

The Pierce Family of Jupiter & Hypoluxo

by Josh Liller, LRHS Historian

Hannibal Dillingham Pierce was born in Maine on November 16, 1834. He is believed to be a distant relative of Franklin Pierce (U.S. President) and Benjamin Pierce (U.S. Army officer and namesake of Fort Pierce), although this has not been proven. Hannibal ran away from home at age 16 to become a sailor on clipper ships, traveling as far as Australia, and on at least one whaling ship.

Hannibal Pierce was shipwrecked on Lake Michigan near Chicago. He was cared for by the family of Mr. and Mrs. James Moore of Waukegan, Illinois. In 1858, he married their daughter, Margretta, a schoolteacher. Hannibal and Margretta had seven children, but only two survived infancy: Charlie (born in Illinois) and Lillie (born in Florida).

During the American Civil War, Pierce and his brother-in-law, Will Moore, enlisted in the 17th Illinois Cavalry, serving from late 1863 until late 1865. Hannibal rose to the rank of First Sergeant. Moore was a bugler, an important role in a cavalry unit.¹

In 1872, Hannibal, Margretta, and Charlie sailed to Florida, eventually reaching the Indian River. They first lived in an abandoned palmetto shack at Ankona, south of Fort Pierce, until it burned down. Having learned of an opening as 2nd Assistant Keeper at the Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse (which included both a salary and housing), the Pierce family headed south in a small boat where they encountered Capt. James Armour sailing north. Having learned of the family's arrival, Armour was on his way to visit them so he could talk Hannibal into being his new assistant. Hannibal Pierce served as assistant keeper for one year, from October 1872 to October 1873.

At the Jupiter, the Armour family and Pierce family shared an eight-room house with Charles Carlin, the 1st Assistant Keeper, and his family. Armour, Carlin, and Pierce turns keeping watch at night – ensuring the oil lamp burned throughout the night, occasionally winding the weight that turned the lens, and watching for any ships in distress. There was a shift change at midnight. By day, the keepers worked together to keep the tower clean, take care of their house and the station grounds, and provide food for their families. As head keeper, Armour handled official correspondence and record keeping related to the lighthouse. Charlie's chores probably included sometimes helping his father with some of the simpler keeper duties.

Hannibal Pierce was on watch after dark on October 20, 1872 when the steamship *Victor* wrecked just south of the Jupiter Inlet. The steamer's single propeller broke so there was no way to keep the ship away from land. In the morning, the keepers helped the crew and passengers get ashore safely, and they were subsequently rescued by another ship. The *Victor*

¹ Another, unrelated, Hannibal Pierce, served in the 105th Illinois Infantry Regiment and as an officer for the 16th US Colored Troops, an African American infantry regiment.

began to break apart from the pounding of the waves. The keepers, their families, and a group of visiting Seminoles salvaged all the goods they could. The keepers got food, clothing, and a sewing machine. They also adopted dogs from the ship and converted the *Victor's* lifeboats into a small sailboat.

The Pierce family left Jupiter for Hypoluxo, an island at the south end of Lake Worth. They traveled down Lake Worth Creek, at the end of which they had to portage their boat to the lake. During this trip, a hurricane crossed Florida from Fort Myers to Cape Canaveral. The family had to improve shelter from the storm by hiding on land under their overturned boat.

Hannibal Pierce built a home on Hypoluxo and grew vegetables, particularly tomatoes and eggplant. He would ship vegetables to Titusville or Jacksonville via sailboat when he could, but the trip was sometimes slow so the vegetables might spoil before getting to market. The Pierce family gained ownership of their land from the federal government in 1883, receiving 50 acres on Hypoluxo Island as part of a Homestead Grant.

Besides farming, Hannibal Pierce worked for the government several more times after the lighthouse. He was keeper of the Houses of Refuge at Orange Grove (Delray Beach) in 1876-1877 and Biscayne Bay (Miami Beach) 1883-1885. House of Refugees aided shipwreck survivors as part of the US Life Saving Service (later the US Coast Guard). Hannibal was also postmaster of Hypoluxo from 1888 until his death in 1898. He also recorded the weather for the Weather Bureau Service.

Charlie Pierce captained a sailboat for money and ran a grocery store before becoming postmaster of Boynton Beach for 30 years. Late in life, he wrote a memoir of his experiences in pioneer Florida, [On The Wings Of Wind](#) (the title refers to sailboats). He used not only his own memories and journals, but also those of his late mother, his sister Lillie, and other surviving pioneers. The memoir was not published until several decades after Charlie's death (as [Pioneer Life in Southeast Florida](#)) and it was extensively edited by a university professor from over 600 pages down to 250 pages.

Lillie Pierce married Fred Voss, a boat engineer. They had a farm and raised a daughter and four sons. Their youngest child, Dr. Gilbert Voss, was a prominent marine biologist at the University of Miami. Other notable descendants include Harvey Oyer III, lawyer and author of The Adventures of Charlie Pierce series, and Marty Baum, historian and environmentalist.