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J. Emory Pierce: The Man for the Times

PATRICIA H. RYAN

Many longtime Huntsville residents remember J. Emory Pierce, the colorful and controversial editor of the *Huntsville Times* and builder of the Times Building. To his admirers he was a man of “vision-faith-action,” the inscription on his tombstone. To others he was simply a con artist, and stories abound of his deceptive, yet creative, financial dealings. Whether all these tales are true or not, it was hard to be ambivalent about the flamboyant Mr. Pierce.

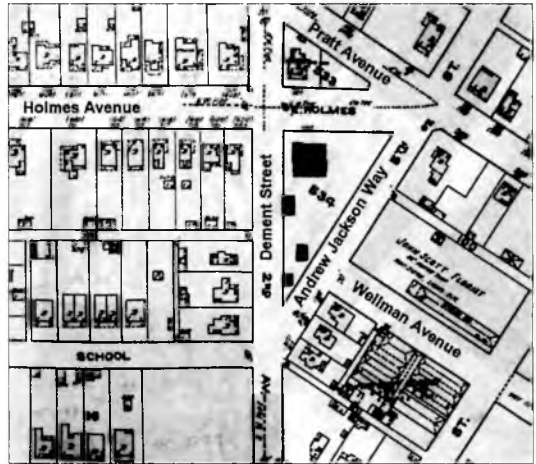
Jacob Emory Pierce was born in Georgia on December 20, 1880, the son of Washington Wyly Pierce (1851-1896) and his wife Mary Ann Orr (1854-1938). The family lived in Texas before moving to Huntsville about 1894. Striking in appearance, he was described as “a fine specimen of physical manhood with a heavy suit of black hair hanging about his shoulders and [swinging a] cane. He would attract attention on the streets or in any crowd, and would compel from strangers the inquiry, who is that man?” Around 1906 he married Nannie Heflin (1876-1953).¹

According to an undated but most likely 1925 *Huntsville Times* article by Colonel Nathan M. Rowe, with information presumably supplied by Pierce, he began his newspaper career in 1894 as a carrier for the *Huntsville Daily Tribune* at the salary of \$2.50 per month. As he advanced, he served as collector, bookkeeper, business manager, city editor, and editor before leaving the *Tribune* to start his own paper. On March 23, 1910, the first issue of the *Huntsville Daily Times* was published, with Nannie H. Pierce the sole owner and J. Emory Pierce the editor and general manager. He later wrote of its humble beginning in “an old ram shackly, leaking wooden structure.” For many years, running the newspaper was certainly a family affair. In 1925 for instance, Pierce’s sister Arvie was society editor and head of the accounting department; his brother Berry (sic) was the manager of circulation, and his son William was sports editor and assistant to the advertising manager.²

Like many entrepreneurs of his time, Pierce engaged in varied business activities and at one time was involved in fifty-two different enterprises. Due to a lack of local source material, a thorough examination of his sundry ventures is not possible. However, a study of available court documents reveals that the Pierces were certainly no strangers to the judicial process having been involved in almost three dozen cases. Some cases sought judgments against Pierce, some involved delinquent ad valorem taxes, and others were dismissed. Unfortunately, haphazard storage over time has left many court records missing or

incomplete, but existing volumes provide some insight. Early in his career, he and his brother N. L. operated the Pierce Coal Company (also called N. L. Pierce & Co.) in Huntsville while Pierce Brothers & Whitaker sold coal, coke and wood in Fayetteville, Tennessee. In 1910 their supplier sued for payment of fifteen carloads of coal, which Pierce claimed were only partially delivered. In 1916 he owed for “one talking machine, known as deluxe 1914 model.” In both cases the outcome is unknown. The most serious charge involved misrepresenting himself as a government officer in the sale of Fourth Liberty Loans during World War I. He was acquitted of this “ridiculous and absurd charge” and noted the jury in this “political persecution case” was out only four and one-quarter minutes.³

Befitting his self-proclaimed stature in the community, Pierce wanted to create a distinctive home for his family. He selected the triangular plot at Five Points that fronted 200 feet on the south side of Holmes Avenue and was bounded on the east



This 1921 Sanborn map shows the Five Points area with Pierce's new house being the dark rectangle in Block 534; today the house site is occupied by Tenders, and the BP station sits in what was Pierce's front yard. Outbuildings, including a garage, are located south of the main house.



