

FIRST IN A FOUR-PART SERIES

Baker's Founding Fathers

■ Baker County historian Gary Dielman profiles four men who were instrumental in the creation of Baker City, starting today with Royal A. Pierce (1828-1911), who laid out the original townsite for the city in 1865



Dielman

By Gary Dielman
For the Baker City Herald

Isaac Hiatt in his “Thirty-one Years in Baker County,” which tells the county’s history from its beginning in 1862 to 1893, described Royal A. Pierce’s actions to create a town at the south end of Powder River Valley. In August 1864, R. A. Pierce laid claim to the southeast quarter of Section 17, Township 9 South, Range 40, East of the Willamette meridian, and proceeded in 1865 to get a title to the same from the state. He built a house west of where the courthouse now stands and early in the spring of 1865 laid out the southeast quarter of the quarter section for a town site, which he named Baker, but somehow people would call it Baker City and that became the adopted name.

The 1864 Baker City Township Map shows clearly why lawyer Pierce filed a claim on 160 acres and platted the first town in the township. As the first to do so, Pierce is my choice for “Founding Father of Baker City No. 1.”

In this four-part Baker City Herald series I will nominate three more early residents to be Founding Fathers Nos. 2, 3 and 4. They are a sample of the many early citizens who contributed to the growing community in the 1860s and 1870s.

Pierce realized that Auburn, lying in narrow Blue Canyon in the foothills of the Elkhorn Mountains, was not a favorable site for a city. Pierce had a better idea: Develop a city where he saw five roads pointing like arrows toward the south end of Powder River Valley.

In the next episode in this series I write about how Dr. J. M. Boyd, Founding Father No. 2, ended up gaining title to the land described above due to a flaw in Pierce’s filing process.

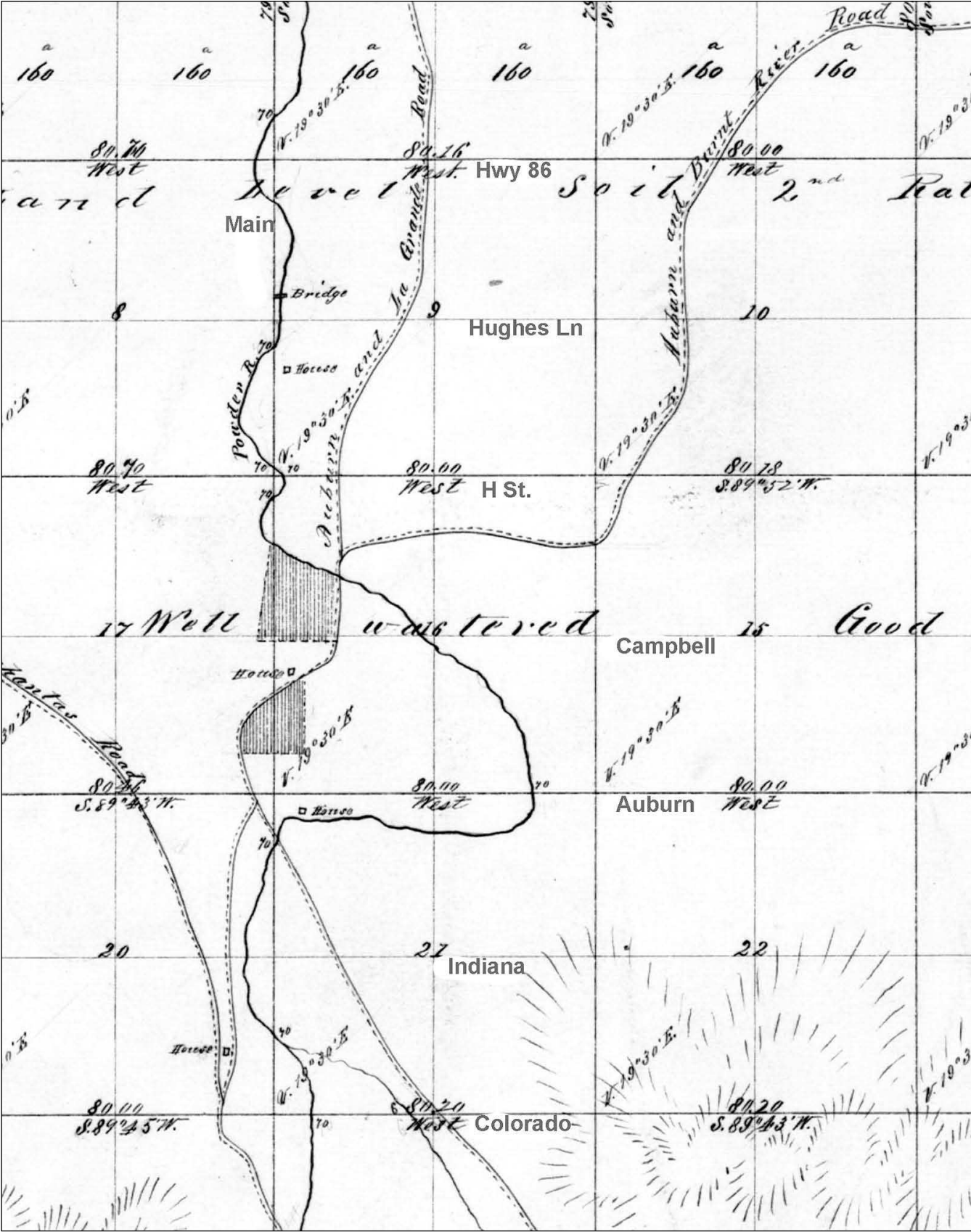
How did Pierce end up in Baker County? Well, in 1852 he had gotten close, when he sailed around the Horn of South America to California, where he engaged in mining on the Feather River. The next year he returned to Wisconsin, where in December 1853 he married Elizabeth Ann Turk (1832-1918).

