

**Generation One**  
**Robert Pierce and Ann Grenway Pierce**

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| <p><b>1. Robert (c. 1600?-11/5/1664)</b></p> <p>2. Thomas (1635-6/26/1706)</p> <p>2. Deborah (2/12/1639-4/15/1640)</p> <p>2. Mary (?-?)</p> <p>2. Sarah (b?, died between 1650 and 1774)</p> | <p><b>m. 1635?</b></p> <p>m. 8/3/1661</p> <p>m. 4/15/1651</p> | <p><b>Ann Grenway (1591?-12/31/1695)</b></p> <p>Mary Fry (1642-1695)</p> <p>Thomas Hearing, Dedham</p> |
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Robert Pierce and Ann Grenway settled in Dorchester in the first wave of seventeenth-century emigration from England to America, but the circumstances of their arrival are ambiguous. Family legend weaves a tale of a shipboard romance between them on the “Mary and John,” a vessel in John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony fleet, but the passenger list for that 1630 voyage does not include a Robert Pierce. John Grenway, a millwright, his wife Mary, and their daughter Ann, however, were passengers on the “Mary and John,” and the Grenways became active residents of the fledgling town. Although not a proprietor,<sup>1</sup> John Grenway was among the first to be granted freeman status, and he was therefore entitled to vote and to share in further land divisions. He owned a house on five acres of land, “said to be near the burying place,” and accumulated other properties throughout the town.<sup>2</sup> Mary Grenway and her daughters, all of whom were literate, took an active role in town affairs that pertained to women. Mary Grenway initiated two petitions to the Massachusetts General Court seeking freedom for a midwife, Alice Tilly, to practice freely in Boston and Dorchester; Grenway gathered the signatures of over forty local women, including four of her daughters.<sup>3</sup>

Robert Pierce, who married the Grenways’ daughter Ann, was among the first few groups of Englishmen who left from Plymouth and other western counties of Great Britain to settle the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It is not known whether he sailed on another ship in Winthrop’s fleet, or came later in the 1630s on a ship arriving directly in Dorchester, but genealogists have traced the family to Plymouth, England, where Robert was born around 1600.<sup>4</sup>

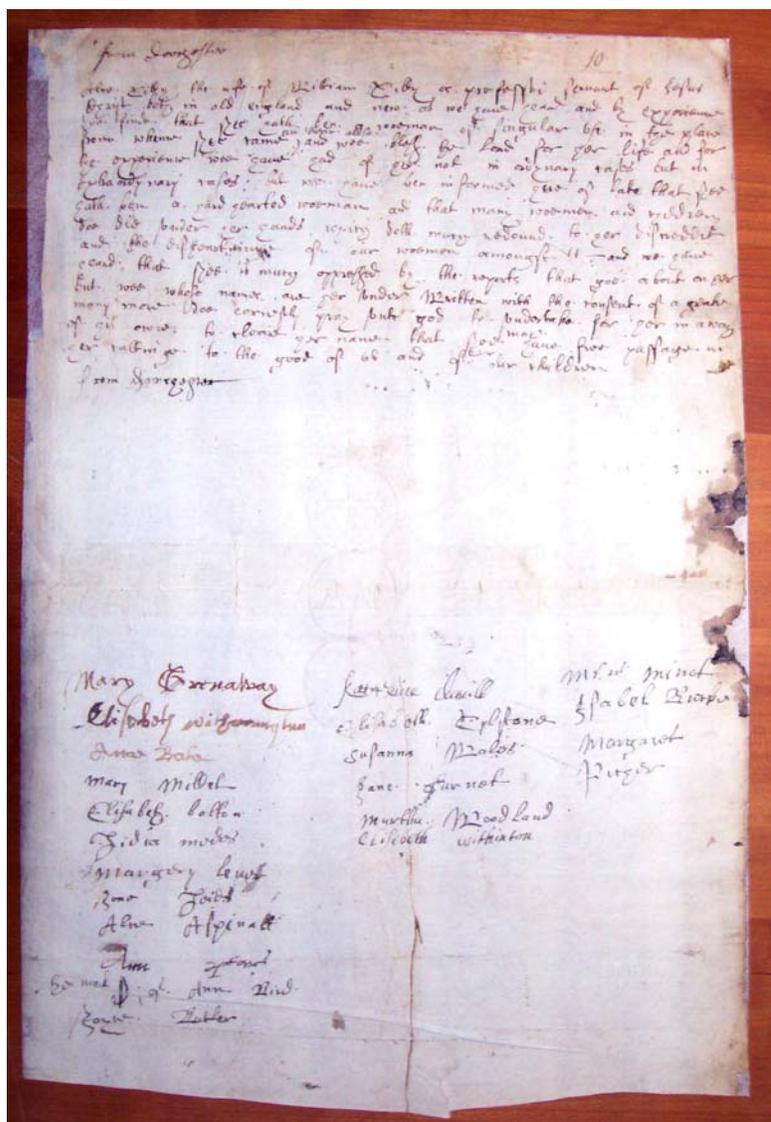
It is clear that Ann Grenway and Robert Pierce eventually met, married, and settled in Dorchester, but the dates of these events remain uncertain because genealogical records of this era are spotty. Genealogists use the year 1635 as the approximate date of both their marriage and the birth of their first child. Ann Grenway Pierce’s birth date is also unknown, but Dorchester records and her gravestone assert that she was 104 years old at her death in 1695, noting her status as an aged and respected matriarch.<sup>5</sup>

