

The 'East Bloomfield Factory' Coverlet Mystery



Objects in the museum's collection have a story to tell; who were their owners, where were they made or what were they used for? The East Bloomfield Factory coverlet mystery began thirty plus years ago when my Aunt gave me a blue and tan coverlet that had been in our family. On the corner square was woven 'East Bloomfield Factory 1834 A. Richards'. I always wondered where the factory was located and who the weaver was, but I was never successful in the few inquiries I made. During the textile inventory conducted this winter, we found two East Bloomfield Factory coverlets listed in our museum's collection. One in excellent condition, donated by Mrs. Elling, was blue and tan with 'East Bloomfield Factory 1834' and the name of Elcy Perkins in the corner block. The other from an unknown source was half a coverlet woven in tan and brick colors with the name of Sally Bailey. The records did not indicate where they were created or by whom.

Unlike thirty years ago we now have the internet to use as a research tool and I was determined to find something about this manufacturer. A search for 'East Bloomfield Factory Coverlet' gave the **first clue**. In a book by Clarita Anderson, *American Coverlets and Their Weavers: Coverlets from the Collection of Foster and Muriel McCarl* was listed the name of Silas Pierce, a coverlet weaver born in 1801 in New York. He and his wife Mary were located in East Bloomfield, Ontario Co., N.Y. The coverlets were dated 1834 and in the corner block was the factory name, date, client's name and logo. History: The coverlets were woven at the East Bloomfield Factory.

A search of the 1830 New York Census, Ontario Co., Bloomfield, lists Silas Pierce as a 30-to 40-year-old head of household. The 1850 New York census, Ontario Co., Bloomfield, lists him as a 49-year old wool manufacturer.

Silas was born in New York and Mary in Massachusetts, her father was reported to have fought in the Revolutionary War; they were probably married sometime before 1826, possibly in New York. It is unknown when they moved to East Bloomfield, however, we know from the 1830 New York Census that they were living here at least by 1830. Silas and Mary had nine children born in East Bloomfield; two died in infancy and are buried in the North Bloomfield Cemetery.

We now had the name of the man who wove the coverlets, but where was the factory or mill? The **second clue** came from the minutes of the first Historical Society of East Bloomfield organized on February 12, 1889. The Society was organized to plan for the Centennial year celebration of the settlement of our town. The committee for the Centennial Historical Society of East Bloomfield wrote to individuals asking for them to share their memories and experiences. These collected reminiscences of pioneers and their descendants, were collected and written in a book now owned by the East Bloomfield Historical Society.

One person who contributed was a builder of many buildings in the town by the name of B. F. Jenkins. He wrote in his letter, "And in fact I suppose I done more building in E. Bloomfield than any other builder from 1832 to 1885 inclusive." In the same letter he gave us our **second clue**: "E. Bloomfield in former days was quite a manufacturing town ..." In listing the manufacturers he includes "...Silas Pierce a woolen factory in Mud Creek near Julius Steele's and was burned out but soon located north of the village near the old Farrent Mill and too the devouring flames found him, destroyed his factory. He made another effort at Factory Hollow (in West Bloomfield) but there was no rest for him there for again the great destroyer of property fire, cleaned him out again." A sample of newspaper articles of the time support Mr. Jenkins' memory of multiple fires which were common during this period of open flame and combustible materials.

As early as 1829 The Wayne Sentinel Palmyra on Friday, November 6, 1829 reported: *Fire—The carding and clothing works belonging to Mr. Silas Pierce, in East Bloomfield, were consumed by fire, on the night of the 29th together with his books, accounts, and about one thousand yards of customer's cloth. His loss is estimated at \$2000. The origin of the fire is unknown.* (This article proves that Silas settled here by at least 1829)

Again, in 1834, Mt. Morris Spectator wrote: *Fire in East Bloomfield—On Saturday, Jan. 23, the woollen (sic) factory and dwelling-house of Mr. Silas Pierce, of East Bloomfield, with about 2000 yards of cloth and 200 lb. 's of wool, were burnt.*

New York Spectator, New-York, Monday, February 8, 1836: *FIRE. — The woollen factory and dwelling house of Silas Pierce, of East Bloomfield, Ontario County; also 2000 yards cloth and 200 lbs. wool, were burnt on the 23rd.*

Mr. Jenkins in his letter to the Historical Society continued... “he was baffled in his business, went to Rochester....” Below is an advertisement for Silas Pierce’s wool business. We can see that he was not just making coverlets.



**ENCOURAGE HOME INDUSTRY!
ROCHESTER WOOLLEN FACTORY.**

CASH and Cloth will be paid for 40,000 lbs. WOOL at the Rochester Woollen Factory, in the Selyn Buildings. No. 6, corner of Mill and Furnace streets near the Falls. On hand, a large assortment of Domestic Cloths, Cassimeres, Safincis, Flannels, and Carpeting, of various styles, colors, and qualities, which will be exchanged for Wool on fair terms. Wool will also be manufactured on shares or by the yard, promptly and in good order. I will manufacture Sheep’s Grey and Mixed Cloths, for Cloths, Cassimeres, and Safincis for sale to Merchants and others, by the case, piece or yard.

N B – Wool, Soap, and all other kinds of produce received in part payment, when the work is done.

Rochester, June 3, 1844.

SILAS PIERCE

Mr. Jenkins finishes with “.....” but here a worse misfortune overtook him, for one of his sons was murdered.”

