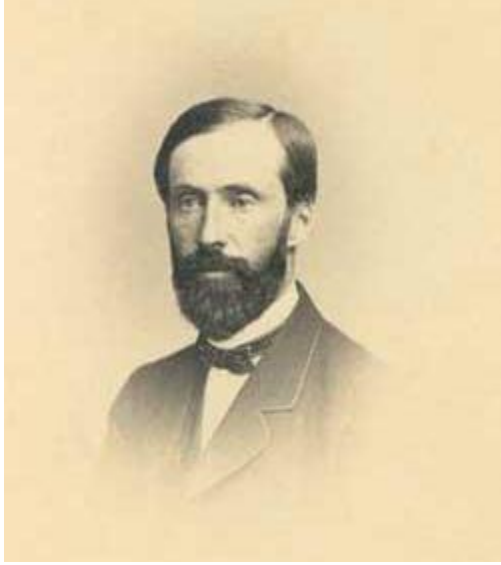


# EDWARD LILLIE PIERCE



Born: Mar. 29, 1829 in Stoughton, Norfolk, MA

Died: Sep. 6, 1897 in Paris, France

Appointment(s): U.S. Treasury Dept.  
Treasury Dept. Agent  
Jan. 13, 1862

President Lincoln  
Superintendent of Contrabands  
Feb. 1862

American Missionary Association  
Superintendent of Teachers  
Mar. 1862

## 1829-1897

Edward was born March 29, 1829 in Stoughton, Massachusetts to Col. Jesse Pierce and Eliza Smith Lillie. Edward graduated from Brown University in Rhode Island and then from Harvard Law School. Edward married first Elizabeth H. Kingsbury and they had six children. After her death, he married Maria L. Woodward and he had two more children with her. She died in 1880.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Pierce was active at a young age in political and social movements of his time. Mr. Pierce worked in the law office of Salmon Chase who became his mentor and went to Washington, D.C. with him as his secretary when Chase became a Senator. In 1860, Pierce was a delegate to the Republican National Convention. When the Civil War broke out, Edward enlisted as a private in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Massachusetts Infantry Regiment at Fort Monroe, Virginia. He served until July 1861 when he was detailed to oversee former slaves digging entrenchments at the fort in Hampton, Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

The day after the “big gun-shoot” on November 7, 1861 when US Navy Commander S.F. Du Pont sailed his fleet up Port Royal Sound and bombarded the batteries, the Union landed troops to occupy Hilton Head and surrounding area.<sup>3</sup> The whole area of Port Royal Island and the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, including Hilton Head, became known as Port Royal. On December 20, 1861 the new US Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase implored his secretary, Mr. Edward Pierce to travel to Port Royal, South Carolina as a Treasury Department Agent to investigate the conditions of the newly abandoned plantations, the cotton crop and what

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<sup>1</sup> *World Biographical Encyclopedia: the History of Beaufort County*, South Carolina, NY 2019 [https://www.prabook.com/web/edward.lillie\\_pierce/1068470](https://www.prabook.com/web/edward.lillie_pierce/1068470).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rose, Willie Lee. *Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999, c1964, pp xi-xii

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could be done for the abandoned slaves.<sup>4</sup> Pierce departed from New York on January 13, 1862 on the 'Baltic' and arrived at Hilton Head on January 17<sup>th</sup>. He inspected the entire region and wrote a complete report which stated the number of abandoned plantations on each of the area's sea islands, including Hilton Head with 14, Port Royal with 65 and Daufuskie with 5. The Union military had established camps for the refugees on Hilton Head and Port Royal Island with about 6-700 'contrabands' in each camp.<sup>5</sup>

