

FranklinPierce

UNIVERSITY

FOUNDER'S DAY SPEECH

by Professor Peter Wallner, Nov. 14, 2012,
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Franklin Pierce has always been ranked as one of our worst Presidents. The reason he is ranked so low is due to his views on slavery and the Civil War – which to contemporaries seem pro-southern and defeatist. But I have always claimed that Pierce is one of our least known and least studied former presidents and his reputation may not be entirely deserved.

Because of this poor ranking and Pierce's reputation regarding slavery, I wondered why a new college would be named for pierce in 1962 – the height of the Civil Rights movement. My inquiries about this turned up a story which may be apocryphal. According to this account, the first board members were all from out of state (Massachusetts), but the land for the school was in New Hampshire. At an early board meeting, it was suggested that they name the school after someone from New Hampshire. Franklin Pierce was suggest, at which some point someone on the board exclaimed, "Who was he?"

While the story may not be true, I think it *is* true that the name of the school was chosen without any real investigation into who Franklin Pierce was or what he stood for. My purpose today is to answer the questions: Who was Franklin Pierce? And why would he be remembered today? Should FPU be proud of the man for whom the school is named?

A couple of facts about his presidency indicate that there is more to pierce than his historical reputation. First, Pierce is one of only two Presidents whose entire political career occurred in a small state – the other was Bill Clinton. Second, Pierce is the only President to date to serve a full-term in office with the same cabinet – no changes. None of his cabinet members ever said a bad word about him in later years. Third, Pierce is also the only President elected to a full-term who sought a second term but was denied re-nomination by his own party.

Who was Franklin Pierce? He was a product of the Granite State. Born and raised in Hillsborough. Franklin was strongly influence by his father, Benjamin Pierce, a Revolutionary War hero, local leader and politician, who became governor of New Hampshire in his later years. Though well-to-do, Benjamin Pierce always supported the small farmers who struggled to earn a living off the hardscrabble land. Franklin followed his father into politics, being elected town moderator at 23, to the State House at 24, Speaker at 26, the U.S.

Congress at 27, and the U.S. Senate at 31. Pierce admired his father and never wavered from his father's believe in small government, the common man, and democracy. Benjamin Pierce was a Jeffersonian, later a Jacksonian Democrat, and so was his son. Franklin Pierce's meteoric rise in state politics demonstrated that he learned these lessons well and became a favorite son to his neighbors and the voters of New Hampshire as he reflected their values of independence, hard work, and individual liberty. His mother, Anna Kendrick Pierce, was less of an influence of her son and was somewhat unstable and possibly a heavy drinker.

Second, Pierce was a patriot in an old-fashioned way. He grew up in the home of a Revolutionary War hero. He always admired the accomplishments and sacrifices of the Revolutionary War generation. He was determined to protect the union and the constitution which they created. Besides his father's example, young Franklin Pierce also learned from the experiences of his older brothers and brother-in-law, who all served in the War of 1812. His brother-in-law, John McNeil, led the New Hampshire militia in the Battle of Lundy's Lane, and was ably assisted by Pierce's older brother, Benjamin K. Pierce, and his next oldest brother, John Sullivan. After the war, John McNeil remained in the army and became a brigadier general. Benjamin K. Pierce also became a career soldier and rose to the rank of colonel (the town of Fort Pierce, Fla., is named after him).

Though too young to fight in the War of 1812, Pierce always hoped to have an opportunity to serve in the military. That opportunity came when he was 42 years old, when he left his family and law practice in Concord to fight in the Mexican War. Because of his political prominence, President Polk commissioned Pierce as a brigadier general. He led a brigade of soldiers to Mexico City and fought in the final battles of the war. Contemporaries such as Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, and Pierce's commanding officer, Winfield Scott, spoke highly of his courage and leadership. His war record added to his nine years in Congress made Pierce a viable Presidential candidate. He was nominated in 1852, running against his former commander, Winfield Scott, and winning in a landslide.