Robert and Ann Pierce settled first in Pine Neck, later called Port Norfolk, an area of upland and salt marsh along the Neponset River and the harbor that took its name from a dense grove of pine trees that persisted well into the nineteenth century. Pierce built their home on a parcel of land belonging to his father-in-law, John Grenway. Like other seventeenth-century fathers, John Grenway arranged for the distribution of property among his children. Common practice would have been for a father to divide his land among his male heirs at his death,<sup>6</sup> but Grenway and his wife Mary had six daughters and no sons, and he divided his land during his lifetime, among his daughters and sons-in-law. In 1650 he gave portions of his lands to at least two of

his five married daughters and their husbands, including Robert and Ann Pierce.<sup>7</sup> To them he deeded all his land on Pine Neck, six acres, and it was there that Pierce built his first house.

Throughout the nineteenth century Pierce’s descendants and other Dorchester townfolk had a clear idea of where this house was located, for the cellar and the well remained local landmarks. The Rev. John Pierce, minister of the First Parish in Brookline and a Pierce descendant, visited the site in 1804. He “found part of the cellar, in which was the stump of a tree, and drank water from the well dug for the use of my great, great, great grandfather.” On a return visit, in 1820, he took a small fragment of rock from the well as a memento.<sup>8</sup> Later in the nineteenth century local historian Edward McGlenan wrote in *The Dorchester Book* that the house was near what was then the Neponset railroad station, and he also referred to the cellar and the well.<sup>9</sup>

When the Pierces settled in Pine Neck, they were one of only a handful of families in the area, most notably the Pierces, the Minots, and the Tolmans. The most densely settled area of Dorchester remained Allen’s Plain, near the first meetinghouse, in the northern section of the town; this was the location of the Grenways’ home. The intention of the Massachusetts Bay Company and its settlers had been to establish a nucleated town center, with small houselots clustered near the church. One concern was safety, as the colonists had feared attacks by any nearby Native American tribes, but they were equally concerned that Dorchester should remain a cohesive, unified community, with religion at its center. In 1635 the General Court reiterated this intent, ordering that no dwelling be built more than a half mile from the meetinghouse without permission.<sup>10</sup> As evidenced by the Pierces and others, however, settlement quickly spread from the tight, compact village to other parts of Dorchester. The actual threat from the native Neponsets, most of whom had been felled by disease before the colonists arrived, was negligible,<sup>11</sup> and



