

Rediscovering William Pierce, Jr.'s Character Sketches*

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Note: The author has extracted most of the information in this paper from a more highly-documented book that he is writing, which is tentatively titled *"The Wisest Council in the World": Restoring the Prose Portraits by William Pierce of Georgia of the Delegates to the Federal Convention of 1787.

Rediscovering William Pierce, Jr.

Four delegates, Abraham Baldwin, William Houstoun, William Few, and William Pierce, Jr., represented Georgia in Philadelphia at the U.S. Constitutional Convention of 1787. Although the state was newly founded, sparsely populated, and politically divided between the tidewater and the upcountry (See Saye, 1934), its delegates had great hopes for the future. Delegate Gunning Bedford of Delaware thus observed that while Georgia was “a small State at present, she is actuated by the prospect of soon being a great one” (Farrand, 1966, I, 491). Similarly, Luther Martin of Maryland noted that “Georgia looked forward when, her population being increased in some measure proportioned to her territory, she should rise in scale, and give law to the other States, and hence we found the delegation of Georgia warmly advocating the proposition of giving the States unequal representation” (Farrand, 1966, III, 18). At the start of the Convention, most Georgia delegates accordingly supported the Virginia Plan, which called for a strengthened national government of three branches in which states would be represented in both houses of a bicameral Congress on the basis of population.

In one of the most thorough studies of the Convention, historian Clinton Rossiter did not place any of the Georgia delegates among the most important groups at the Convention, which he identified respectively as *The Principals*, *The Influentials*, or *The Very Usefuls* (1987, pp. 247-50). He did, however place Baldwin among what he called *The Usefuls*, Few and Houstoun among *The Visibles*, and, as will be explained below, Pierce among *The Dropouts and Walkouts* (p. 251). As this classification suggests, of the Georgia delegates, Baldwin, who had emigrated from Connecticut where he still had valuable connections that were useful in crafting the Great Compromise, was the most influential. Moreover, he was the only such delegate to serve on the Convention’s influential committees. Still, despite William Pierce’s early exit, he has been more widely quoted. Pierce’s fame stems from being the first to compose and publish a set of intriguing character sketches of fellow delegates, covering 53 of the 55 who attended. Although these were not published until 1828,

this was still more than a decade before the publication of James Madison's notes on the Convention and would have helped reintroduce the delegates to a new generation of citizens.

Ironically, the details of Pierce's own life are relatively unknown. Until fairly recently, most biographical descriptions of Pierce reported that he was born in Georgia in 1740 rather than, as is now known, in York County, Virginia in 1753. In a speech that he delivered to the State Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania on the occasion of the Constitution's bicentennial, David A. Kimball, the Team Leader of the Bicentennial Constitutional Research of Independence National Park, observed that "As a nation, we've never heard of William Pierce. This is probably more our loss than his" (1987).

Even in 1987, Pierce's observations about fellow delegates had been widely published. Moreover, a beautifully-bound limited-edition book has recently reprinted Pierce's character sketches (Leffler, Kaminski, and Fore, 2012), a number of his journal entries, letters, and a Fourth of July oration that he gave in 1788. Although many scholars, including this author, have quoted Pierce, many fewer have actually analyzed what Pierce said and how his words might have influenced subsequent popular and scholarly opinions.

Drawing from my previous research (Vile, 2005, 2012) and from further investigation over the past several months, this paper sketches the highlights of Pierce's life and describes and analyzes chief aspects of what his sketches said. I will further analyze how these sketches have influenced our subsequent understanding of the event. Finally, I will briefly show what a comparison to two other documents, one made by, Louis Guillaume Otto, the French minister to the U.S. describing members of Congress (some of whom had been Convention delegates) in 1788 and another by Pierce's son, William Leigh Pierce, in an extended poem published in 1813, further suggest about Pierce's sketches and the Convention.