Elizabeth, who went by her middle name, Ann, was born in Sussex, England. At a young age she emigrated to Wisconsin with her parents. Royal Pierce was born Feb. 23, 1828, at Londonderry, Vermont. His parents were Abel Pierce and Harriet Dodge Pierce, whose forefathers had emigrated to America in the 1600s. When Royal was a child, his parents ventured further west to Black Earth, Dane County, Wisconsin, a village 20 miles west of Madison. Royal grew to adulthood in Wisconsin.

For a while he both taught school and studied law. It was common practice in those days to “read” for an established lawyer and then apply to the local court for permission to practice law. A Wisconsin newspaper article dated March 10, 1860, noting that Pierce was a member of the Dane County Bar Association, is evidence that at some point Pierce had been admitted to the practice of law in Wisconsin.

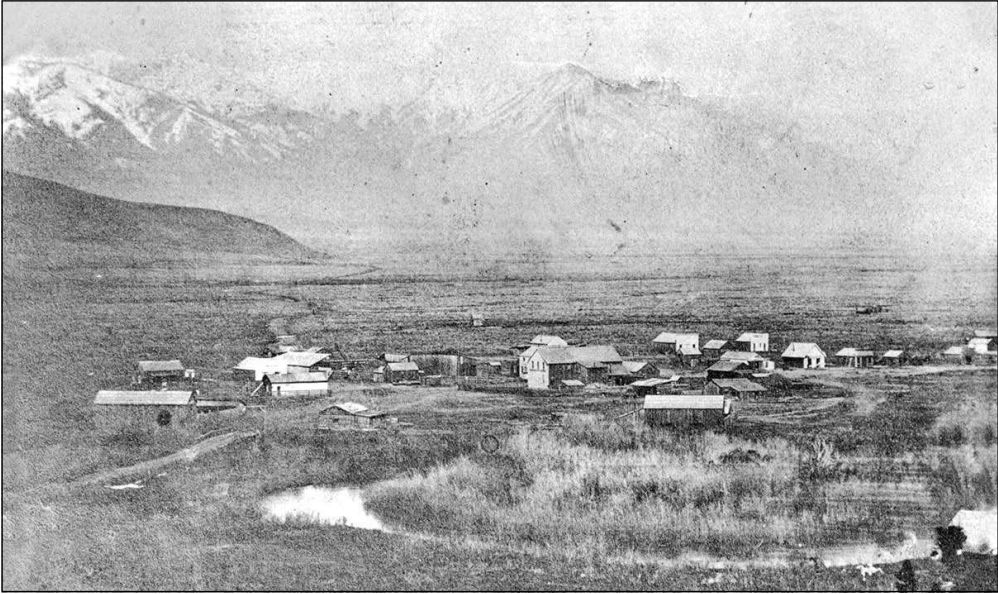
By 1862, when Royal and Ann emigrated to Oregon, Ann had given birth to five children, two of whom had died young and were buried in Wisconsin. The three surviving children accompanied their parents to Oregon traveling with the Tim Goodall wagon train via a supposedly shorter route to Powder River Valley. They crossed Snake River at Brownlee Ferry, near today’s Brownlee Dam, then up Powder River along a not very well-defined trail to Eagle Valley and on down to Powder River Valley. During the journey across the plains on the Oregon Trail, Royal was 34, Ann 30, James 5, Abel 4, and Nelly 2.

When they arrived at the future site of Baker City, according to Ann in a 1912 interview, they camped on the west side of Powder River opposite the present city park. Ann said there was one little log cabin on the west side of the river, in which a Mr. Evans conducted a saloon and provision store. The cabin referred to was apparently the “house” noted by the surveyors on the 1864 Baker City Township Map as belonging to Charles B.



Baker County Library District Historic Photo Collection

The labels on this official 1864 township map show the location of some of today’s Baker City streets.



Baker County Library District Historic Photo Collection

The earliest known photo of Baker City, 1868. Charles E. Place’s cabin is above the large body of water. Place’s toll bridge is to the left of the cabin. The road going over the bridge is today’s Bridge Street. In the center of the photo we see the back (east) side of Baker City House, the town’s second hotel. The front of the hotel faces Main Street. Just to the left of the hotel is where Old Post Office Square is located today.

Fischer, who acquired land east of Pierce’s claim. For many years the grove of cottonwoods on the east side of Powder River was known as Fisher’s Grove, present site of Geiser-Pollman Park. The 1870 U.S. Census listed Charles B. Fisher, age 29, profession mail carrier, born in New York, with personal worth \$2,000 and real estate worth \$2,000 (\$80,000 in today’s dollars). How he had acquired so much wealth before coming to Oregon is not known. According to a 1907 obituary of Pierce that appeared in the Baker City Democrat newspaper, “His first camp