Pierce returned to Washington, D.C. in February 1862 and reported to Chase about the needs of the 'contraband'. Pierce suggested that besides clothing, food and medical care, he recommended that charitable organizations start sending teacher/missionaries to the Sea Islands to educate the illiterate freedmen.<sup>6</sup> As a result of his thorough report, President Lincoln told Chase to authorize Pierce as the Superintendent in charge of the abandoned slaves on the Sea Islands, including Hilton Head (then known as part of Port Royal). With the help of the American Missionary Association, he recruited about sixty teachers and superintendents who sailed with him aboard the 'Atlantic' in March 1862 to establish schools for the freedmen. They were the first group of teachers sent from the north and were known as "Gideon's Band".<sup>7</sup> Pierce also discovered that Captain Rufus Saxton had appointed Barnard K. Lee, Jr. of Boston who had arrived recently on the army transport 'Ocean Queen' as Supervisor of all refugees on Hilton Head Island. Mr. Lee had already established what was most likely the first school for contrabands on Hilton Head Island in late January 1862.<sup>8</sup> The only other area school for the abandoned slaves was the one begun early January in Beaufort by Rev. Solomon Peck with the assistance of three black teachers, including John Milton.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Mr. Pierce became part of what became known as the 'Port Royal Experiment'.<sup>10</sup> But as Northern abolitionist idealists and former slaves met for the first time on slave territory, both groups were facing challenges and difficult adjustments. When the care of the freedmen was transferred by the US government from the Treasury Department to the War Department under Edwin Stanton, Pierce was asked to remain in his position, but he declined, telling friends that he could not serve under a military authority.<sup>11</sup> He was then offered the position of Military Governor of South Carolina, but he was not confirmed into that post.

Pierce served as District Attorney from 1866-1869 and Secretary of the Board of State Charities 1869-1874. He was also a Massachusetts State Legislator 1875-1876 and a delegate to the Republican Party National Conventions in 1876 and 1884. In December 1878, U.S. President Rutherford Hayes offered him the position of Assistant Treasury Secretary, but Pierce declined. Pierce was a scholar and donated his

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<sup>4</sup> Wise, Stephen R and Rowland, Lawrence S. Rebellion, Reconstruction, and Redemption 1861-1893, Vol 2.

University of South Carolina Press, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> World Biographical Encyclopedia. Opcit.

<sup>7</sup> Rose, pp xii-xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Botume, Elizabeth Hyde. First Days amongst the Contrabands. Boston: Lee & Shepard Publishers, 1893. pp 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Wise and Rowland.

<sup>10</sup> Rose, p 42.

<sup>11</sup> Wise and Rowland.

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personal library of more than 800 books to the people of St. Helena Island in 1883.<sup>12</sup> He also founded the public library in Milton, Massachusetts, where he had a residence and was a frequent lecturer at Boston Law School. Edward L. Pierce visited Europe many times, including tours as guests of European countries to inspect their prisons, reformatories and asylums in order to provide them with suggestions for improvement. Although Edward L. Pierce played a vital role in the education of freedmen in the Sea Islands during the Civil War and into Reconstruction, he is probably most well-known for his 4-volume biography of Charles Sumner. Edward L. Pierce was played by actor Christian Baskous in the epic film, "Glory".

The *Boston Herald* published Edward L. Pierce's obituary on Thursday, September 9 1897:

The circumstances attending the death of Edward L. Pierce in Paris are not yet fully known in this country. When his illness came he was residing in a pension in Paris kept by an American woman married to a Frenchman of that city. His wife was not with him [\*], having been detained at Haddersfield, the English home of her relatives, by her own illness. Mr. Pierce had travelled beyond Paris and had been unfavorably affected in his digestive organs by the living at Homburg. A telegram came to this country on Monday of last week from Mr. Turner, the Paris representative of C.F. Hovey and Company announcing the illness of Mr. Pierce.

One was sent to his wife at the same time, who immediately repaired to his bedside and was with him to the end [\*]. His son, George Pierce, who is a student of medicine, took the earliest steamer to Europe. On Saturday of last week, came another telegram to this country representing his condition as serious. On Monday, in the European mail, letters were received by his family from himself and Mrs. Pierce. His letter was brief, and was apparently cut short by his physical condition, but it announced his intention to take an early steamer home. On the next day intelligence of his death was telegraphed. The supposition is that it was by failure of the digestive process, combined with kidney problems. [\*contradictory statements].<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> World Biographical Encyclopedia.

<sup>13</sup> *Boston Herald* newspaper. Boston, Mass. Thursday, Sep 9, 1897, p 6. <https://www.newspapers.com>