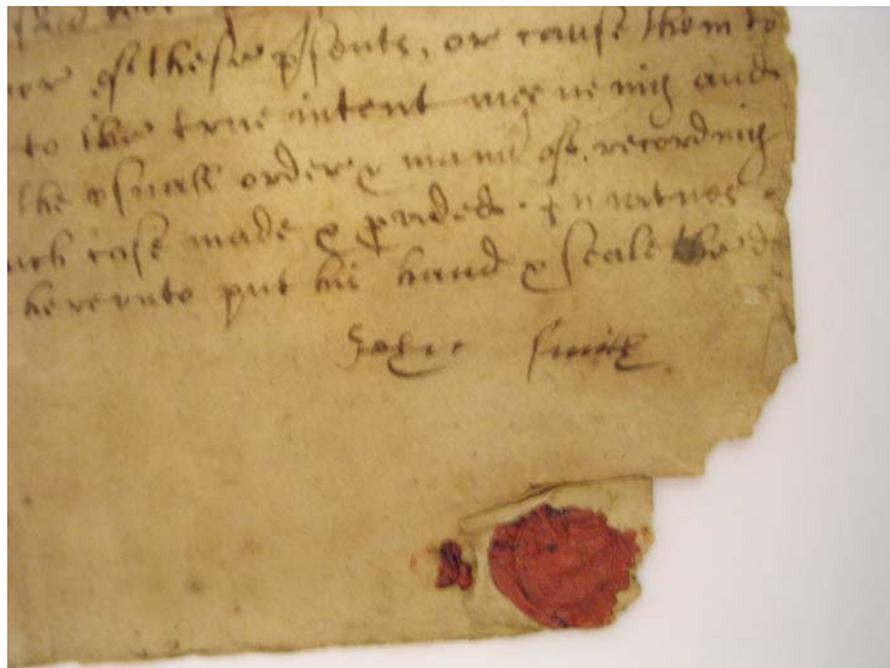
Petition regarding Alice Tilly, Dorchester midwife, with signature of Mary Greenway and four of her daughters—Susanna Wales, Mary Millet, Katharine Dauieil, and Ann Pierce, 1650.

the land seemed boundless.

The earliest town records contain a few scattered references to Robert Pierce. The first reference, in 1639, declared that he “shall be a Commoner.”<sup>12</sup> Pierce and his wife Ann joined the Dorchester Church in 1640, making him eligible for freeman status with its accompanying suffrage and property rights, but there is no record that Pierce ever obtained that status. He did take a role in town affairs, serving as fence viewer in 1651 and 1654, and he probably shouldered his responsibility for the maintenance of the roads that ran near his land in Pine Neck and later in the Great Lots. While women in the seventeenth century generally had a very limited public role, Ann Grenway Pierce, along with three of her sisters, signed her mother’s petitions to the General Court in 1649 and 1650.

Robert and Ann Pierce eventually moved to a house on a six-acre “home lott” of plowing land in the Eastern Great Lots. An unrecorded deed in the Pierce Family Papers indicates that Pierce acquired this property from John Smith in 1652, and he had apparently already built a house according to an earlier “verbal agremt” between them, on land which lay along the Lower Road, the “jogging” section of Adams Street that is now Gallivan Boulevard.<sup>13</sup>

Pierce owned other parcels of land in addition to this homelot. The inventory of his estate, in 1664, lists the home lot, with the house, barn, and surrounding six acres, twenty acres of land in Pine Neck, five acres of meadow, perhaps from one of the town land grants, and thirty-six acres of common land. With the other items specified in the inventory, these land holdings indicate the kind of mixed-use, scattered-field farming typical of New England in the seventeenth century.



Detail of deed for land purchased by Robert Pierce, 1652.

Pierce had plowing land, meadow, and, on Pine Neck, the salt marsh so essential for forage. The inventory lists wheat, Indian corn, “pease,” and hay, and a few animals—two cows and two pigs—that were typical of crop and animal husbandry. The household goods, which included some brass and pewter, a table and chairs, a feather bed, and two Bibles, indicate a family of moderate means.<sup>14</sup>

Robert and Ann Pierce had three children, and two, Thomas and Mary, survived into adulthood. In his will Robert Pierce provided both for his children and for his widow, Ann. With only one son there was no question as to whether his property would go only to the eldest son, or be di-

vided among all the sons. In England, due to limited land, primogeniture, a practice which passed real property intact to the oldest son, was the rule, but with the abundance of land in the New World, fathers were able to make different decisions. Subsequent generations of the Pierce family dealt with the transmission of property to the next generation in various ways, factoring birth order, gender, age, and the amount of available property into the bequests.