Pierce's Life

The most complete information published to date about Pierce is found in librarian Sam Fore's article in the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* and in the introduction to the recent book that he coedited and that compiles primary documents that Pierce authored. Pierce was born in York County, Virginia to Matthew and Elizabeth Pierce in 1753. Pierce's father was a vestryman of the Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg and a commissioner of the peace. He died when William was still a young age, and beginning with his teen years, William began using the suffix Jr. to distinguish him from an uncle. Pierce was under the guardianship of another uncle, John Pierce, and he grew up among plantation families in Tidewater, Virginia, who highly valued education. Although the details of his own education are sketchy (as a planter's son, it seems likely that he was privately tutored), the numerous and varied classical and historical allusions within his letters show that he was well grounded in the liberal arts.

From 1774 to 1775, Pierce studied in Annapolis, Maryland under Charles Willson Peale, one of the leading portraiture artists in the colonies. Pierce returned to Williamsburg to set up a studio, but, if any remain, none of his paintings or drawings have been identified, and, sadly, "Pierce's Reliques," from which his character sketches are drawn, do not even contain any doodles. Within a year after returning to Williamsburg, Pierce was fighting for the patriot cause in which he served throughout most of the conflict. In addition to serving in a Virginia artillery company, Pierce served as an aide-de-camp to General John Sullivan in his campaign against the Mohawks in New York and later as an aide to General Nathanael Greene who was fighting the British in the South (for some of Pierce's letters during this period see Greene, 1991-2005); Congress awarded Pierce a sword after he brought news of the Patriot victory at Eutaw Springs, in which he had participated. For a period in 1780, Pierce returned to Williamsburg, where he is believed to have attended the College of William and Mary, the curriculum of which had recently been reformed. Records confirm that he was selected as a member of Phi Beta Kappa, which was then chiefly a debating society; future Chief Justice John Marshall, who sat in on lectures by George Wythe, was among other members who were initiated in the same year as Pierce.

After the war, Pierce moved to Georgia, married Charlotte Fenwick from a prominent plantation family in Georgia, and turned to business, plantation management, and politics. Although the former ventures failed rather miserably, he was successively elected to the Georgia Assembly, to the Continental Congress, and to the Constitutional Convention. Unsuccessful in being elected governor or getting a commission as Director of the Port of Savannah, Pierce, who had been sidelined by diseases during his service with General Greene, died debt-ridden in Savannah in 1789, after which his widow bore him another son and remarried.

Pierce and the Constitutional Convention

Prior to the Convention, Pierce expressed concerns over the state of the nation and the need for reform. In a letter to Virginia's St. George Tucker, who would have an influential career as a legal professor and jurist, Pierce observed (with his characteristic spelling of complete) that:

The season being near at hand for the meeting of the Convention, little else is talked of in this quarter but the changes that will likely take place in our federal Government. It is certain that the confederation is very compleat, and deficient in point of energy, but I fear we shall meet with great difficulties in amending it. The different States will not make such a surrender of their sovereignty as may be found necessary to give the federal head compleat weight in the Union. Nothing will produce such a surrender but a sense of the greatest danger (Letters of Delegates, 24:221).

On his very first day of the Convention (May 31), Pierce was prepared to strike a new balance between state and national authorities:

It appeared clear to me that unless we established a Government that should carry at least some of its principles into the mass of the people, we might as well depend upon the present confederation. If the influence of the States is not lost in some part of the new Government we never shall have any thing like a national institution. But in my opinion it will be right to

shew the sovereignty of the State in one branch of the Legislature, and that should be in the Senate (Farrand, 1966, I:59).

Pierce accordingly wanted to know “how the Senate should be appointed” before deciding on how to select members of the House of Representatives. He further favored paying members of the House from the national treasury, and, at a time when the Convention was considering a seven-year term for Senators, he favored a term of three years. Not long before he left the Convention, Pierce observed that:

We are now met to remedy its [the Articles’] defects, and our difficulties are great, but not, I hope, insurmountable. State distinctions must be sacrificed to far as the general government shall render it necessary—without, however, destroying them altogether. Although I am here a representative from a small state, I consider myself as a citizen of the United States, whose general interest I will always support (Farrand, 1966, I:474).

