upon the highest place of the city, the larger chapel of which compares in antiquity with the advanced corner turret of CASA BLANCA. Both of these buildings were constructed by Garcia Troche, first son-in-law of Ponce de León, in 1523; and likewise this Governor, Ponce de León, had reserved for himself the beautiful lot upon which a fortress (castle) was to be erected for the custody of the Royal Treasury, out of its funds. Ponce de León was the commander or perpetual mayor of the fortress, in charge of a certain number of arbalisters, and the said fortress was to substitute his former stronghold of the old town, which was no longer used for public offices for the collection of excise and other taxes, as these offices had been removed to the new city on the Island. Ponce de León did not construct this building because his death occurred in 1521; but his son-in-law, Garcia Troche, made haste to do so and thus extend the privileges that his family were enjoying by taking the necessary steps so that his brother-in-law, Luis Ponce de León, the only son of the Governor, could inherit all the dignities and prerogatives enjoyed by his illustrious father, and among them the command of the fortress and the custody of the Royal Treasury. Then he built the advanced turret at CASA BLANCA (1523) which, notwithstanding the lapse of time, stands firmly upon the highest rock on the most airy and picturesque spot of this city.

Therefore, the illustrious Governor Juan Ponce de León was the founder of the city on its first site and he lived long enough to witness and direct the removal thereof to the place where it now stands, and of which historical deed we are now celebrating the fourth centenary.

We should therefore glorify those of our forefathers who with a firm belief,

high mind and power of strength in their soul, laid down the beginning of the civilization and culture of our country, because we must always bear in our hearts the fact that the benefits we are enjoying today are founded upon the sacrifices made by those men.

Those who fail to remember their forefathers and to render them the cult and homage of which they were worthy are without soul, with no faith, no heart and no mind, and should be stricken out of the book of life.