The east wall of the house and porch appears to be under construction around an earlier Victorian structure. According to local legend, Pierce did indeed build his rock castle around the clapboard house. When the mortgage holder on the frame building demanded payment, Pierce reportedly denied its existence, proudly pointing to his new residence.

by Fifth Street (now Andrew Jackson Way) and on the west by Second Avenue (now Dement Street), which he assembled from three parcels between 1906 and 1908. The last tract he acquired by declaring, “(I) hereby give notice that I am in adverse possession of (it),” an unconventional way to pass title.* The consideration paid for one of Pierce’s tracts indicates the presence of a house, and the 1913 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows a modest two-story frame dwelling with a bay on each side. What Pierce envisioned was something entirely different—a two-story house with a three-story tower and walls composed of stones of varying kinds and sizes

set in concrete. Known locally as the “wedding cake house,” the “rock castle,” or “Pierce’s folly,” it was certainly a departure from the Colonial Revival and bungalow styles then in fashion. It seems likely that he incorporated at least a portion of the older house in his new one. By superimposing the footprint of the 1913 house over that of the stone house as shown on later Sanborn maps, it is apparent that part of the west wall and window bay is shared by both houses. Written on his 1921 ad valorem assessment sheet dated December 1920 is “one ten-room residence improvements remodel still [ongoing],” so 1920/21 seems a logical date for its construction.⁴

*The adverse possession volume dates from 1893 to 1929 and contains a mere thirty-five claims.



The Pierce home and outbuildings as seen when looking westward from the intersection of Holmes Avenue and Andrew Jackson Way. Courtesy Huntsville Madison County Public Library

Once his home was completed he could focus on an even bigger dream—constructing the tallest building in town to be located at the southwest corner of East Holmes Avenue and Greene Street to house his newspaper. Pierce first bought the property in 1906 but lost it through foreclosure six years later; he purchased it again in 1919. To finance part of the project the Times Building Company was incorporated in late December 1926 with a capital stock of \$100,000 (1,000 shares of \$100 each). Nannie Pierce owned 998 shares; J. E. and William H. Pierce, his son, each owned one share. A special edition of the *Times* published June 25, 1925, announced his plans. While the actual newspaper could not be located, xeroxed portions of it provide insight. A preliminary drawing showed a ten-story building topped with a wide cornice supported by brackets and “J. E. Pierce” and “The Huntsville Daily Times” displayed prominently above the entrances. The design was further refined and the building expanded to eleven floors by the time construction started. Legend relates that the elevators had already been ordered when Pierce learned of plans for the twelve-story Russel Erskine Hotel. Another floor was added to match



The Pierce house, viewed from the corner of Holmes Avenue and Dement Street, showing the light standards on the fence posts and one of the concrete and stone benches. Courtesy Escoe B. Henley

the height of the hotel, and today the top floor of the Times Building is accessible only by staircase.⁵

Two Pierce “stories” are told involving the building’s construction. The first relates to the elevators. Having delayed payment to the Otis Company until the elevators were safely installed and the building almost, if not altogether, completed, Pierce said the company could take back its elevators, but he would sue for any damage to the building incurred during the removal process. Thus he got free elevators.

