

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Lived in by ten generations of Pierces, Historic New England's Pierce House stands today as a symbol of three hundred years of Massachusetts history. The house, built in Dorchester, Massachusetts in 1683, highlights important aspects of social history, community history, and New England history. On the most direct level it tells the compelling story of a middling New England family whose members worked hard to provide for themselves and their children. Like other families, the Pierces hoped to acquire and maintain enough land to keep their descendants nearby and to preserve their legacy. Throughout the family's long occupancy of the Pierce House multiple generations lived together in the house and many of those who left established households in the immediate neighborhood, often with the help of their parents. Over time, however, they found that they needed to regularly adapt to changing circumstances to achieve their goal of family continuity. While the Pierce family history is typical, it is unusual to have such strong surviving documentary evidence of that history. Fortunately, the Pierces were unusually conscientious about collecting and preserving their family history in an extraordinary collection of materials now in Historic New England's Library and Archives.

The Pierce family's history also chronicles their community. Dorchester, founded in 1630, was one of the earliest settlements in Massachusetts Bay, and it was one of the largest, including the land in what later became South Boston, Milton, Sharon, Canton, and Stoughton. Robert Pierce (c.1600-1664) immigrated to Dorchester from England; his son, Thomas (1635-1706), was the first family member to live in the Pierce House. Robert Pierce was not a proprietor of the town; but he and his heirs received land grants from the town as lots began to be divided. While the size of such grants was determined by wealth and status, Dorchester's territory was so extensive that the Pierces received significant acreage, mostly in the southern part of the town later known as Neponset. Robert Pierce inherited his first land from John Grenway, his father-in-law, in the 1650s, but he and later generations also obtained land through purchases. In 1696 Thomas bought the twenty-acre farm on which the Pierce House had been built in 1683. By the end of the seventeenth century, he owned almost 200 acres of land in Dorchester, enough property to allow the Pierces, and other Dorchester families, to practice agriculture well into the nineteenth century.

The Pierces were farmers for six generations; for 150 years they supplied most of their needs by producing crops, raising animals, and participating in a complex system by which they exchanged goods and services with their relatives and neighbors. They were able to settle their sons, and often their daughters, on family lands in the town, some of which remained in the hands of Pierces well into the twentieth century. Over time, however, land bequests became smaller as the land was repeatedly divided over successive generations.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Dorchester families, like those in other early settlements, were devising strategies to provide their children with alternative means of support, including preparing them to become artisans. Although Dorchester retained its rural character, most residents could no longer support themselves by farming alone. Some chose to move to farms in other, less settled areas, but others remained in town, cultivating their small parcels and

practicing trades. As young men became artisans, however, their ties to the community, which had earlier been rooted in the land, began to compete with their need to succeed in the market, and many of them followed their trades to Boston or other places. Some younger Pierces moved away, but others remained in the Neponset area and became brickmasons.

Dorchester's proximity to Boston meant that it would be increasingly drawn into the city's rapidly expanding economic orbit, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, although some parts of Dorchester continued to look like "the country," the town increasingly operated like a suburb of Boston. In 1869, Dorchester's residents voted to annex their town to the city of Boston. By this time Dorchester's thoroughfares were becoming increasingly commercial, railroads and omnibuses were connecting the town with the city, and commuters were becoming interested in purchasing suburban homes. The Pierces participated in these changes; as masons, they helped to construct new buildings; as landowners they sought to capitalize on increasing land values. In the 1860s Lewis Pierce (1786-1874) and his sons began to subdivide their fifteen-acre farm into house lots, and a decade later they began to build and sell homes on some of those lots.

Yet, despite their involvement in such efforts, they took pride in their long Dorchester heritage and strove to preserve their history and their house. Family members were generally active in their church and community and many had held appointive and elected local offices and church positions, including Samuel Pierce (1701-1768) and his grandson Lewis, who were elected Selectmen of the town. The Pierces' adaptations were designed to serve the goal of family continuity, and even after the Pierce farm had become a house on a 10,000 square foot lot, Pierces continued to live there and elsewhere in the neighborhood, and the house continued to be a source of pride that was bequeathed to the following generations.

In the late nineteenth century successive waves of immigrants – Irish, Italian, Eastern European Jews – began to transform Dorchester into a series of ethnic neighborhoods. Irish immigrants had come to Neponset in the mid-nineteenth century to work as servants and farm laborers in the homes of local families, including the Pierces. Many settled in the neighborhood and some, including one of Lewis Pierce's former farmhands, were able to buy homes as family farms were subdivided. Suburban development was slow in Neponset, but, by 1930, houses had been built on most of the lots, and the neighborhood, now known as Adams Village, took on its current aspect. In 1925 the city of Boston took the house across the street from the Pierce House (formerly owned by Lewis Pierce's grandson) by eminent domain to build the Thomas Kenny School. Adams Village had become predominantly Irish. The Pierce family became intertwined with that history in 1948, when Anne Grenway Pierce (b. 1924) married Robert Shaughnessey (1920-1997), an Irish-American third generation firefighter who grew up around the corner. The Shaughnesseys lived in the Pierce House until Anne Shaughnessey's father, Roger Grenway Pierce (1889-1968), died. When his mother, Antoinette Pierce (1863-1937), had left him the house, her will had included a provision that the "Old House" either be occupied by a family member or passed on to a historical society. In 1968, when the Shaughnesseys decided to move to Milton, they sold the house to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, now Historic New England.

The Pierce family story is also intertwined with the larger trajectory of American history, especially in those historical moments when the actions of everyday people affected the larger course of events. In times of national crisis, some Pierces took on greater duties. Colonel Samuel Pierce (1739-1850), in particular, played an important role in the American Revolution. He served in the Dorchester militia and participated in the fortification of Dorchester Heights and the forced evacuation of British troops from Boston in 1776. After independence was declared he remained in the militia, alternating periods of service away with administrative duties (primarily the distribution of provisions, pay, and troops) at home. Later family members also served as soldiers – Lewis Pierce in the War of 1812, Roger Grenway Pierce in World War I, and Roger Curtis Pierce (1920-1990) in World War II – and Lewis Francis Pierce (1809-1888) was part of a delegation to Washington D.C. during the Civil War to oversee arrangements for Massachusetts regiments.

The Pierce family story explains much about New England history, family history, and social history. It reveals important themes about family and economic life that are often obscured by the American tendency to focus more on innovation than on constancy, in part due to the popular view of history as “progress.” As a result, historical narratives tend to emphasize migration to the west, an early market economy that encouraged urbanization and industrialization, and the success stories of people who profited from these developments. Yet, while these are very important historical themes, the Pierce family story also discloses important continuities in family life. The family goals – to make a living, to provide for successive generations, to maintain ties with kin, to be involved in community and church – and the various means successive generations of Pierces adopted to achieve these goals, have universal relevance. Even as ten generations of Pierces occupied the family homestead and other descendants moved away, the family continued to operate largely within a close geographical and kin network of relationships that provided economic as well as emotional support. The Pierces’ family story personalizes and gives life to important themes – continuity and change – that are the essence of the larger American story.