Despite his belief in its importance, Pierce was recorded as speaking only four times at the Convention, and he spent just about a month there before leaving for New York, with the apparent intention of engaging in a duel with a British merchant; ironically, Alexander Hamilton, who was later die in such an encounter with Aaron Burr, intervened to avert the confrontation. In a letter to St. George Tucker dated September 18, 1787, Pierce acknowledged the imperfection of the new Constitution but observed that “I approve of its principles, and would have signed it with all my heart, had I been present” (1898, p. 314).

Although he did not attend the state’s ratification convention, Pierce delivered a Fourth of July Oration to the Georgia Society of Cincinnati (a veteran’s organization of which he was a member) touting the new Constitution’s virtues and urging its ratification. In this speech, he said that:

The condition of America demands a change; we must sooner or later be convulsed if we do not have some other government than the one under which we at present live. The old Federal Constitution is like a ship bearing under the weight of a tempest; it is trembling, and just on the point of sinking. If we have not another bark to take us up we shall all go down together. There are periods in the existence of a political society that require prompt and decisive measures; I mean that point of time between a people's running into anarchy and an anxious state of the public mind to be rescued from its approaching mischiefs by the intervention of some good and efficient government (Pierce 1788).

Perhaps because he died in 1789, Pierce is one of only a handful of delegates for whom no contemporary picture or portrait has been located, and his verbal portraits of fellow delegates are better known than he is.

Arrangement and Publication of Pierce's Sketches

Pierce spent the last day of May, and most, if not all, of the month of June, 1787 --the Convention met from May 25 through September 17 -- at the Convention, where he had an opportunity to observe, and listen to, most of the delegates (although he also reported on some that he was not able to observe there). Pierce compiled limited notes on about a week of Convention debates and recorded an anecdote about George Washington's concern over keeping the proceedings secret but is best known for the character sketches that he compiled not long after the Convention. These were first published in 1828, probably as a result of the enthusiasm generated in the aftermath of the Jubilee of the Declaration of Independence, and have been subsequently published in the *American Historical Review* (1898), in Max Farrand's *Records of the Federal Convention* (1966, III: 87-97), and elsewhere. Arranging delegates in states from North to South, which is how they voted at the Convention, Pierce almost always guessed the delegates' ages, and went on to describe their

educational backgrounds, abilities, reputations, offices held, etc. His most consistent point of focus was on the delegates' rhetorical abilities.

Many of Pierce's sketches packed a punch, employing asteism, a form of backhanded compliments that make for entertaining reading. He thus confirms John P. Kaminski's observation that character sketches can be not only "useful" but also "entertaining" (2008. Xxiii). Pierce's sketches thus include such snarky observations as [of fellow Georgian William Houstoun] that "nature seems to have done more for his corporeal than mental powers"; or [of New Jersey's William Livingston] that "he appears to me rather to indulge a sportiveness of wit, than a strength of thinking"; and [of Maryland's James McHenry] that he was "a man of special Talents with nothing of genius to improve them." In an observation that may fit into a similar category, Pierce noted that Delaware's Richard Bassett, whose religious enthusiasm he found grating, was held "in high estimation [albeit only?] among the Methodists."

Some of Pierce's observations are unforgettable. He thus characterized Connecticut's Roger Sherman as exhibiting "the oddest shaped character I ever remember to have met with." He continued:

He is awkward, un-meaning, and unaccountably strange in his manner. But in his train of thinking there is something regular, deep and comprehensive; yet the oddity of his address, the vulgarisms that accompany his public speaking, and that strange New England cant which runs through his public as well as his private speaking make everything that is connected with him grotesque and laughable; -- and yet he deserves infinite praise,--no Man has a better Heart or a clearer Head. If he cannot embellish he can furnish thoughts that are wise and useful (Farrand, III: 88-89).

Pierce further sent on to describe Sherman's early life as a shoemaker, his service on the state bench, and his work in Congress.

