

More on the Story of Joseph Pierce

The impetus for writing, “An American Journey- My Father, Lincoln, Joseph Pierce and Me”, was Julie Moy’s encouragement to compile my research and thoughts on the life of Joseph Pierce into a single source for researchers to add to the story of what we know of him so that his story, and in a larger sense, that the contributions of the Chinese to this nation, will not be lost to the memories of history. As such, I received very exciting information from Dr. Michael Marcus, Amy Melissa Kirby and Art Apruzzese, which adds to what we presently know of the Pierce story.

Captain Amos Peck and The Hound of Stonington

Amos Peck was the sea captain who purchased Joseph at the age of ten for six silver dollars and brought the young boy from China to live with his family in Berlin, Connecticut. The Pecks were a prominent family in Berlin, Connecticut, who were descendents of Paul Peck, a deacon in Thomas Hooker’s church, when Hooker founded Hartford, the state capital of Connecticut. Amos and his family in Berlin belonged to the Kensington Congregational Church, a denomination that had strong abolitionist leanings. The Hound of Stonington was a ship that Peck was master of.

I wrote the following passage in my book, “*Chinese boys were sold to be either servants of missionaries or as cabin boys to sea captains. But instead of allowing the young boy to spend a life at sea, Amos brought him back to his parents’ home in Connecticut to be raised with his siblings. Perhaps, Peck’s upbringing in Congregationalism with its abolitionist leanings against human servitude caused him to perform this act of kindness.*”¹

Dr. Michael Marcus, West Hartford, CT, who taught in Berlin and has spent years researching some aspects of the United States/Chinese trade connection in preparation for a book he is writing, sent me copies of the following State Department correspondence, (1) dated March 21, 1855 to Amos Peck from Dr. Peter Parker, Acting Commissioner for the U.S. Legation in Macao, China; (2) dated July 23 and 27, 1855 from William Robertson, U.S. Consulate in Havana, Cuba to Secretary of State William Marcy and (3) a formal protest dated July 23, 1855, filed in Havana, Cuba, against Amos Peck for actions he committed as Master of the United States ship, The Hound, against the financial and business interests of Messrs. Pereda and Machao, Havana merchants, involved in the coolie trade.²

In an e-mail of July 8, 2013 Dr. Marcus writes, “*Regarding discrepancies in the “origin” story and what **might** have happened in 1852 or as I am now suggesting in 1855: it is possible that*

¹ Irving David Moy, *An American Journey- My Father, Lincoln, Joseph Pierce and Me*, Lulu. Com, pg. 28

² Senate Documents Otherwise Publ. as Public Documents and Executive Documents, 14th Congress, 1st Session, 48th Congress, 2nd Session and Special Session, 1856, pgs. 93-96

Pierce embarked on The Hound in March 1855 and arrived in the U.S. at some point later that same year. Captain Amos Peck is documented as master of The Hound, built in Mystic in 1853 and chartered in New York in the fall of 1854. Peck gets a footnote in history for complaining about the coolie trade in a communication to William Robertson, Acting American consul in Havana, Cuba. Peck refused to take the number of coolies to Cuba that Spanish agents wanted The Hound to carry. In that communication Peck explicitly compared the coolie trade to the Atlantic slave trade and expressed his shame at being involved in it. Robertson is referenced as regretting the involvement of U.S. vessel in it as well. This sheds light on Amos Peck's motivation for buying the boy and bringing him to his parents' home. This information may also be relevant to Pierce's year of birth. One could also well ask how/where/when did Joseph Pierce learn to fix his birthday using the Christian calendar, or was 1842 always an approximation even in his mind? If he was about 10- close 11 when he arrived in Berlin, where he indisputably was raised, and if he came with Master Peck on the Hound in 1855, then the year of his birth would have been 1844. That date would help with the math in fixing his age in death in 1916 as 72, as engraved on his marker."

As Dr. Marcus points out in his e-mail the incident referred to in the documents has to do with the two Spanish merchants chartering passage with the owners of The Hound for Chinese "contracted" laborers (coolies) bound for Cuba. Peck, after dropping off cargo from New York to Manila was to go to Macao for these passengers on his journey that began in September 1854. But while at Macao at the end of March 1854, Peck allowed only 230 of the 400 present to embark onto the ship, failing to abide by the charter agreement reached with the owners of the ship that the complainants also content could carry up to 470 passengers under the laws of Spain. The correspondence to Peck from Commissioner Parker appears to have been in response to an inquiry as to Peck's rights as the ship's master to refuse passage to the remaining 170 coolies.

The Coolie Trade ³

To shed some light on what the coolie trade was like at the time, the period that contracted Chinese labor flourished was between 1847- 1862. Up to 600,000 yearly were transported on American ships bound for Cuba to work on sugar cane plantations or the guano mines on the Chincha Islands (Islands of Hell) of Peru. The term coolie in Mandarin means "bitterly hard (use of) strength. Although the coolie trade is associated particularly with South China, it also included laborers from the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines and Indonesia. Men signed contracts based on false promises, some were kidnapped, some victims of clan violence who were sold to coolie brokers or sold themselves off to pay off gambling debts. But many were educated and/or from wealthy families. The growth of the coolie trade

³ Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/coolie>

was believed to have been the result of the worldwide movement to abolish the slave trade and the resulting need to transition to another form of labor in place of African slaves.