Silas’s second child Porter who worked in the woolen business with him mysteriously disappeared as revealed in these articles:

Daily Chronicle, Ithaca, February 5, 1848 *Mysterious Disappearance.*

“On Wednesday evening last, Mr. Porter P. Pierce left his boarding house, corner of Fish and Mill Street, for the central part of the city, stating that he should be home again at an early hour. About 7 o’clock the same evening he was seen in the Arcade House, talking with some friends, since which time it cannot be ascertained that he has been seen in the city. He was 23 years of age, about middling sized, and had on plaid pantaloons, a striped worsted vest, black coat, a bluish drab overcoat and a cap. Mr. Pierce was engaged in the manufacture of woollen cloths in the Selyn buildings, was very steady in his habits, and no cause can be aligned for his disappearance. Any information of his whereabouts since Wednesday last, will be gratefully received by his friends. Address his father, Silas Pierce, Rochester.”

Syracuse NY The Daily Star, Thursday, February 3, 1848 *Mysterious Disappearance.*

“Much alarm has been occasioned within a few days by the sullen and mysterious disappearance of Mr. Porter Pierce, proprietor of the Woollen Factory on Mill Street in this city. The last that was seen of Mr. P was on Wednesday evening of last week, about 7 o’clock, in the Arcade. He complained of feeling unwell, and said to Mr. Robinson, who roomed with him, that he had an errand across the river, and in a short time should retire early, hoping after the night’s rest to feel better. Since he parted “with Robinson, nothing has been heard of him. During the day, Wednesday, he transacted business as usual, all the books and papers belonging to the office were found in their accustomed place. He had very little money in his possession,

when last seen, as it was known he had paid out nearly all the receipts of the day. It is supposed that he might have fallen into the Race, or met his death at the hands of someone who supposed he had money about his person. The water was let out of the Race yesterday, and very careful search made, but at a late hour last evening his body had not been found.”

Sadly, the next article is a report on the discovery of Porter’s body and proves that he was actually murdered.

Utica NY Oneida Morning Herald, Thursday Morning, March 30, 1848 The Body of Porter P. Pierce Found.

“Yesterday about noon a colored man by the name of Richard Murphy, ferryman at the mouth of the Genesee River, discovered the body of a person floating down stream, opposite the village of Charlotte, in Greece. He succeeded in bringing the body to the shore. As a gold watch was found upon the body, it was supposed it might be that of Porter P. Pierce, who so mysteriously disappeared some time since. Information was communicated to Mr. Silas Pierce, who in company with some fifteen or twenty friends immediately went down to see the body. It was at once identified as that of Porter P. Pierce. The clothing, with the exception of the coat, was still upon the body. His gold watch hung by the chain round his neck, having escaped from the pocket. In the vest pocket was a gold pencil and a pin cushion, which were identified. A wallet which he usually carried was gone.

The top of his skull, over the crown, was crushed in, apparently by a (?) blow. The character of the injury was such that it could scarcely have proceeded from a fall, or any other accident. There seems to be good ground, therefore, for the opinion that he met his fate at the hands of murderous violence, and was thrown by his destroyers into the river. The body must have passed over the upper and lower falls, each nearly a hundred feet in height, before it reached the place where it was found, about 7 miles from the city.

The deceased disappeared on the night of the 26th of January last.

Our readers will recollect that public meetings were held, and much excitement existed in reference to his mysterious absence. The mystery is now solved. An inquest was held yesterday afternoon by Coroner Frost, and the verdict of the jury was that the deceased came to his death from blows inflicted upon the head by a person or persons unknown. Roch. American”

We now know the name of the person who made our coverlets and where his factories were located, but what a sad twist in our coverlet story! But we should not stop here in our tale as several of their children went on to realize great accomplishments.

Silas and Mary Root Pierce with their remaining six children moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan sometime after the 1850 census. Silas lived to the age of 79 and died July 4, 1880 and Mary died February 19, 1872 at the age of 71 years. Their other children had long and productive lives:

Mary E. Pierce, their oldest daughter, was born November 23, 1823; she died November 23, 1862 and appears to have been unmarried.



Bryon Root Pierce born September 20, 1829, worked in the woolen business, but decided to train in dentistry and after moving to Michigan opened an office in Grand Rapids. He enlisted in the 3rd Michigan Infantry and fought in the Civil War obtaining the rank of Brigadier General. Bryon, wounded 5 times once at Gettysburg, returned to Grand Rapids after the war. As a veteran he participated in both the Grand Army of the Republic and the Military Order of the Loyal Legion. He served as commandant of the Michigan Soldier's Home (now the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans), which he was instrumental in having built in Grand Rapids. In the late 1890's he ran a hotel. When he died at age 94 on July 10, 1924 he was the last Civil War soldier in Michigan.

Edwin Sheldon Pierce was born December 1, 1833. Upon moving to Grand Rapids, was a partner in the retail clothing business. He enlisted with his brother and fought in the Civil War retiring at the rank of Lt. Colonel. In 1898 he moved to Washington D. C. when he was appointed Sergeant-at-Arms for the United States House of Representatives. Edwin died September 1, 1912, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery; section 3, grave 2511.

Amelia C. Pierce was born in 1834 and married Major Henry C. Grout who was pay-master during the Civil War. She died in 1905. Silas Kellogg Pierce born June 28, 1842 served as a Captain in the Civil War and later a businessman in Lansing Michigan. He died September 14, 1904.

Frederick Pierce... birth date unknown... fought in the Civil War... died from disease.

Every object in the museum collection has a story to tell. The Silas Pierce coverlets have an unusually rich history filled with local industry, family tragedy and outstanding service to this country.