Pierce also believed in higher education. He was the only one of Benjamin Pierce's eight children to graduate from college. Pierce attended Bowdoin College, where he was the acknowledged campus leader among a group of friends that included John Parker Hale; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; Calvin Stowe (Harriet Beecher); future political leader, William Pitt Fessenden; and Pierce's best friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Pierce and Hawthorne remained best friends throughout their lives, and after Hawthorne's death, Pierce paid for Hawthorne's son to attend Harvard. Pierce also paid for the college educations of his two nephews, the sons of his younger brother, Henry Dearborn Pierce. Pierce also went beyond college, studying law under Levi Woodbury – other than Pierce, probably the second most important political leader in N.H. history – judge, governor, senator, cabinet officer, Supreme Court Justice – Jacksonian Democrat.

Pierce was a good family man. He was devoted to his wife, Jane Means Appleton, who was always in fragile health, very shy and retiring, and hated politics. Pierce was just the opposite – gregarious, outgoing, enjoyed a good time, athletic, an excellent horseman, hunter, and fisherman. He was the perfect politician in that he was handsome, a good public speaker, and never forgot a name or a face. In 1842 he gave up elective office with a year to go in his senate term to return to New Hampshire to spend more time with his wife and help

raise their two boys. The death of both boys – the second in a gruesome railroad accident – cast a shadow over their lives, but Pierce did everything he could to take care of his ill wife, especially after leaving the Presidency. He took her on a two-year-long trip to Europe seeking a cure for her ailments. With no children of his own, he generously aided the children of his friends and relatives. Everyone who knew Pierce, whether political or foe, acknowledged his kindness and generosity.

Pierce was also an honest man. He did not view political office as an opportunity for self-aggrandizement. At a time when corruption was endemic in government (far more so than today), Pierce never profited from his political career, as many around him did, and as President, he ran one of the cleanest, most corruption free administrations of the 19th century. To Pierce, public office was a public trust, and the American people were entitled to frugal and efficient government. His administration managed to pay down 60% of the national debt in four years, and operate with a budget surplus each year. There was never a hint of scandal or impropriety associated with any of Pierce political activities or those of his cabinet. In fact, his cabinet is rated of the best of the 19th century.

So why then is Pierce's administration so denigrated today? There is one main reason, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise which had banned slavery from the western territories acquired in the Louisiana Purchase. The bill was proposed by Sen. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois in order to settle the land between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains. Southerners in Congress refused to support the bill, since they would be unable to bring slaves into the territory. To win their support, Douglas inserted repeal of the Missouri Compromise and replaced it with the concept of popular sovereignty, whereby the settlers of the territory would vote on whether or not to allow slaves. Pierce at first objected to the bill, but eventually was talked into supporting it. The bill passed, despite strong objections from northerners, and the slavery issue was before the public as never before. Violence erupted in Kansas between pro and anti-slavery settlers. Pierce was blamed for the violence and for upsetting the fragile peace that had existed between north and south since the Compromise of 1850. As a result, he was so unpopular in the north that he could not be re-nominated in 1856. While Pierce can be blamed for supporting the unpopular and unsuccessful Kansas-Nebraska Act, he did so to support the Democratic Party platform on which he ran for office, which called for popular sovereignty, and to continue westward expansion which held the promise of new lands for the common man, whom he had always supported.

Pierce was a man of his times. He held the same views on race and slavery as the great majority of Americans. In fact, anyone wishing to learn about the United States in the mid-19th century would learn a lot by simply following Pierce's career, for he was involved in every major movement of the times. For example, Pierce advocated for westward expansion. Besides the ill-advised Kansas-Nebraska Bill, he also negotiated the Gadsden Treaty with Mexico which added a stretch of land in the southwest that included the future cities of El Paso, Tucson and San Diego. He understood that if Kansas and Nebraska could not be settled, westward expansion and the promise of cheap land for the common man would come to an end.

Pierce supported the building of a transcontinental railroad, and had all the routes surveyed for a future railroad. This was carried out by his Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, who also became Pierce's best friend in the cabinet, a fact which hurt Pierce's reputation in later years. A transcontinental railroad would unite the country over the vast continent, but the slavery issue prevented any one route from being chosen during his

administration. Nevertheless, all five routes surveyed would eventually become transcontinental railroads, and the report of the survey teams would be published into a multi-volume work, considered today the most complete description of the American West ever produced.