But there were many similarities with the African slave trade as conditions on the ships crossing the Pacific Passage were just as inhumane as those on the Middle Passage. Terms of contracts were not honored, like slaves many were sold at auctions and worked under strict overseers. According to Ruthanne Lum McCunn, “the Chinese called this trade the pig trade because they said men were bought and sold as pigs.”⁴ An estimated 75% died working in the Cuban sugar plantations. More than 2/3 of the coolies died working in the Peruvian guano mines within their contact period.

Analysis and Conclusions

Amos Peck’s actions in limiting the number of Chinese laborers to be transported on his ship to Cuba and abolitionist leanings supports my theory about why Amos Peck might have bought Joseph Pierce, the type of household he was brought up in and why he enlisted and supports what I wrote in my book regarding what his motivation might have been to bring Joseph Pierce back to Berlin to live with his family.

Because of his apparent knowledge of the horrors of the coolie trade, he sent his inquiry to Dr. Peter Parker, knowing that response would be that being the master of an American ship under the United States flag, he would be under United States laws as to the number of passengers allowed to board his ship. Further, if Peck were “to be guided by the Spanish law in determining the number of passengers” according to Commissioner Parker, Peck would be subject to paying a fine and subject to imprisonment and his ship subject to forfeiture under the U.S. Passenger Act of 1848. This was the “cover” he needed to limit the number of coolies he had to deliver to a life of servitude and most certain death.

The correspondence of July 23, 1855 by William Robertson to Secretary of State William Marcy announces the arrival Peck with *The Hound* and its cargo of 230 Chinese laborers to Havana. The July 23, 1855 formal protest was filed on the same day of the ship’s arrival when the merchants found that the cargo of laborers was less than what they had contracted the ship to bring due to Peck’s actions in refusing the others to board his ship. Robertson’s follow up correspondence on July 27, 1855 to Secretary of State Marcy fully explains the reasons for Peck’s acts. I quote from the letter, “*I enclose you a translation of the protest, and also a copy of a communication to Captain Peck from Dr. Parker, acting United States commissioner, which no doubt, confirmed the captain in his refusal to receive more Chinamen than the number he took in. Captain Peck expresses himself as heartily ashamed of being concerned in such a trade,*

⁴ Ruthanne Lum McCunn, www.mccunn.com, “The Pacific Slave Trade” (Background for God of Luck)

and states that, from information obtained from the “passengers”, on the passage, as to the manner of their being obtained in their country, and, subsequently, of the manner of their being disposed of after arrival here, he cannot but consider this trade as bad, if not worse, than anything he has read or heard of the African slave trade. For my part, I assure you I regret very much to see vessels under our flag engaged in such traffic.”

Although slavery was in effect during Antebellum America, the slave trade itself was against the law. It took bravery to stand up for one’s beliefs in light of the financial losses Amos Peck may have suffered once word got out of his refusal to carry the Chinese laborers. I can speculate that Amos Peck did not return to the west coast for a ship to China until some unknown years had gone by. It would take another 15 years, in the mid-1860’s, for the United States government to disengage ships flying under its colors, from the China to Latin America coolie trade. He would die at the age of 57 on February 12, 1882 in Santa Barbara, California, at the beginning of another voyage.

Joseph Pierce’s Date of Birth

Just as interesting to the Pierce’s story are the implications on his actual year of birth based on the information received from Dr. Marcus. I wrote the following in my book, *“The account of the unnamed Civil War comrade has his birth date as May 10, 1842, while Pierce lists it as November 16, 1842 on his pension applications. As Ms. McCunn wrote me, “It is HIGHLY doubtful that November 16, 1842 was Joseph Pierce’s birth date, certainly it was what he claimed, but he was a small child at the time who likely didn’t even know his birthday in the Chinese calendar, let alone have the ability to convert it accurately to the Western calendar. Therefore, it can be only be assumed Pierce was born on one of these dates in 1842.”*⁵

Analysis and Conclusions

Dr. Marcus’ fixing of Pierce’s birth year with the possibility of him coming to the United States with Amos Peck in 1855 on The Hound is an exciting development in helping to further pinpoint the actual year of his birth that has always been problematic in determining. On his enlistment papers dated July 26, 1862, his age is listed as being 21; this would have made his birth year 1841. Pierce, himself, lists his birth year as being 1842 on his pension applications and as Dr. Marcus points out, if Pierce was 72 when he died in 1916, his birth year would have been 1844.