In part of another sketch of Benjamin Franklin that this author still cannot tell whether Pierce meant to be laudatory or gently mocking, Pierce, evoking imagery similar to that which St. Luke had used to describe Jesus calming the winds on the Sea of Galilee, said that:

Dr. Franklin is well known to be the greatest phylosopher of the present age; -- all the operations of nature he seems to understand, --the very heavens obey him, and the Clouds yield up their Lightning to be imprisoned in his rod (Farrand, III, 91)

Although Pierce sometimes mixed gentle mockery with praise, he believed that in participating in the Convention, he had been given “a seat in the wisest Council in the World.” Pierce resisted the temptation, which is far too common today, to attribute the work or the success of the Convention to a single delegate, typically James Madison. Still, in recognition that not all delegates had contributed equally, Pierce devoted extra attention to those delegates like James Madison, Roger Sherman, Gouverneur Morris, James Wilson, Benjamin Franklin, Rufus King, and George Washington who were especially important to the proceedings.

Pierce probably wrote or compiled his sketches on a journey that he took from New York to Savannah from October 3 to October 10, 1787 to deliver a copy of the proposed constitution to the state he represented. The central value of the sketches is that they cover so many of the delegates, that they focus not simply on what the delegates said, which are contained in notes that Pierce, Madison, and other delegates took, but on how they said it, and that they were not influenced by the delegates’ subsequent service and reputations or by an apparent desire to flatter them. Scholars know this because Pierce did not publish the sketches during his own lifetime (or the lifetimes of most of the delegates), because he died less than two and a half years after the Convention, and because he did not mention works that some of the delegates wrote during the Federalist/Anti-Federalist debates.

What Do the Sketches Reveal?

Pierce listed delegates by state and almost always guessed their ages. He did not follow a standard format in describing other aspects of the delegates. He almost always commented on their intellectual and rhetorical abilities. He often mentioned prior military or public service and sometimes commented on their reputations and influence, their virtues, and on unique character traits.

Age, Education, and Reputations

Numerous scholars have noted that Pierce fairly persistently gave approximate ages for the delegates that were off the mark. Most have not further observed that he consistently underestimated such ages by an average of almost four years. Although it is possible that he simply was not a good judge of such matters, his guesses may be an indirect indication of the delegates' higher social rank; as individuals who for the most part had engaged in intellectual tasks within doors, they likely did not appear as old as others their age who worked out of doors with their hands.

Pierce reported relatively few observations about the delegates' physical appearances. He reserved his highest accolades for Rufus King of Massachusetts, who was about his same age. Pierce's comments tended to single out individuals who would have been noticeable for being relatively tall, short, corpulent, or (in the case of Gouverneur Morris) missing a limb.

By contrast, Pierce almost always commented on the educations and abilities of the delegates. The most fascinating aspect of this component of Piece's observations is that he devoted far more attention to describing what he had witnessed of their abilities than focusing on their degrees from colleges and universities. Pierce's most amusing mistake was when he inaccurately identified his fellow Georgia delegate, Abraham Baldwin, as graduating from Harvard rather than from Yale. In so doing, he thus inadvertently anticipated President Kennedy's remark, upon receiving an honorary degree at New Haven, that "I have the best of both worlds, a Harvard education and a Yale degree."

Pierce associated many of the delegates with patriotism and often noted their rank or reputation within their states. He singled out six delegates, Rufus King (MA), Benjamin Franklin (PA), John Dickinson (DE), George Washington (VA), John Rutledge (SC), and George Wythe (VA) as among those with national, or international, reputations. Pierce identified most delegates as “esquires” and/or as “gentlemen.” Although the former term is sometimes used to designate lawyers, Pierce used the titles not so much to distinguish delegates who were lawyers from those who were not as to elevate delegates over non-delegates.