The second anecdote concerns the marble panels in the entry lobby and the marble wainscoting in the elevator lobbies of each upper floor. Pierce met the delivery train at the depot, unloaded the marble, and somehow got the bill of lading without signing to show he had received it. When the marble company, after many pleas, came for its money, he denied having received any marble from them. There is likely

some truth to this tale as the Gray (Grey) Knox Marble Company of Knox County, Tennessee, filed a mechanics lien on the building for \$4,532.13 plus interest.⁶

The Times Building, located at what Pierce referred to as Holmes Avenue and Metropolitan Avenue (Greene Street), was completed in December 1928. Calling it “Greater Huntsville’s biggest and best asset,” he wrote of its importance and layout:

You can see the Daily Times building for miles and miles. It can be seen from any direction and on the installation of our giant beacon on top, the equipment now being en route to Huntsville, the rays from this 10,000,000-candle power light can be seen on clear nights as far as 100 miles, reach across as they will Birmingham, Chattanooga, Nashville and going halfway to Memphis. This means that on dark and cloudy nights the powerful electrical illumination will focus 40 and 50 miles under all conditions. Just another means of attracting the outside world to this rapidly growing and prosperous community...

Forgetting the struggles of the past for a moment let us usher you thru our plant: first you enter the spacious marble corridors, banking department and business office to the west of the Holmes Street entrance, circulation department to the south of the Metropolitan Avenue entrance, advertising department in the west corridor which leads south to the spacious pressroom, stereotyping and mailing departments. Immediately west of the south corridor you go down the marble stairway into the mammoth auditorium, the largest in any private or public building in the South. Here you find other useful departments of the building itself, all floors served by the finest multi-voltage control Otis elevators.

After the first floor accommodations you have the comforts and conveniences of the second floor which includes the composing room, editorial, news, social, president’s office, director’s room, private office of the editor and general manager, city room and other modern newspaper depart-

ments, including the Associated Press. The first floor will also have the classified, social receiving desks, private telephone exchange connecting all departments, information and other aids to quick public service.⁷

Unfortunately, Pierce's dream was short-lived.

The severity of the Great Depression coupled with Pierce's shaky finances caused him to lose everything. In early June 1931 the *Times* went into receivership and was operated by Shelby Fletcher. In October the newspaper, printing properties, and a Dodge sedan were auctioned for \$44,350. Pierce's son William dropped out of the bidding at \$35,000. Trustee Charles F. Lovell sold the building to I. B. Tigrett, T. H. Temple and Littell J. Rust. The deed, a lengthy and complicated document, concerned the default on First Mortgage Gold Bonds in the aggregate amount of \$200,000.⁸

Pierce's downslide continued and he soon ran afoul of the federal government. By 1935 he was publisher of the *Huntsville Daily Register* which was established December 8, 1931, by his son William. Emory Pierce sold advertising to farmers and others in West Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi for a special TVA edition promoting rural electrification for their counties. The government and the farmers saw things differently. They claimed Pierce fraudulently represented himself as a government official selling TVA stock units to secure electricity for their areas. Only after the transactions were completed and they examined their folded receipts did they discover they had in fact purchased advertising, not stock. In September Pierce was arrested in Winchester, Tennessee, after complaints by about twenty Franklin County farmers, and he immediately labeled the charges "malicious, ridiculous, and libelous." The trial took place in federal court in Memphis in December. Twenty-two witnesses testified for the prosecution, all claiming they were duped; the defense called some thirty persons to dispute this or attest to his good character. E. H. Roach, alternately referred to as Pierce's secretary, chauffeur, and *paper rack*, was also charged. Roach claimed that beginning in August 1934 he and Pierce averaged 800 miles per week in Mississippi and Tennessee selling advertising. He

acted as a paper rack by holding up copies of the *Register* for customers to examine. Pierce took the stand for six hours and maintained he sold ads ranging from \$10 to \$300 to some 3,500 to 5,000 persons in 92 counties. Under cross-examination he admitted he had been detained in at least five Tennessee counties as well as five or six in Mississippi over complaints by subscribers who were dissatisfied “for some reason which I do not know.” Incredulously, Pierce’s attorney moved for acquittal on the grounds that the Tennessee Valley Authority act was unconstitutional and therefore it was not illegal to pose as its agent since it was not a federal agency. District Judge John D. Martin denied the motion, and the jury convicted both men on seventeen counts of the twenty-count indictment. Pierce was sentenced to twelve years in federal prison and fined \$8,500. Roach received a five-year sentence with a \$3,400 fine. It is not known if the case was appealed or how much time either man served.⁹