The date of Commissioner Parker’s response to Peck is March 21, 1855 and not 1854. And according to the official protest by Pereda and Machado, The Hound was chartered in New York on September 16, 1854 to provide passage for the coolies to Havana and arrived and docked in

⁵ Ibid, Irving David Moy, pg. 17

Macao on March 30 and 31, 1855. This protest was lodged on July 23, 1855 the day after The Hound arrived without the expected cargo of coolies. If Joseph did embark on The Hound with Captain Peck it would have been on the March 1855 trip to China. If the young lad was around 10 or 11 at the time, Dr. Marcus is correct that his birth year is more likely to have been either in 1844 or 1845 than 1842. In 1855 Franklin Pierce was still President of the United States so giving Joseph the surname of Pierce was still possible.

Recruitment Station Location in New Britain

Twenty-one men, including Joseph Pierce and Medal of Honor winner, Elijah Bacon, from Berlin, Connecticut, enlisted on July 26, 1862 at a recruiting station in New Britain. I always wondered where in New Britain the recruitment station was located.

Amy Melissa Kirby, president of the New Britain Historical Society, sent me excerpts from the following books, which point to the possible location of the recruitment station as being possibly the chapel in the third meeting house of First Church (Congregational Church) that was located on the corner of Main and Bank Streets on the Center Green:

David Nelson Camp, History of New Britain: With Sketches of Farmington and Berlin, Connecticut

The first regular Civil War “war meeting” in Hartford County, and one of the first in the state, was held in First Church on Sunday evening, April 14, 1861. This was only a few hours after the evacuation of Fort Sumter. Samuel Rockwell presided. Resolutions by the town to support the Union government were unanimous. During this meeting, V. B. Chamberlain displayed a portrait of major Anderson, and gave a “thrilling speech.” An enlistment paper was presented, and the first to sign was Frank E. Stanley, who was killed at Irish Bend, Louisiana. This began the official enlistment of volunteers. Enlistments continued in earnest, and on Monday, April 22, 1861, Company G, First Regiment of New Britain, was among the first Connecticut companies to be mustered into service.

Other companies either partly or primarily from New Britain to successfully muster in included:

- Company G, 6th Regiment Infantry
- Company A, 7th Regiment (which included Valentine B. Chamberlain)
- Company A, 13th Regiment
- Company. F, 14th Regiment- mustered in August 23, 1862 (into U.S. service); had 65 troops, and its principal officers were in New Britain: Captain Jarvis E. Blinn,

Lieutenants Frederick S. Seymour and Theodore A. Stanley, Sergeants Frank W. Stanley, Norman W. Warren and Charles R. Gladden

Alfred Andrews, Memorial. Genealogy, and Ecclesiastical History (of First Church, New Britain, Connecticut)

During 1862, 24 volunteers from the First Church Sunday School enlisted in the Union Army, of which 8 had fallen. The number of enlisted men from New Britain was 640, of which 80 died from wounds or disease.

Previous to this church was a house built by blacksmith Ira Stanley. The New Britain Society decided in 1853 to build a new meeting house (church). The plan was to buy the house of Ira Stanley (who had moved to a new home on Washington Street), move that house to a nearby lot, and build the church out of brick. The purchase of the Stanley House cost \$7,000 partially recovered by selling the moved house to Dr. Benjamin Comings. The cost of the building was paid off by the end of 1862, mainly by the congregation itself.

The new meeting house, later nicknamed Center Church, was dedicated August 23, 1855. It was built of Romanesque Architecture, measuring 138 ft. long by 63 ft. wide, and had a spire 190 ft. high. Its major rooms were a chapel, an audience room, and two smaller parlors.

Reverend Horace Winslow was the pastor of First Church when the new church was built. Winslow had been accepted to the church in December 1852, and resigned in November 1857. Reverend Lavalette Perrin was appointed in January 1858 and was pastor in place during the Civil War (through July 1867 as of the writing of this book).

First Church News, Vol. 56, No. 5.

From Robin Spencer of the Anniversary Committee: “When New Britain residents and First Church members were called to serve in the Civil War, they signed their enlistment papers on the communion table that is still in our chapel today.”

Analysis and Conclusions

From the excerpts the probable location of the recruiting station was in the third meeting house of First Church (Congregational) that was located on the corner of Main and Bank Street on the Center Green. This location makes sense for a number of reasons. First Church was the first rallying location in Hartford County for the cause of Union shortly after the war began. Many members of the church answered the call for volunteers. The location of the church (later earning the nickname Center Church) was centrally located off the green easy for recruits to find and then to gather on the green to be mustered into companies after their physical exams that could have taken place in the two small parlors or the audience room. And from the excerpt in

First Church News, the completion and signing of their enlistment papers took place in the chapel on its communion table.

Art Apruzzese from San Luis Obispo, CA sent a period photo of the Center Green area of New Britain around the time period of the Civil War. The spire of First Church is clearly seen to the right of the photo although the church itself is hidden by the adjacent buildings. A gazebo is shown on the green. After the war in 1897 The Soldiers' Monument was erected and dedicated on September 19, 1900 at this location.

