



The S.B. Pierce building (at center in distance in this turn of the century photo) is still a landmark in Upham's Corner. View is from Columbia Rd. west, near where the Strand Theatre now stands (at right of photo).

1899 S.B. Pierce Building still a flagship building in Upham's Corner

by Anthony Sammarco

Approaching Upham's Corner from the west, Columbia Road seems to lead directly to the S.B. Pierce Building, a four story commercial block built in 1899.

Prior to the annexation of Dorchester to Boston in 1870, the main streets of Dorchester were residential, among them Boston Street that later was renamed "Columbia Road." At the corner of what is now Columbia Road, Dudley and Ramsey Streets was once the house of Samuel Bowen Pierce (1806-1895), who left Vermont after his father sold a cow to finance his journey to Boston. According to his great-grand daughter, Elizabeth Hough, Pierce entered the crockery business, selling his goods throughout New England. He married Hannah Rea of Roxbury, and their sons were Samuel, Frank and J. Homer Pierce.

J. Homer Pierce (1840-1933) was to become one of the largest land developers in Dorchester after 1870. The Pierce Family owned large tracts of undeveloped land and once new streets were laid out, they were instrumental in creating the areas of Glendale, Bodwell and Bellevue Streets. After the death of Samuel B. Pierce, his house on Columbia Road was demolished, and a modern commercial

block with storefronts on the first floor and professional offices above was built by J. Homer Pierce. Naming the building the S.B. Pierce Building, it was to become an important part of the streetscape of Upham's Corner.

In the accompanying photograph (circa 1910), Upham's Corner appears as a busy commercial thoroughfare. On the left is Wheelock Hall, also known as the Odd Fellows Hall for the organization of that name. Next was Winthrop Hall, a large hall that later became a vaudeville and silent movie theatre in the early 1900's, with the Upham Building on the corner of Dudley Street. In the center is the S.B. Pierce Building, its rounded windows and heavy cornice giving the area an impressive and urban feeling. The church on the right was the Baker Memorial Church. Through the generosity of Miss Sarah Baker of Savin Hill, this Methodist-Episcopal church was built at the corner of Cushing Avenue, now the parking lot for the Bank of Boston. The streetcars connected Andrew Square with Meetinghouse Hill and Dudley Station, and brought shoppers to the area, which in less than thirty years had become one of the busiest of Dorchester shopping centers.

However, after World War II, the S.B. Pierce Building began to fall on hard times. Office space remained unrented, and as family moved to the suburbs and stores

relocated to "strip malls", the deterioration would continue until 1975 when the building was abandoned. Realizing the importance of the Pierce Building, the City of Boston tried to at least stem further deterioration, but for a decade the very visible building remained boarded-up and unused. However, in 1985, the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation began a restoration of the S.B. Pierce Building for retail space, artists' lofts and office space. The large windows once again allowed Upham's Corner to glimpse the ongoing restoration, and one of the first stores was Rix Drug Store, which for many years occupied the first floor. With huge loft space on the second floor, used by artists, and spacious office space on the top two floors, the efforts of Dorchester Bay were well rewarded. Without their efforts, and today's new renter, Payless Shoes, on the first floor this very important building might have been irreplaceably lost.

So, here's a "Hat's Off!" to the Dorchester Bay Economic Development Corporation, now in its second decade as a viable developer of housing and commercial space in Upham's Corner.

Anthony Sammarco's award-winning history columns are a regular feature of Dorchester Community News.