The Pierce Family: An Appalachian Black History

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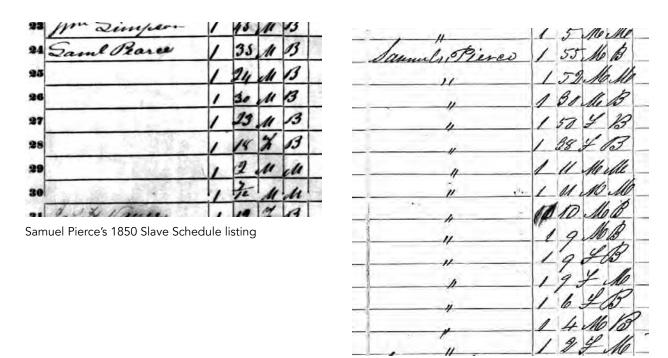
Black in Appalachia: Research, Education & Support

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Some time between 1848 and 1850, somewhere in Virginia, an enslaved woman gave birth to her son, Edward Jerome. As details remain scanty, modern historians are uncertain about the quality of early life for the boy, who was called by his second name. Jerome likely learned to walk on the dirt floor of the one-room cabin where he was born. He likely listened to older people tell stories and shape words to look like the world, so he too could shape the world one day.

By 1850, a wealthy farmer named Samuel Pierce enslaved Jerome and his mother along with five other individuals in Sullivan County, Tennessee. While his mother cooked Pierce's food, Jerome probably worked with the show-worthy cattle and draught horses on the estate. By 1860, Samuel Pierce enslaved fourteen people and reported an estate worth \$34,000, or ~\$1.2 million in 2022. Over the course of the next decade however, Pierce would lose nearly half his wealth to the Civil War and its aftermath.

Horses and Cattle.—Best native bull to Samuel Pierce, of Tennessee; best fat cow to Samuel Pierce, of Tennessee; best fat heifer, one year old, to Samuel Pierce, of Tennessee; best native heifer, over one and under two years, to Samuel Pierce, of Tennessee; best herd of all ages to Samuel Pierce, of Tennessee; best saddle gelding to John T. Jones, of Bristol; best pair heavy-draught horses to Samuel Pierce, of Tennessee; first premium saddle stallion for "Farcy Boy" to R. K. Kelly, of Virginia; first premium saddle filly, two years old, for "Fancy Girl" to V. Thomas, of Virginia.



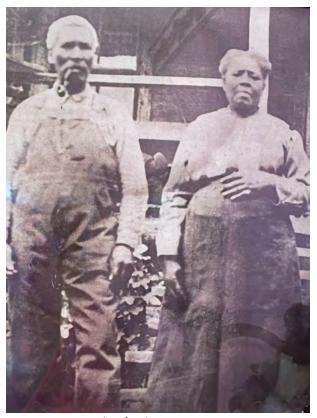
Samuel Pierce's 1860 Slave Schedule listing

After running on a platform of abolition for new American territories, Abraham Lincoln won his bid for the presidency on November 6, 1860. Fearing federally-mandated abolition was nigh, eleven Southern states seceded from the Union during the first half of 1861 to form the Confederate States of America. The Civil War began on April 12, 1861 with the Battle of Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st, 1863, declaring all enslaved persons living in Confederate territory free and allowing these persons to enlist in the Union military should they find the opportunity to do so. Notably, the Proclamation exempted all states in the Union itself and Tennessee.

As a teenager, possibly as young as thirteen years old, Jerome made several attempts to escape slavery in Sullivan County. Between 1863 and 1865, he successfully broke free, traveling north on foot with several other men. Their track was treacherous, they foraged and lived off the land as they went, but Jerome walked to emancipation before the Civil War was out. The United States Army paid him ten dollars a month to haul food and equipment supplies to Union troops stationed in the South. He often rode on the back of the lead horse, fording the rivers where bridges were destroyed, and he learned to count the wages he saved in order to purchase his mother's freedom.