In 1936 the Pierce house was sold at auction to satisfy indebtedness outstanding on a mortgage. Subsequently the Cumberland Presbyterian Church purchased it for their meetinghouse. The northeast 100 feet was parceled out to Gulf Oil in 1939 while the house was sold to Mutual Savings Life Insurance Company in 1942. According to city directories it served as a funeral home until Pure Oil bought it in 1950. Regrettably this unique architectural treasure was razed for a gas station.¹⁰



The sign atop this remnant of wall in Five Points reads: “This rock wall is the last remaining of a beautiful wall around Mr. J. Emory Pierce’s ‘CASTLE’ on Holmes Street that distinguished this neighborhood in east Huntsville. The wall matched the structure of the home.” (Sign erected by Coca-Cola.) Photograph by Linda Allen.

Pierce later owned and operated the Pierce Newspaper Publishers Service, a national advertising business. The southeastern headquarters were located in Memphis with branch offices in Houston, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Seattle.¹¹

Pierce died in Houston of a heart attack on September 12, 1952. Services were held in Huntsville at the First Baptist Church with burial in Maple Hill Cemetery. As a testament to his long standing in the community, ninety-five of the town's most prominent citizens served as honorary pallbearers.¹²

The legacy of J. Emory Pierce is certainly his beautiful Times Building, a hub of downtown activity for many years until suburbia began to draw businesses away. Now, with a sensitive restoration underway it will once again be a vibrant presence on the Huntsville skyline.