Rhetoric

Pierce’s portraits are most distinctive because of his emphasis on the delegates’ rhetoric. Despite Pierce’s relative silence at the Convention and protestations of his inadequacies in a Fourth of July Oration that he delivered in 1788, that speech, and his facility in writing sketches of fellow delegates, suggest that he was a gifted speaker. He certainly valued rhetoric highly. In the notebook that contains his character sketches, Pierce quoted Jacques Necker, the Swiss-born French statesman (1732-1803), to indicate that “The power of eloquence is not a vain power: we often obey it and frequently are captivated by it when we yield to our own reflections. – Words and phrases are the interpreters of our sentiments, and the representatives of our thoughts.” What is most fascinating about Pierce’s comments in this area is that he often contrasted his own evaluations of the speakers with their more general reputations. Pierce appears to have been part of the belletristic movement in the eighteenth century. As two contemporary scholars explain, this approach “was based upon the concept that rhetoric and related polite arts, poetry, drama, art, history, biography, philology, and so on should be joined under the broad heading of rhetoric and belles lettres” (Golden and Corbett, 1968, p. 8).

Pierce was confident enough in his own judgments that he often contrasted his own evaluations of the speakers with their more general reputations. Thus, for example, in describing

John Dickinson of Delaware [who was, however, older, and less healthy, than in the period in which he established his initial reputation], Pierce observed that “I had often heard that he was a great Orator, but I found him an indifferent Speaker.” Pierce went on to say that “With an affected air of wisdom he labors to produce a trifle, -his language is irregular and incorrect, - his flourishes (for he sometimes attempts them), are like expiring flames, they just shew themselves and go out; -no traces of them are left on the mind to clear or animate it” (Farrand, 1966, III, 92).

Pierce evaluated speakers using a number of criteria. He focused on their manner of delivery, their literary style and eloquence, and the quality and logical coherence of their arguments. Thus, he had relatively high praise for the logic and coherence of an individual like James Madison, who was not otherwise distinguished as a forceful speaker. Pierce accordingly observed that “tho he cannot be called an Orator, he is a most agreeable, eloquent, and convincing Speaker. From a spirit of industry and application which he possesses in a most eminent degree, he always comes forward the best informed Man of any point in debate.”

Consistent with the Latin rhetorician Quintilian’s comment that an effective speaker was “a good man speaking,” Pierce sometimes tied the speakers’ speech to their characters. Immediately after describing his speaking style, Pierce thus observed that Bedford “was warm and impetuous in his temper, and precipitate in his judgment.” Pierce further said that Broom’s private speech was “cheerful and conversable”; Ellsworth was “very happy in a reply”; Franklin’s story telling was “engaging”; Johnson had an “affectionate style of address” to his friends; and Gouverneur Morris “charms” and “captivates” but was “fickle and inconstant, --never pursuing one train of thinking, --nor ever regular.”

Although it is common to picture delegates as coming to the Convention with very fixed interests and ideas, Pierce’s descriptions suggest that delegates did not simply posture or state their positions without regard for others but genuinely tried to convince one another. His descriptions are consistent with the delegates’ adoption of convention rules that attempted to facilitate discussion

and persuasion. The descriptions further suggest that interpretations of the Convention based on the delegates' narrow self-interests are seriously flawed.

Virtues

In a commonplace book that he compiled, William Pierce's son, William Leigh Pierce, quoted Junius, probably a pseudonym of Sir Philip Francis (1740-1818), on the subject of "Character" as saying that: "every common dauber writes rascal and villain under his pictures, because the pictures themselves have neither character nor resemblance. But the works of a master require no index. His features and coloring are taken from nature." William Pierce was clearly a master at portraying personalities as well as moral and political virtues.

A review of his descriptions reveals that he referred to the following sometimes overlapping qualities: modesty (Bassett, Gilman, Ingersoll, Madison, and Paterson), integrity (Blount and Gerry), honor (Blount), honest rectitude (Dayton), attention to duty (Ellsworth), fidelity (Few), perseverance (Gerry), patriotism and love of country (Gerry and R. Morris), sincerity (Blount and Lansing), and steadiness, and firmness (Wythe). Pierce enumerated far more virtues than vices, but he did highlight what he believed to be Hamilton's vanity and Gouverneur Morris's fickleness and inconstancy. Although Pierce included enough warts to add spice to his narrative, his central goal, consistent with his belief that the Constitution was far superior to the government of the Articles that it was designed to replace, was to persuade readers that the Convention as a whole had been a wise and just council.