Historian J. David Hacker estimates that more than 750,000 Americans died during the Civil War. In five years, the bloodiest conflict in American history cost over 2 percent of the population their lives. At the close of the war, Jerome once again took the dangerous route south, hiding his blue uniform from unfriendly eyes. He returned to Sullivan County, Tennessee in search of his mother, but the pair were never reunited. Whether the Pierces sold her, if she moved on of her own accord or if she died, the mystery remains unsolved. As though she vanished, no existing record gives a definite end to his mother's life. Jerome settled permanently in Sullivan County; perhaps he hoped his mother would return there one day.

On March 27th, 1888, Jerome Pierce purchased 163 acres of land on Bays Mountain from Nancy Hayes Vincent for \$53.00 (worth roughly \$1,560.00 in 2021). There, he constructed a two-story log cabin with a rock chimney, living room, kitchen, and three bedrooms for his family. Since returning to Sullivan County in the 1860s, Jerome married Alice Luvenia Brown Pierce. Together they had seven children: Samuel Patton (1884), Albert Jerome (1886), Francis Virginia (1888), William M. (1889), Oscar L. (1892), Edward (1899), and Doug M. (1902), but tragedy struck in 1906 when the family lost both Oscar and Doug in the same year.



Jerome Pierce and Wife Alice Luvenia Brown

The onset of Jim Crow followed the end of Reconstruction, but Alice and Jerome Pierce provided powerful tools for their family to weather this turbulence: land ownership and reliable income. The family living on the side of Bays Mountain farmed their own food, and Jerome's reputation as a skilled horseman garnered local acclaim by the turn of the century. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing in the United States at this time, and Kingsport's infrastructure began to change radically as a result.

During the eighteen nineties, Kingsport was home to several major railroad connections, a telephone and telegraph company, and a tilling factory that manufactured brick and earthenware. Industrial development required extensive construction work, and Jerome Pierce and his draught horses were in demand to haul lumber and other materials for building projects.

Of these projects, perhaps the most notable came in 1914, when Kingsport Waterworks Corporation purchased 1300 acres on Bays Mountain where they would build a dam to create a water reservoir for the city. The Corporation contracted Jerome along with his two eldest sons, Samuel and Albert, to haul stone and concrete for the dam using their Belgian draught horses. Jerome and Albert went on to haul lumber for Tennessee Eastman Company (at the time, still in its infancy in Kingsport), as well as rock, sand, and concrete for projects such as the construction of First Baptist Church.

In the ensuing decades, Albert continued to work with horses, as well as blacksmithing and farming.



Hauling logs from Bays Mountain for Eastman Kodak with a Studebaker wagon; Jerome Pierce (seated on horse) with sons Albert J. and Samuel Patton Pierce, 1927-1928

Albert Pierce and his wife, Orlena Fitzgerald Pierce, had thirteen children together. Unfortunately, Lena passed in 1932, three years after the birth of her youngest child, Jack Pierce. Family ties were strong, however, and in the wake of his wife's death Albert raised his youngest children with the help of his oldest. Jack Pierce later recounted to Vince Staten for the Kingsport Times-News that his father performed part-time blacksmithing for Pet Dairy Company and spent the rest of his time farming; his family always had food on the table, even when money was tight. On the farm, they raised horses, cows, hogs, corn, wheat and other vegetables. Albert's family lived in what is now called Old Kingsport (then just Kingsport) where they were the only Black family in their neighborhood. The children attended Douglass, and walked several miles to catch a ride to school in New Kingsport. On Friday, September 17, 1954, Albert Jerome Pierce passed away at sixty eight years old, leaving behind ten children and twenty one grandchildren.