Ann Pierce inherited more than the customary widow's third; rather, she was to have, during her lifetime, one half of Robert's house, land, and household goods. Although she could do as she wanted with the household goods, her share of the house and land would return to her son Thomas at her death. Thomas in effect inherited all the property—but only after an indeterminate period of time. Robert and Ann's daughter Mary had married Thomas Herring about 1650, and Robert gave her a dowry at that time. In his will he left her an additional twenty pounds, and he also bequeathed ten pounds to be divided equally among Mary's five children.<sup>15</sup>

Ann Grenway Pierce survived her husband by almost thirty years. She probably lived out her long life in the house built by Robert Pierce in the 1650s, but it was Ann rather than her husband who lived long enough to see the house further north on the Lower Road that her son Thomas and his family moved into in the 1690s—the house that was for so long called the Robert Pierce House.<sup>16</sup>



Ann Grenway Pierce tombstone, Dorchester Burying Ground.

## Endnotes Generation One

1 Proprietors were the group of settlers to whom the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony granted title to town land; they in turn distributed the land among themselves and other town residents, in an initial grant and subsequent land divisions.

2 William B. Trask, "John Grenaway. Abstracts of Deeds (1650) from John Grenaway to His Children," *New England Historic and Genealogical Register*, 32 (January, 1878), 55-59.

3 Massachusetts Archives, vol.9, pp. 10, 12. Mary Beth Norton has called these two petitions, together with four similar ones from Boston women, "American women's first collective political action." She notes that as a group these petitions were more successful than similar petitions from men which challenged the Bay Colony courts. Alice Tilly had been accused and convicted of causing deaths among her patients, both the infants and their mothers. Her supporters, however, argued that she was "the ablest midwife [that we know] in the land." The magistrates of the Court knew her only from hearsay, wrote the petitioners, whereas they spoke from their own experiences as her patients and attendants at childbirths; Tilly was skilled even in the most extraordinary cases, when "in the eye of sence or reason nothing but Death was to be expected. . . ." Although Tilly did not receive the declaration of innocence she sought, the court apparently removed the restrictions on her movements and the Boston and Dorchester petitioners achieved their goal—her continued services as a midwife. Mary Beth Norton, "'The Ablest Midwife That Wee Knowe in the Land': Mistress Alice Tilly and the Women of Boston and Dorchester, 1649-1650," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 55 (Jan., 1998), 105-134. Quotes, pp. 105, 125, and 126.

4 One of two specific entries in the parish records of St. Andrew's Church in Plymouth, England, may be the baptismal record of the Robert Pierce who settled in Dorchester. One entry is for "Robert Peers," baptized on Oct. 8, 1600; he was the son of Robert Peers and Nicoll Lamb, who had been married in April of 1599. The other child was "Robert, son of Thomas Pearse, baptized April 18, 1605;" his parents, Thomas and Jane, were married on March 27, 1586. Since the Dorchester Robert Pierce named his only son Thomas, this Thomas Pearse of Plymouth may have been the father and grandfather. Edward Zimmer and Andrea Greenstein, "Pierce Family Genealogy," Generation 1, p. 1, unpublished paper, undated, Library and Archives, Historic New England/SPNEA, Boston, MA.

5 *Dorchester Births, Marriages, and Deaths to the End of 1825* (Boston, 1890), reprinted by Heritage Books (Bowie, MD, 2000), p. 123. If Ann were born in 1591, she would have had her first child in her mid-forties, which was highly unusual in the seventeenth century.

6 Custom in New England differed from that in England, where land scarcity led to the practice of primogeniture, or passing one's real property intact to the oldest son. In New England, particularly in the first and second generations, most men had enough property to divide their lands among all their sons, and the property passed to the sons at the father's death. Daughters commonly received dowries when they married, and often their fathers bequeathed them some additional money and perhaps a portion of land, usually smaller than the shares left to sons.