Occupations

It is common to portray most of the delegates to the convention as experienced politicians, and Pierce did describe the public and military service of a fair number of the delegates. Although many more had served, Pierce specifically associated nine delegates, including himself, with military

service. Pierce identified individuals who had served as judges on the supreme courts of Connecticut, New Jersey, and Virginia, and others who sat on the bench in Connecticut, Delaware, and South Carolina. He identified Luther Martin as the Attorney General of Maryland and John Lansing as Mayor of Albany. Pierce identified twenty delegates who had been trained in, or were practicing, law. Pierce singled out eleven delegates, including himself, as having served in Congress, one of whom (Nathaniel Gorham) had been its president. Pierce further identified two delegates as serving as state legislators, one as a state's agent to Great Britain, and four as having been state governors.

Pierce made no mention of the service of attendees who had worked on state constitutions or bills of rights. Nor did he identify the delegates who had signed the Declaration of Independence or Articles of Confederation, perhaps explaining why he did not, like Alexander Hamilton, return to the Convention to sign the document after leaving for New York. Pierce did not self-identify as a merchant, but he provided positive descriptions of five other delegates who were, and he identified five as doctors, professors, or scientists. Pierce mentioned that Sherman started out as a shoe-maker, "But despising the lowness of his condition, he turned Almanack maker, and so progressed upwards to a Judge." At a time when painters were sometimes regarded painters, like shoe-makers, as mere mechanics rather than as genuine artists, there is a chance that Pierce's comments on the subject were somewhat autobiographical.

To this author's view, the most remarkable aspect of Pierce's sketches is that (other than a passing reference to Dickinson's *Letters from a Federal Farmer*) they only identify one delegate, George Washington, as a "farmer." Many of the delegates, including Pierce himself, owned large plantations, or worked as lawyers or merchants with those who did so. By omitting references to plantation life, Pierce avoided mentioning slavery, which might have tarnished the delegates' reputations.

Religious Faith and Immigrant Status

There is great contemporary interest in the faiths of the Founding Fathers. Pierce was remarkably reticent in identifying the religious beliefs of the participants. Although Pierce did not, like some contemporary scholars, portray most of the delegates as sharing in the deism of some of the most prominent participants, the only religious affiliations that he mentioned were that John Dickinson (DE) was “bred a Quaker” and that Richard Bassett (DE) was “a religious enthusiast, later turned Methodist” (although it is possible that his reference to Sherman’s “strange New England cant” was an indirect reference). As a Southerner, Pierce may have identified Bassett as an enthusiast not simply because of his religious beliefs but also because he had freed his slaves.

In another omission, which might reflect his cosmopolitan contacts as a merchant, Pierce only identified the native background of one of eight delegates (South Carolina’s Pierce Butler) who were immigrants. Similarly, he rarely mentioned the marital status of delegates and portrayed Maryland’s Daniel Carroll as a life-long bachelor rather than a widower. Consistent with the vow of secrecy, Pierce did not discuss issues of substance at the Convention except in a very general way. Pierce associated Madison (and to a lesser degree, Randolph) with the leading principles of the Convention, but he did not specifically identify what they were.

Pierce’s Self Assessment

Pierce ended his sketches by tantalizingly inviting his readers to draw his portrait for themselves:

My own character I shall not attempt to draw, but leave those who may choose to speculate on it, to consider it in any light that their fancy may depict. I am conscious of having discharged my duty as a Soldier through the course of the late revolution with honor and propriety; and my services in Congress and the Convention were bestowed with the best intention towards the interest of Georgia, and towards the general welfare of the Confederacy. I possess ambition, and it was that, and the flattering opinion which some of my Friends had of me, that

gave me a seat in the wisest Council in the World, and furnished me with an opportunity of giving these short Sketches of the Characters who composed it.