Pierce defended freedom of religion and open immigration at a time when they were most imperiled by anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant political and social movements. He was a strong and consistent advocate of the first amendment. As President, he appointed the first Irish Catholic to his cabinet, James Campbell – postmaster general. He also appointed the first Jew to a diplomatic post, August Belmont, minister to the Netherlands. Prior to his Presidency, Pierce had invited Concord's first Catholic priest to dine in his home – a symbolic gesture remembered to this day by New Hampshire's Catholic Church hierarchy. Pierce also defended the Shaker's from state government attempts to restrict their religious practices. As President, he worked hard to blunt the impact of the know-nothing movement, an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant political movement that threatened to take over the government. Pierce required all know-nothings to be fired from his administration.

Pierce understood that the U.S. was destined to become a world power. He endorsed free trade of U.S. goods around the world, starting with the first trade reciprocity treaty between the U.S. and Canada. During the Crimean War, he insisted that American ships be permitted to trade with all sides. Before leaving office, he achieved a low tariff bill which reduced tariffs to their lowest level of the century.

The temperance movement was a popular cause at that time. Pierce participated in the movement, despite, or maybe because he had a drinking problem of his own, but he refused to support the movement when it demanded prohibition of alcohol. Pierce believed prohibition was impractical and would be selectively enforced against the common man and religious minorities like the Catholics.

Pierce opposed filibusters. The word had a completely different meaning than it does today. Today a filibuster is action by one senator to prevent action on a bill. In the mid-19th century, filibusters were illegal military invasions of foreign countries by adventures and para-military organizations. These were extremely popular at a time Americans believed in the concept of manifest destiny – the idea that the U.S. was destined to take over all of North America including Canada, Mexico and Central America. As president, Pierce had to deal with invasions by U.S. citizens of Cuba, Mexico, and Nicaragua. He did everything he could to prevent them, by having the navy and federal marshals attempt to halt their departures, arrest the leaders, and bring them to justice. In every case, local juries refused to convict anyone of filibustering, but Pierce was largely successful in preventing these illegal military groups from reaching their destinations.

Finally, Pierce's policies forced Great Britain to begin to respect the United States. He did this through his attempts to prevent filibusters in Central America, by insisting that the British respect our shipping during the Crimean War, and by strictly enforcing laws preventing the British from recruiting soldiers on American soil during the Crimean War.

In all these movements, favoring westward expansion, supporting a transcontinental railroad, promoting free trade, opposing prohibition, standing for freedom of religion, enforcing international law, and demanding respect from Great Britain, Pierce was on the right side of history. In only one area, the issue of slavery, did he fail to live up to his own principles. He stated many times that he abhorred slavery, but he

saw clearly that it was legal and constitutional, and the only way to end it was through a civil war, which would result in the deaths of thousands of his neighbors – the common man he had always defended. His vision was clouded by this fear, and by his commitment to the Revolutionary War generation of his father, which had created a nation with slavery a part of it. For his failure to embrace the cause of emancipation and civil war, his Presidency and his reputation are forever tarnished.

But a low ranking as a President is not sufficient to understand Franklin Pierce or the times in which he lived. His best friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, wrote often about Pierce, including this description, “He is a most singular character, so frank, so true, so immediate, so subtle, so simple, so complicated.” Pierce was a complex man with simple values. If a student of human nature like Hawthorne, who explored the depths of the human condition in his own writing, could find Pierce to be infinitely interesting, history would profit by taking a second look and reconsider the career of the only President from the Granite State. There seems little hope of this, however. While there have been hundreds of books written about Lincoln, only two historians – one writing in 1930 and my books – have attempted to analyze Pierce’s life and career. There is an old proverb, however: “Truth is the daughter of time.” The passage of time permits us to understand Pierce better. At least today, at the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the University that bears his name, we remember the many admirable qualities of a patriotic American, our 14th President, Franklin Pierce.