Virginia Pierce married Alfred Bond in 1908. Upon the occasion of her marriage, Jerome built his only daughter and her husband a cabin nearby his own on the side of Bays Mountain. Alfred was a sharecropper, and he and Virginia, along with their eleven children raised all of their own food. The Bonds had a dairy on their property, which was refrigerated by a spring, rather than electricity. They built their own well, and when a child occasionally dropped the bucket into the hole, grandfather Jerome would come to retrieve it for them. Virginia and Alfred's third child, Oscar Bond (whose career in public service speaks for itself) constructed a frame house adjacent to the one Jerome built in 1908. Some of his younger siblings, such as Orvel, the ninth Bond child, grew up in the house Oscar built. Orvel recounted to Leigh Ann Laube (reporting for the Kingsport Times-News) that the family's diet consisted mainly of beans, cornbread and pork in the fall (Jerome raised hogs on Bays Mountain). On special occasions, usually on Sundays when there were visitors, Virginia prepared fried chicken for dinner.

Alfred passed on Friday, February 15, 1952, four-and-a-half years before his fiftieth anniversary with Virginia. On July 27th, 1958, Patton Pierce, Virginia, Oscar, Regina, Rosalee and Chynet Bond gathered to celebrate the anniversary together. Although Virginia passed on Tuesday, November 2, 1976, the annual tradition continues today. Over the decades, the family reunion grew from backyard cookouts to events held at the Masonic Lodge or Shiloh Baptist Church. On the centennial of Virginia and Alfred's wedding in 2008, Kingsport Mayor Dennis Phillips named July 27th Pierce-Bond Day.



Albert J. Pierce and wife Lena Fritzgerald

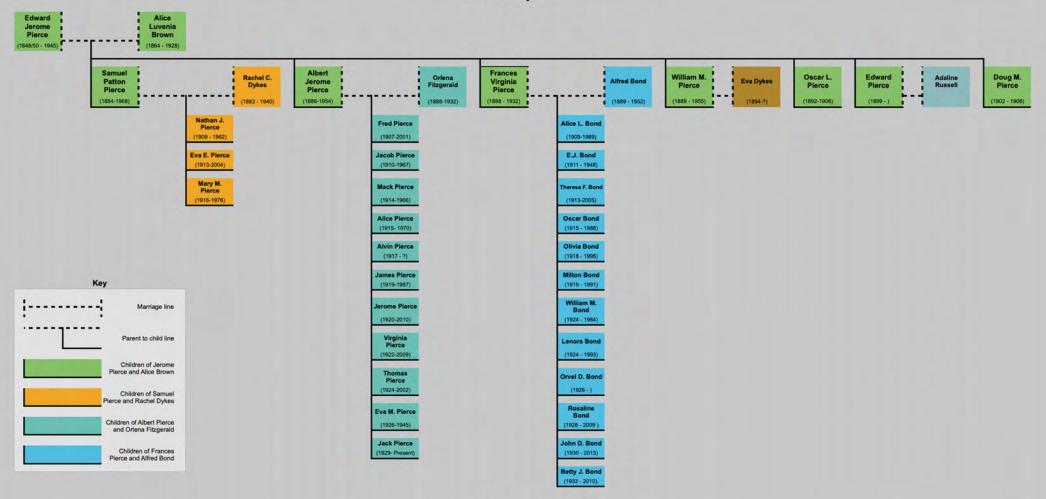
Jerome Pierce himself passed away in 1945. He was preceded in death by his wife Alice Luvenia, who passed in 1928. They are buried next to one another in the Pierce Chapel A.M.E. Cemetery in Kingsport, Tennessee. Today, much of Jerome's property belongs to the Bays Mountain Park, although the Bond-Pierce family retains ownership of his log cabin, and in May 2012, Jerome's memory was made a permanent feature of the park when his name was engraved on a garden bench. However, this engraved bench is only an echo of Jerome's legacy, which is woven into the foundation of Kingsport itself and continues to live on as his descendants tell their stories, shaping words to look like the world so their children, too, can shape the world one day.





Jack Pierce, Grandson of Jerome Pierce







Bays Mountain Dam at Kingsport Reservoir

Bays Mtn Dam 2



Memorial Bench at Bays Mountain Park

Jerome Pierce Plaque 1 (Alex)



Pierce Chapel Historic Register copy





Alfred Bond 1



Jerome and Alice 2 copy



Lena Pierce 1







Pierce 1





Virginia Bond 2



Virginia Leeper

