

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Pierce House is a rare known surviving example in the Boston area of a seventeenth century, or First Period, house. It documents period building practices and the tastes and housing needs of one family, the Pierces, over more than three centuries. At different times, family members expanded and adapted their dwelling to meet new demands for space, function, comfort, privacy, and cleanliness.

The relatively upscale two-story house, built in 1683 with two rooms per floor, embodied distinctive characteristics of post-medieval construction that can be traced to a particular region of East Anglia, in England. The building then evolved in several stages until the late eighteenth century, when it took on most of its current present plan and massing. First, the west rooms were added c.1712 to create a central-chimney-plan structure. Later in the century, the roof gable and small, diamond-paned windows typical of seventeenth-century buildings were removed, the slope of the roof line was extended, and Georgian six-over-six sash windows and a new exterior door with a pedimented frame were installed. By 1765 a lean-to had been constructed across the back of the house. Finally, in 1765, Colonel Samuel Pierce extended the east rooms and lean-to by nine feet, so that the building comprised three front rooms of more or less equal size and a full lean-to. Each change is expressive of changing uses of space and ideals of fashion.

The west addition reflected the continued use of post-medieval forms and framing practices, and allowed greater division of function between the two heated rooms on the first floor. One room would have been designated the more formal parlor, while the other would have been used as the hall, where a greater number of household activities took place. The enlarged Pierce House of 1712 would probably have been among the biggest houses in Dorchester at that time. The size reflected not only the Pierces' ability to afford such a structure, but perhaps also solutions to accommodating the multiple generations of family members who occupied the house in the early eighteenth century. The construction of the lean-to reveals the continued trend toward functional division of space, especially the tendency to place service activities, such as cooking, in the rear of the building. At some point before 1765, a kitchen probably occupied part of the lean-to.

The Georgian remodeling of the house and Colonel Samuel Pierce's enlargement of the east end of the house are evidence of the profound changes in outlook that permeated New England life in the eighteenth century as Renaissance, or Enlightenment, ideals took hold. The changes included a new emphasis on the individual and increased consumerism. In architecture the new ideals were expressed in more specialized room functions with greater opportunity for privacy and new classically-inspired features and finish materials. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries post-medieval houses such as the Pierce House were transformed and much of their previous appearance was obscured. Colonel Pierce's new rooms incorporated Georgian decorative elements, and over the next decade he updated the older sections of the house as well, adding fashionable woodwork, two "beaufats" (corner cupboards), and window seats. Each alteration is expressive of changing tastes and uses of space, but, while Colonel Pierce clearly valued modishness, he also venerated the past, and he retained some seventeenth-century details.

The significance of the Pierce House is enhanced by the rich documentary record of its

architectural history. Colonel Samuel Pierce's journal tracks the changes that the owner, a skilled carpenter and mason, made to the house over thirty-five years. The entries make it clear, however, that Pierce was, first and foremost, a farmer. While he enlarged the house and added stylish Georgian features to the front rooms, he was equally committed to updating the utilitarian functions of the house located in the lean-to and cellar, and he noted such tasks as putting down a cistern in the kitchen, digging the cellar, and, in 1778, constructing the half-underground dairy that would increase the efficiency of the Pierce family women's production and storage of milk, butter, and cheese. The sunken dairy is now one of less than half a dozen believed to survive in eastern Massachusetts.

The Pierces actively chose to preserve the house as an artifact of their ancestral past. Although the entry and staircase were remodeled, a second exterior door was added, and Greek Revival-style mantelpieces were installed in two of the upstairs rooms in the mid-nineteenth century, family members made few significant changes thereafter. As the nineteenth century progressed, the house became an icon of colonial heritage. When a portion of the fireplace lintel from the parlor was removed, for example, the wood was turned into commemorative cups. Several illustrated magazine articles, replete with nostalgic lore, focused on the house. It was photographed by leading photographers of historic architecture including Wilfred A. French and Halliday of Halliday Historic Photographs, and drawn by that inveterate documenter of historic buildings, Edwin Whitefield, all of whom chose to depict the house at angles that emphasized its steep roof pitch.

SPNEA's founder, William Sumner Appleton, photographed the Pierce House in 1919 and attested that "this is one of the houses that should be preserved" (in *Old-Time New England*, October 1919). In 1968, when the Historic New England-SPNEA acquired the house, Bertram K. Little, the Director, concurred, calling it "a document of the highest importance for the study of seventeenth century building practices and the transmutations in the form and use of a single family's dwelling over the years" (*Old-Time New England*, Summer, 1968).