

## Alexandria Times

Denise Dunbar  
 Publisher & Executive Editor  
 ddunbar@alextimes.com

Margaret Stevens  
 Sales Director  
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Caitlyn Meisner  
 Managing Editor/Reporter  
 cmeisner@alextimes.com

Wafir Salih  
 Reporter  
 wsalih@alextimes.com

James Matheson  
 Intern

Jordan Tovin  
 Photo Intern

### ADVERTISING

Margaret Stevens  
 mstevens@alextimes.com

Marty DeVine  
 mdevine@alextimes.com

Patrice V. Culligan  
 pculligan@alextimes.com

Tina Franco  
 Office Administrator  
 tfranco@alextimes.com

### DIRECTOR OF ART & DESIGN

Jessica Kim  
 graphics@alextimes.com

### CONTRIBUTORS

Kerry Boyd Anderson  
 Kim Davis  
 Mark Eaton  
 Mark Edelman  
 Thompson Eskew  
 Kim Gilliam  
 Ryan Hopper  
 Kim Jackson  
 Lexie Jordan  
 Louise Krafft  
 Brianne McConnell  
 Jim McGrath  
 Kaitlin Murphy  
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 Dr. Vivek Sinha  
 Dr. David Weintritt  
 Amy Will

### ALEXTIMES LLC

Denise Dunbar  
 Managing Partner

The Ariail family  
 Suzanne Brock  
 William Dunbar

### HOW TO REACH US

1199 N. Fairfax St. Suite 401  
 Alexandria, VA 22314  
 703-739-0001 (main)  
 www.alextimes.com

# Joseph Pierce: a Chinese-American soldier in Civil War Alexandria

BY ANDREW MCELWAIN

Historic Alexandria is proud to celebrate Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. To learn more about AANHPI Heritage Month, we encourage you to visit the Asian Pacific Heritage Month page at the Alexandria Library and the Asian Pacific American Center at the Smithsonian page.

In the 1850s, millions of immigrants came to the United States. Many of them were escaping conflicts and calamities in their homelands, such as those who fled Ireland in the wake of the Great Famine of 1845-52 or those who left Germany after the Revolutions of 1848-49. People also immigrated from the southern Chinese province of Canton, now Guangdong, which had recently experienced floods, famine and political unrest. These recent immigrants would soon find themselves caught in the violence that was about to erupt in the U.S.

Hundreds of thousands of immigrants would end up fighting in the Civil War, around 50 of whom were from China. The vast majority of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. had gone to California, thou-

sands of miles away from most of the fighting. At the outbreak of the war, the number of Chinese on the East Coast was probably between 150 to 300, making 50 soldiers a significant percentage of the total.

Chinese people had entered into a society that operated under a racial caste system. Until 1870, the only categories on the U.S. Census were “white,” “Black” and “mulatto.” It wasn’t until 1870 that categories for “Indian” and “Chinese” were added. This meant that individual census takers determined on their own how to label Chinese immigrants, leading to them being categorized as white in some areas and as people of color in others.

Despite their uncertain status – or perhaps because of it – men like Joseph Pierce signed up to fight anyway.

Pierce, whose birth name has been lost, was born in Canton, China, sometime in 1842. He was brought to the U.S. at age 10 by an American ship captain named Amos Peck. Pierce had likely been sold to Peck by his father, probably with the intent that Pierce would serve as a cabin boy on Peck’s ship rather than face

starvation at home.

Peck’s crew would call the young boy Joe, and he would later take on the surname of then-President Franklin Pierce. Instead of keeping Pierce on his ship, Peck brought him home to Connecticut where he was raised by the Peck family. In the summer of 1862, 20-year-old Pierce enlisted in the 14th Regiment Connecticut Volunteer Infantry along with many other young men from his community.

A few weeks after it formed, the regiment took part in the Battle of Antietam on the bloodiest single day in U.S. history. There is some debate as to whether Pierce was at the battle. Some accounts say that he injured his back in the battle, others say he had fallen ill beforehand and was too sick to fight. Whatever the cause, Pierce was sent to Alexandria to recuperate. He spent the Fall of 1862 and the Winter of 1863 in the city.

Part of that time was spent working at a convalescent camp on the edge of town by Shuter’s Hill, where the George Washington Masonic National Memorial is today. Pierce had recovered by spring and was able to rejoin his regiment.



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
 Corporal Joseph Pierce.

He would go on to see battle at places like Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Appomattox. A few weeks after Lee’s surrender in April 1865, Pierce and the 14th Connecticut would muster out of the army at Bailey’s Crossroads and return home to Connecticut.

Pierce eventually moved to Meriden, Connecticut, got married, had four kids and worked as a silver engraver until his death in 1916.

*Further reading on Chinese-Americans in the Civil War:*

*Chinese in the Civil War: Ten Who Served by Ruthanne Lum McCunn*

*“Mulatto, Indian, Or What”: The Racialization of Chinese Soldiers and The American Civil War by Angela He*

*Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.*