

LANDSCAPE SIGNIFICANCE

The role of the Pierce family, with its multiple generations and extended branches, in the physical settlement and development of Dorchester is both typical and remarkable. The family's persistence in Dorchester from the early seventeenth to the late twentieth century illustrates the evolving character of New Englanders' relationship with property and the role of land in the family economy. The uses, scale, meaning, and value of the land continually changed during the time the Pierces occupied the Pierce House, but they represent a pattern of continuity and change experienced throughout New England.

From the time of their arrival, the Pierces began to accumulate land by divisions of town land and by acquisitions. Well into the eighteenth century, family members continued to acquire and maintain the varied types of land, including meadow, pasturage, salt marsh (essential for feeding livestock), and wood lots, needed to sustain a family economy within a community of exchange. The different generations and branches then followed a typical pattern of distributing those lands to their sons and, in some instances, even their daughters, to provide them a means of support. Yet, as the community became more densely settled in the eighteenth century, the availability of land decreased and its cost increased.

Nonetheless, the Pierces continued to own, occupy, and use the family lands acquired in the seventeenth century, many of which were originally located in what was called the "Great Lots," along both sides of Adams Street in the southern part of Dorchester (see Map 1, Appendix F). Several Pierce family properties, in addition to the Pierce House, highlight the family's lengthy ownership of land. Thomas Pierce (1635-1706), the first Pierce occupant of the Pierce House, accumulated extensive lands including some around Adams Village, near Adams and Minot streets, which remained in the family until the middle of the twentieth century. By the late eighteenth century some of this land belonged to Thomas' great-great grandson Thomas Pierce (1757-1841). He constructed a small two-story, gambrel-roofed, hall-and-parlor house with a rear ell and assorted outbuildings (see Photo – Pierce Family, Generation Two) on Adams Street north of Minot Street. At the time of his death, Lewis Pierce (1786-1874) still owned six acres of salt marsh along the Neponset River near Neponset Village, part of a larger parcel first acquired at the end of the seventeenth century.

However, there were also changes in use by the end of the eighteenth century. The proportions of different kinds of land, such as salt marsh, pasturage, wood lots, and meadow, owned and the agricultural uses of those lands began to vary. In addition, some former agricultural lands were transformed because of their proximity to expanding industrial villages, including, for example, some wood lots in the Upper Mills that had been owned by the Pierce family since the early eighteenth century.

By the early nineteenth century, the reduced size of repeatedly divided parcels and the lack of available land made a family economy focused on farming increasingly less viable. Land became the site of dwelling houses and shops in which the head of household practiced a trade,

and the family economy increasingly became redirected toward the market rather than community exchange. Colonel Samuel Pierce (1739-1815), who, like Thomas, considerably expanded the family landholdings, was able to provide for his sons, daughters, and even sons-in-law in this fashion, leaving them each a several-acre lot with room for a dwelling, shop, and land for planting foodstuffs. In contrast to Thomas, however, Colonel Samuel had to purchase property rather than accumulating it through town land divisions.

By the middle of the nineteenth century a further shift had begun throughout Dorchester and the Boston region as former agricultural parcels were subdivided into house lots. In contrast to earlier subdivisions of land designed for both housing and work purposes, now the land was divided into half-acre parcels or less intended solely for residential use. This type of development in Dorchester created an increasingly densely-settled landscape of regularly-sized lots aligned along streets that were laid out in grids. The land was no longer a site of production and sustenance; its value would derive from its sale price. The Pierce Family homestead began as a twenty-acre parcel in the late seventeenth century that extended between Adams Street and Neponset Avenue (see Maps 8 and 15, Appendix F). In the 1760s five acres were set off to Edward Pierce (1735-1818) for his own homestead by his father Samuel (1702-1768.) By the 1840s, Samuel's grandson Lewis Pierce (1788-1874) began to sell off parcels, mostly along Neponset Avenue, as settlement moved north from Neponset Village. The most dramatic transformation began in the late 1860s, however, when the Pierce family subdivided the easterly part of the homestead land and constructed speculative housing as Neponset Village further expanded in their direction.

After Lewis' death in 1874 the Pierce family land experienced its final dramatic transformation. Most of the land had been mortgaged to finance the speculative development (a common practice). If Lewis's heirs wanted family land they, unlike earlier generations, would need to purchase it. In 1845 Lewis's eldest son, Lewis Francis, had bought three quarters of an acre from his father and built a house (see Photo – Pierce Family, Generation Seven-A) across the street from the Pierce House. Lewis's children chose to sell the remaining Pierce land. Even the Pierce House, with its reduced 10,000 square-foot lot (similar in size to abutting lots), went on the auction block. Purchased by Lewis's youngest son, William Augustus Pierce (1827-1905), the homestead would remain in the family and the family would continue to be represented in the neighborhood by him and Lewis Francis Pierce. The appearance of the Pierce House site would remain relatively unchanged until the second decade of the twentieth century because the new owners were slow to develop the surrounding lots. Subsequent generations continued the pattern of providing for the next generation by passing along the family homestead. The story of the Pierce homestead landscape is both a personal family narrative and a representative example of the continuity and change in the use and meaning of land in New England over three centuries.