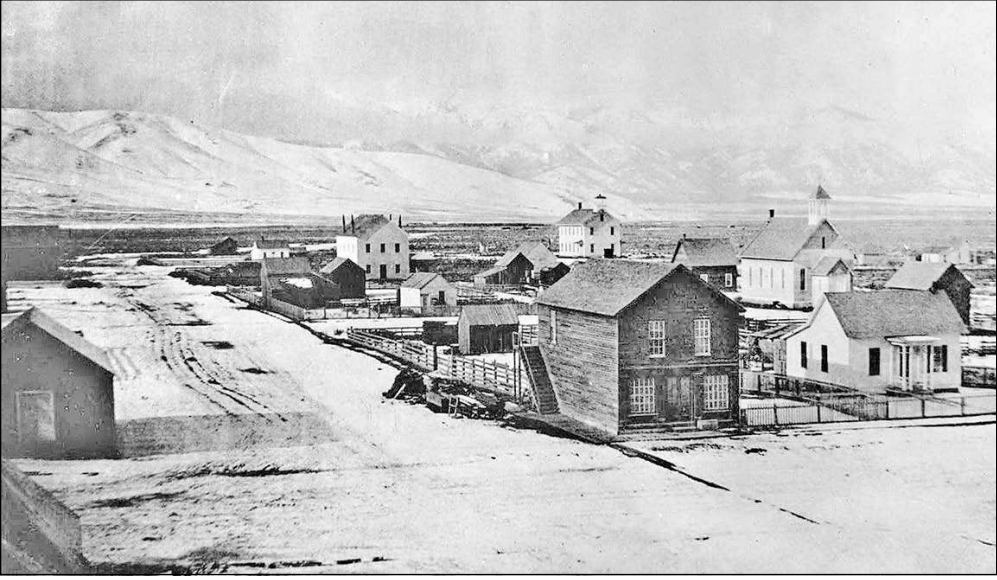
Photo by Gary Dielman

The grave of Elizabeth Ann Pierce at Baker City’s Mount Hope Cemetery.

was made near the Baldock placers north of the city.” The site of that mine is not known. Pierce had tried mining in California. Perhaps he was lured to Baker County as a place to get rich quick. But there is no other evidence that Pierce engaged in mining. The Pierce family soon moved on to Auburn. During two years in Auburn, Pierce was admitted to the practice of law by the newly formed Baker County Circuit Court. Besides practicing law, Pierce branched out into being a land developer. After Pierce platted his land claim at the south end of Powder River Valley and began selling lots, other emigrants to Baker County saw the commercial and residential advantages the site offered over Auburn, which was rapidly losing population

due to placer mines playing out and miners discovering other mines throughout Baker County, plus many miners were leaving to join the gold rush in Western Idaho. In 1865 Pierce moved his family from Auburn to a house he had built on the west side of the new town. Pierce, the town’s first lawyer, set up an office in a modest wooden building on the northeast corner of Main and Court. Around 1874 Catholic priest Rev. Father De Roo built on that corner the two-story Arlington Hotel, the town’s first brick structure. Pierce’s name rarely appeared in contemporary issues of the Bedrock Democrat newspaper (today’s Baker City Herald), which began publishing in 1870. We learn from Pierce’s obituary that in the early 1870s Pierce

built a toll road from Baker City to Keating and resided on what was known as the Pierce farm on lower Powder River. The move to Keating Valley may have been precipitated by bitterness he harbored about losing title to land in the town he founded. In his obituary we learn he claimed the loss came about “through tricks and fraud.” In 1880, after 27 years of marriage, Pierce moved to Challis, Idaho, about 160 miles north of Pocatello, leaving Ann and their children in Baker City. Several of the Pierce children were adults by then, but three were still juveniles. During the 1880 Census conducted in the Virtue District of Baker County, which included Keating Valley, Pierce was listed as a lawyer and his son James, age 27, a butcher. A month later they were both were listed in the Census as living in Challis, the largest town in the newly formed Custer County, where mining was a major industry. Apparently their move to Challis took place between the two census takings. At some point James Pierce ended up back in Baker County. Royal Pierce founded the first newspaper in Challis, the Idaho Messenger, the first issue of which appeared on May 21, 1881. Pierce published the newspaper for seven years before selling it in 1888. The newspaper’s name changed to Challis Messenger. In 1899 Pierce’s name appeared in a curt notice in his old newspaper: “Royal A. Pierce vs Elizabeth Pierce — divorce granted.” On that same date Pierce celebrated his divorce by marrying Phoebe Larter. In the 1900 Census of Challis, 72-year-old Royal Pierce and Phoebe, 40, were listed along with her five children. In the May 7, 1907, issue of the Challis Messenger, appeared an article about Royal A. Pierce’s last days. On April 24, 1907, Pierce, who had been quite ill for some time, departed Challis on the stage for Pocatello, against advice from friends.



Baker County Library District Historic Photo Collection

The intersection of Court Avenue and First Street. At its northwest corner was the first Odd Fellows lodge. The three white buildings in the background, from left to right, are the first Baker County Courthouse, the school house on site of today’s Helen M. Stack building, and the first Methodist Church.