7 Suffolk County Deeds, 1/199-202; Trask, pp. 55-59. Grenway probably allowed Robert and Ann to build a house on his land at Pine Neck before he actually transferred the title in 1650.

In the deeds Grenway transferred each property to his daughter and son-in-law together, but legally, since married women could not hold property in the seventeenth century, ownership and control of the land would fall to his sons-in-law. Grenway's choice of wording may indicate the feelings he held for his daughters, apart from seventeenth-century property law. To his unmarried daughter Ursula Grenway he deeded the use of a portion of his house; after the deaths of John and Mary, Ursula was to inherit the whole house and five-acre house lot, plus other scattered lands. If she died without heirs, the property was to go to one of Grenway's grandsons, with payments to his other daughters and grandchildren as well.

Some of the families into which the Grenway daughters married seem to have moved from Dorchester. Other family names, such as Wales, can be found in Dorchester records into the eighteenth century. See Zimmer and Greenstein, Generation 1, pp. 5-6, and *Dorchester Births, Marriages, and Deaths*.

8 John Pierce, Pierce Family Record Book, p. 92, John Pierce Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

9 Quoted in Richard P. Bonner, ed., *Dorchester Old and New: 1630-1930* (Boston, 1930), p. 53.

10 Ebenezer Clapp, Jr., *History of the Town of Dorchester, Massachusetts* (Boston, 1859), p. 21.

11 According to Clapp, the few Native Americans whom the settlers encountered were friendly. Led by Chief Chickatawbot, who died in 1633, they negotiated a series of treaties that relinquished their land title to the town, retaining some lands at Ponkapoag. Chickatawbot's son Josias signed a final release of title to their territory in 1666. See Clapp, *History*, pp. 10-13.

12 Zimmer and Greenstein, Generation 1, p. 2. As a commoner, Pierce was able to own land in the town but did not have the right to vote.

13 John Smith to Robert Pearse, Unrecorded Warranty Deed, July 17, 165x [illeg], Pierce Family Papers, Library and Archives, Historic New England/SPNEA; Laura Driemeyer, "Trail of Original Pierce House," Research Files, Historic New England/SPNEA.

This house was on the southern side of the "jogging" section of Adams Street (the Lower Road) that is now Gallivan Boulevard. The property is directly opposite the house later owned by Frederick Leeds Pierce and then by his son and daughter-in-law George Frederick Pierce and Antoinette Pierce, on the north side of Adams Street. See Generation Eight.

14 Robert Pierce, Inventory, Suffolk County Probate, Docket No. [miscellaneous dockets], 1664; David R. Starbuck, ed., *Seventeenth Century Historical Archeology in Cambridge, Medford, and Dorchester*, Boston University, 1980, p. 92, Library and Archives, Historic New England/SPNEA.

15 Robert Pierce, Will, Suffolk County Probate, Docket No. [miscellaneous dockets], 1664.

16 See following section, Generation Two. Thomas and his family may have lived in the first Pierce House until after his mother's death, although records indicate that he lived for at least a time in the late 1670s on Thompson's Island. After 1680 Thomas owned another property with a house, and his family could have lived there for a while as well. John Pierce, Thomas's son and Robert and Ann's grandson, married in 1693 and had a daughter in 1694, so for a brief time before Ann's death the household could have held four generations. See Ebenezer Hill to Thomas Pierce, Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, 74/87, August 7, 1679; Jonathan Hill to Thomas Pierce, Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, 74/88, March 19, 1680; and Laura Driemeyer, Anne Grady, Susan L. Porter, and Susan Walton, Pierce House Historic Property Report (HPR), Appendix A – Pierce Family Genealogy, 2005, Library and Archives, Historic New England/SPNEA.

New research by Laura Driemeyer for this HPR and new evidence from the dendochronology sampling on the Pierce House has only recently revealed that the original Robert Pierce House, referred to in the 1650s deed between Robert Pierce and John Smith, is not the house on Oakton Avenue long known as the Pierce House. Built in 1683, the latter was owned by the Pierce family after 1696. See Generation Two.