Pierce's offer to allow readers the opportunity to consider his character "in any light that their fancy or imagination may depict" is inconsistent with the positive information that he subsequently supplied. Students of rhetoric call this a *praeteritio*, or *paralepsis*, which was common in Greek and Roman rhetoric. As Francisca Henkeman explains: "The principal characteristic of *praeteritio* is that the speaker announces that he will omit something, but mentions it nonetheless" (2009, p. 242). Writers and speakers typically use this mechanism to call greater attention to something that readers might otherwise miss.

In Pierce's case, he emphasized his devotion to "duty" as exemplified in the "honor and propriety" with which he served his country as a soldier, as a member of Congress, and as a delegate to the Convention. His reference to "the general welfare of the Confederacy," which echoed the preamble of the new Constitution, suggests that Pierce viewed changing the old government as the only way of saving it. Pierce gilded over any conflict between his duties to Georgia and those to the nation as a whole by mentioning both in the same sentence. Omitting information about his own formal education, age, occupation, family, fortune, religious beliefs, rhetorical abilities, political principles, marital status, physical qualities, or health, Pierce arguably enhanced his reputation by associating himself with "the wisest Council in the World." By calling the Philadelphia meeting a "Council" rather than a "Convention," Pierce emphasized its deliberative, in contrast to its purely representation, aspect.

A Comparison from 1788

Two other sources provide valuable points of comparison to Pierce. One is a series of sketches that Louis Guillaume Otto made of members of Congress in 1788 (Farrand, III, 232-38). It includes descriptions of a number of members who had attended the Constitutional Convention. The

second is an extended poem that William Leigh Pierce, Pierce's son who was born after his father's death, wrote containing comments on a number of the delegates that his father observed.

Otto's sketches, written for diplomatic purposes, highlighted political divisions within individual states as well as delegates' general orientation toward Great Britain or France. The latter fissure further revealed conflicts of interest between the North and South, and the East and West, which, while not absent from records of Convention debates, are barely evident in Pierce's sketches. In addition, Otto's sketches sometimes contain the kind of gossipy information (on occasion, unreliable at that) that would be more appropriate for a modern tabloid than for a diplomatic dispatch. In a particularly salacious passage, he thus incorrectly reported that Hamilton had "found a way to abduct the daughter of General Schuyler, a wealthy and very influential landowner" when, as a matter of fact, she was the *only* one of Schuyler's five daughters who had *not* eloped (Chernow, 2004, p. 129)!

A Further Comparison: Like Father Like Son?

Another comparison is provided by a long poem of three cantoes penned by Pierce's son, William Leigh Pierce (1789-1814). He earned a bachelor's at Princeton in 1808, attended the Litchfield Law School in Connecticut in 1809, and returned to Princeton for a Master's degree in 1811. He then moved to Canadaigua, in Ontario County, New York, where he appears to have been working either with, or under, John Grieg, a lawyer who later served as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. The latter Pierce, whose widowed mother had married another merchant and Revolutionary War hero, Ebenezer Jackson, referred in his poem to a number of Convention delegates, some of whom were still active on the political scene, but was chiefly writing in opposition to the follies that he associated with U.S. entry into the War of 1812.

Not unexpectedly, Pierce expressed particular pride in, and provided additional information about, his birth father. After referring in his second canto (p. 113) to “Shade of my father,” he added a footnote to his memory, which explained that his father was:

Major William Leigh Pierce, of the Virginia continental line in the revolutionary war, an aid-de-camp of major-general Nathaniel Greene, and one of the delegates from the state of Georgia in the convention which formed the federal constitution, where, to use his own language, “his best exertions were bestowed for the welfare of the confederacy at large, and that state in particular whose interests he represented” (p. 113).

Pierce continued:

For major Pierce’s military character and career while fighting for the freedom of his country, the generous reader will indulge the filial pride of the author while he states, that during a long term of service, of trial, and successive hardships, he steadfastly retained the confidence of his general, the friendship of the virtuous, the good opinion of the world, and above all, the affections of his country. He accompanied Greene throughout his noble series of military operations at the south, and was active, vigilant, and faithful to his duty; his gallantry was particularly marked at the battle of Eutaw, and won him tokens of approbation from his general and his country: but he was my father, and I may not say all that my feelings would dictate (p. 113).