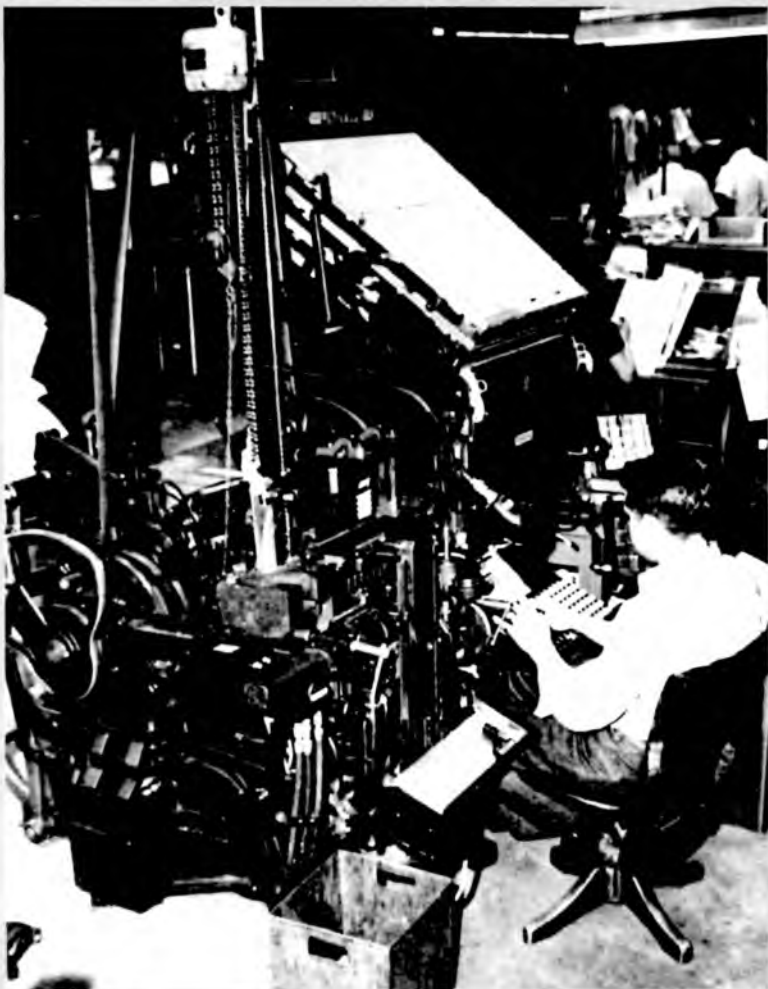
Notes

- 1 Maple Hill Cemetery, Huntsville, Alabama, Block D; "J. Emory Pierce's Rites on Monday," *Huntsville Times*, 14 September 1952, p.1; Nathan M. Rowe, "Col. N.M. Rowe Writes Memoirs of Newspapers in Huntsville," *Huntsville Daily Times*, undated; 1910 Census of Madison County, Alabama.
- 2 Rowe; J.E. Pierce, "The Daily Times Is Now In Its 12-Story Home Plus Modern Plant," *Huntsville Daily Times*, 18 December 1928, p.4; *Huntsville Daily Times*, 28 June 1925.
- 3 "J. Emory Pierce's Rites," p.2; Indexes to Criminal, Chancery and Probate Court Cases, Madison County, Alabama; Circuit Court Case #410, Madison County, Alabama; Circuit Court Case #1233, Madison County, Alabama; "Editor Pierce Vindicated," *Huntsville Daily Times*, 3 April 1919, p.1.
- 4 Deed Book 94, p.458; Deed Book 95, p.395; Adverse Possession Book 1, p.18, Madison County, Alabama; Insurance Maps of Huntsville, Alabama, (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1913), sheet 13; Huntsville, Alabama, (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1928), sheet 12; 1921 Madison County Tax Blanks, Beat 1, vol. P, not numbered.

- 5 Deed Book 95, p.170; Deed Book 105, p.243; Deed Book 120, p.47, Madison County, Alabama; Incorporation Book 3, p.117, Madison County, Alabama; *Huntsville Daily Times*, 25 June 1925.
- 6 Mechanics Lien Book 3, p. 41, Madison County, Alabama.
- 7 Pierce, p.4.
- 8 “Henry Johnston Buys The Times On Bid Of \$44,350,” *Huntsville Daily Times*, 11 October 1931, p.1; Deed Book 139, p.672-686.
- 9 “Pierce Makes Bond Of \$2,000,” *Huntsville Times*, 10 September 1935, p.3; “Pierce Trial Nears Close,” *Huntsville Times*, 19 December 1935, p.1; “Pierce Motion Is Overruled,” *Huntsville Times*, 18 December 1935, p.1; “Pierce, Roach Found Guilty,” *Huntsville Times*, 20 December 1935, p.1; “Lawyers Argue Pierce Motion,” *Huntsville Times*, 26 December 1935, p. 1; “Pierce Given 12-Year Term,” *Huntsville Times*, 20 January 1936, p.1.
- 10 Deed Book 148, p.194; Deed Book 148, p. 365; Deed Book 152, p.192; Deed Book 158, p. 244, Madison County Alabama; Huntsville, Alabama, City Directory, (Charleston: Baldwin Directory Co., 1947), p.547; Deed Book 195, p.215, Madison County, Alabama.
- 11 “J. Emory Pierce’s Rites,” p. 1.
- 12 “J. Emory Pierce Funeral Is Held,” *Huntsville Times*, 15 September 1952, p.4.



This rare view of Pierce's garden to the south of his house reveals that he applied his stone-and-concrete theme to even the plant stands and benches. Courtesy Escoe B. Henley



This monster of a machine was one of the six Linotypes employed by the Times to set type when the paper was located downtown. Courtesy Fred Johnston