Historian uncovers Pierce's life

Call it highly unlikely, but it's true, Pierce Street in Birmingham and Fort Pierce, Fla. were named after the same person. One Benjamin K. Pierce, born 1790 in New Hampshire, older brother of Franklin Pierce, 14th United States President, was quite a traveler.

Retired Detroit Times newspaper man and ambitious writer-historian, Louis Burbey of Royal Oak recently published a book on the life and times of Benjamin Pierce, military officer, titled "Our Worthy Commander."

Burbey, an inveterate historian, likes digging for information on history's less-well recorded personalities who made significant contributions to present life.

One of his earlier projects, to trace the origins of street names in Birmingham, provided the groundwork for the book. His articles on Hunter, Willet, Hamilton and Pierce streets were published in The Eccentric in the late '60s.

Burbey said he was "particularly fascinated by the background of Pierce." He traced the Pierce family back to England, the first of whom came to America in 1633. The great, great granddaughter of Benjamin Pierce and her children live in Norfolk, Va. and Burbey has been in contact with her.

PIERCE WAS A PROFESSIONAL MILITARY OFFICER for 38 years. He began his service as an artillery officer in the War of 1815 between the United States and Great Britain.

At the termination of that war he was assigned to Mackinac Island and in 1817, at age 27, became the Commandant of the island's important Fort Mackinac. The fort was under the supervision of the U.S. 5th Military District located in Detroit. This necessitated frequent visits to headquarters.

ON ONE OF THESE VISITS he journeyed by horseback to what is now the city of Birmingham. He bought 160 acres of land here at $2 an acre. Although he referred to his land as "the farm," he never lived on it.

After his first wife, Josephine, died in childbirth and the baby a few days later, Pierce and his friend Dr. William Beaumont rode out to the farm, possibly because Pierce was interested in convincing Beaumont to buy it. However, Beaumont declined.

When the United States acquired Florida from Spain, Captain Pierce and his command were transferred there in 1821.

He went via the Mississippi River to Fort San Carlos de Berranacas, Pensacola, Fla.

Although the command got to the Missippi River by going to Green Bay, Wis. and down the Wisconsin River to the Missippi, Burbey who has a wealth of sidelight information said, "The best way would have been to cross Lake Michigan to the Des Plains River (Illinois), to the Mississippi, but it flowed the wrong way at the time."

From Pensacola, Pierce, promoted to Brevet-Major, was assiged to various posts, from Virginia to New York and back to Florida. He fought in the First and Second undeclared Seminole War, a war which Burbey said, "Eventually involved half of the United States' regular army."

While sailing down Florida's Indian River in "Mackinac" boats, then Colonel Pierce and his command arrived at an inlet from the ocean where they erected a blockhouse. The troops named it Fort Pierce after "our worthy commander."

Burbey includes the details which bring his subject close to his readers. Pierce had three wives, all of whom died before he did.

His first, whom he married in a colorful ceremony on Mackinac Island was part Indian and part French. The bride's mother and aunt, as was tradition, both came to the wedding in their native dress. Possibly the bride, too. The Pierce family doubtless opposed the union.

PIERCE HAD MANY FRIENDS IN THE MICHIGAN AREA in addition to Beaumont. He stayed with either the Hunter or Willet families when he visited his farm. He worked with both General Alexander Macomb and General Charles Gratiot. He was well-traveled and well-respected.

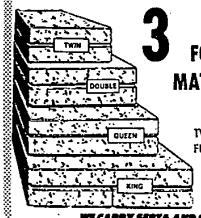
Although he doesn't mention it in the book, Burbey said of Pierce, "He was a better guy than his brother, Franklin. Franklin was inclined to liquor."

Burbey has waived all rights to "Our Worthy Commander" in favor of Indian River Community College in Fort Pierce. Any profit derived from the book is allocated to a scholarship fund.

James Babcock, rare book dealer in Stalker and Boos in the Great American Mall, 280 N. Woodward, has a supply of the books which sell for $7.85 each.

A professor took Louis H. Burbey aside when he was a young man and told him he had a natural flair for history. Burbey has proven the man right many times since. (Staff photo by Dick Kelley)

MATTRESS WAREHOUSE



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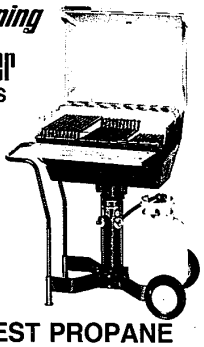

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