Pierce also had high praise for his step grandfather, Brigadier Michael Jackson (1734-1801), who was also a Revolutionary War hero. Pierce indicated that he spent his “juvenile years” (pp. 150-51), under his roof.

By contrast, William Leigh Pierce portrayed many other former delegates in a highly-partisan fashion. Pierce described George Washington and Alexander Hamilton as leading the list of

patriotic worthies, and portrayed Jefferson and Madison as chief among those who were not. Pierce presented Washington as a symbol of ordered liberty:

Well did he know, that freedom uncontrol'd
 Was fierce, oppressive, virulent and bold:
 That passion, like old ocean's raging waves,
 Lashes the strand; along its landmarks raves:
 Distains restraint, --with loud tumultuous roar,
 And breaks in thunder on the sounding shore. (p. 36)

By contrast, Pierce portrayed then-President James Madison, who had graduated from his own alma mater, as a puppet of former president Thomas Jefferson:

How could that man, whose pen in early age,
 Impress'd so deep a stamp upon the page,
 That man, who leagued with wisdom's sons [Hamilton and Jay] to twine,
 Around the Fed'ralist a wreath divine,
 Could he consent to play a minor part,
 The puppet fashion'd by a master's art? ([pp. 41-42)

The spirit of faction that Pierce thought was embodied in Democratic-Republican politics epitomized what Pierce considered to be a nation in decline. As he opined:

With exultation we hold
 Each lofty name by fame enroll'd.
 Statesman, hero, patriot sage,
 Of other and a happier age;
 But ah! Their laurell'd brows proclaim
 The father's worth and offspring's shame. (1813, p. 17)

Pierce's poem further focused on physical disasters and internal conflicts (a riot in Baltimore, military disasters) that portrayed a nation torn asunder by factions that had formed around many of the issues that Otto had already identified in 1788.

In contradictions that the author has yet to reconcile, William Leigh Pierce delivered a much more militaristic speech on July 4, 1812 before the Savannah Volunteer Guards, a precursor to the state's national guard. He may have been more positive about attempts to claim and invade Florida (one of the Guard's tasks) than he was of the efforts to invade Canada. Pierce had little time to explain. He died of typhoid fever in 1814, thus living an even shorter life than his father.

Analysis and Lessons

The first quotation that Pierce recorded in the notebook that contained his character sketches was a statement from Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* that said "One good deed dying tongueless, slaughters a thousand waiting upon that." Like other Founders who focused on fame, Pierce believed that a record of noble men and noble actions would inspire further nobility. Although he presented the convention as "the wisest council in the world," he included discussions of delegates' weaknesses along with their strengths.

The beauty of Pierce's sketches is that they reintroduced the public to the delegates prior to the release of Convention deliberations that James Madison compiled. They also have the merit of presenting the work of the Convention as a collective product rather than the work of a single man. Pierce's sketches are particularly valuable in presenting a portrait of them not as political figures per se, but as men. As detailed above, at a time when we know much of what delegates said, Pierce helps illumine how they might have said it by focusing on the delegates' rhetorical skills.

There is another reason to study Pierce. Catherine Drinker Bowen is among the historians who have described the work of the convention as a “miracle” (1966). David Brian Robertson has noted the widespread thinking among the delegates that “The United States was at a critical turning point, and political support for replacing the Articles of Confederation would never be stronger” (2012, p. 16). When contrasted to overlapping sketches by Minister Louis-Guillaume Otto in 1788 and by Pierce’s son, William Leigh Pierce, in 1813, Pierce’s observation may further underscore the relatively narrow window during which a sense of crisis was great enough but the political passions and sectional divisions within the United States were muted enough that the kind of compromises embodied within the Constitution were possible. As valuable as Pierce’s observations are, they may have encouraged later scholars, particularly early ones, to underplay some aspects of the delegates, like their religious views and associations with plantation life and slavery, which deserve further investigation.

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