

Nelson C. Pierce Oral History Interview – JFK#1, circa 1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Nelson C. Pierce
Interviewer: Nancy Tuckerman
Date of Interview: circa 1964
Place of Interview: Washington D.C.
Length: 11 pages

Biographical Note

Nelson C. Pierce worked in the Ushers' Office at the White House. This interview focuses on Pierce's interactions with the Kennedy family, John F. Kennedy's [JFK] use of the Ushers' Office, and the aftermath of JFK's assassination, among other topics.

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Suggested Citation

Nelson C. Pierce, recorded interview by Nancy Tuckerman, circa 1964 (page number),
John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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Nelson C. Pierce– JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

NELSON C. PIERCE

ca. 1964

Washington, D.C.

By Nancy Tuckerman

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TUCKERMAN: We will now hear from Nelson Pierce who is an usher at the White House. Mr. Pierce, how long have you been at the White House?

PIERCE: A little over two-and-a-half years.

TUCKERMAN: So you started with the Kennedy administration?

PIERCE: Yes, ma'm.

TUCKERMAN: Could you tell us exactly what the Ushers' Office is — we haven't spoken to one of the ushers yet.

PIERCE: Well, the primary purpose of the Ushers' Office is to see that the First Family gets what they need when they need it.

TUCKERMAN: In other words, they call you up on the phone and ask for household needs, information, etc.

PIERCE: That's right — anything at all — any request they have for just anything at all.

TUCKERMAN: Like, if they needed a car or if the children wanted to go someplace?

PIERCE: If they needed a car — if they needed furniture moved or portraits hung, and so forth.

TUCKERMAN: In other words, they would contact you and you, in turn, would contact the person who had to do the necessary job?

PIERCE: That is correct.

TUCKERMAN: And how many ushers are there?

PIERCE: There are five.

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TUCKERMAN: Also, do you see the First Family a fair amount?

PIERCE: We're in contact with them either personally or by phone almost every day. In many cases, many times a day.

TUCKERMAN: One question we've been asking everybody — and I was asked too — is if you can possibly remember the first time you met the President? Whether he shook your hand or how he addressed you.

PIERCE: No, I don't recall the first time that I met the President. I recall very vividly my first experience with Mrs. Kennedy. I was never officially introduced to her, but when they were redecorating the Red Parlor she came down with Caroline — they went through the State Dining Room and into the Red Parlor because the tourists were going through the remainder of the first floor, and I watched for her so I could get the elevator when she came back, and when I saw her coming I pushed the button for the elevator but someone had just taken it upstairs so I had to wait there for a few minutes, and when she came around the corner from the State Dining Room she said, "Good morning, Mr. Pierce," and it surprised me very very much because, as I say, I had never been introduced to her. I didn't realize that she knew who I was though I had spoken to her on the phone on a number of occasions.

TUCKERMAN: I think she was quite good that way, don't you — about remembering people's names and calling them by name?

PIERCE: Marvelous — she had a marvelous memory — so did the President.

TUCKERMAN: So when she was decorating the rooms you probably saw more of her at that time — she was probably in and out of the State rooms.

PIERCE: She was in and out of our office and the State rooms all of the time and, of course, we took charge of making the arrangements for almost all of the redecorating.

TUCKERMAN: Do you think that she was easy to work with and cooperative? I know she was apt to change her mind quite a bit but, generally speaking, was she always polite?

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PIERCE: Oh, she was marvelous. Of course, the President and Mrs. Kennedy were my first First Family, so I will always have a fond affection for them that I doubt seriously I could have for any other First Family.

TUCKERMAN: Did you ever see much of the children? I don't suppose a great deal but occasionally when they were coming up and down.

PIERCE: We saw them quite often. I remember one evening in particular when I had a message for Miss Shaw. She and the children were in the dining room just finishing their supper when I arrived. Caroline got down from the table and started turning somersaults on the dining room rug, and she was complaining that she couldn't go straight. She would either go to the right or to the left. She did two or three that were very good and I complimented her on those and then she asked me if I would please turn somersaults with her. Miss Shaw came to my rescue and I didn't have to go through the motions!

TUCKERMAN: John liked to ride up and down the elevator, didn't he?

PIERCE: John loved to ride up and down the elevator and loved to wear the policeman's hat. Miss Shaw was expecting some guests one evening and had John, Jr. down in the main lobby with her, and the first thing John did was go over and get one of the policeman's hat — he put it on and wore it all over the lobby — he even had to go look in that tremendous mirror in the lobby. He really enjoyed looking at himself in that.

TUCKERMAN: Would he ever come down after supper and maybe talk to all of you?

PIERCE: Once in a great while Miss Shaw would bring him down and into the office and we would get to talk to him then.

TUCKERMAN: Did he ask you to tell stories ever?

PIERCE: I had a Signal Corps man up on the second floor one day working on the stereo set in the West Hall and John came over and asked me to read him a story and he brought the book. I sat down on the edge of the sofa and he pushed me and said, "No, sit back." Then he crawled up alongside of me and I read this story in the book that he had brought.

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TUCKERMAN: And as far as the President was concerned, you mainly would see him at — say State dinners, or would he call up the Ushers' Office if he wanted things done?

PIERCE: If he wanted things done, he would call us direct and we would see him, of course, at the Legislative Breakfasts every Tuesday morning, and at the Publishers' Luncheon and, of course, the State functions.

TUCKERMAN: I always felt that he was terribly interested in the State functions — as to how they were run, and he took quite an active part in it. He was quite interested, didn't you feel?

PIERCE: Very definitely!

TUCKERMAN: He really cared that everything went correctly, including the entertainment?

PIERCE: That showed in the procedure that was followed at each of the State dinners, and there were no stereotypes. Occasionally he would change one phase or another of the proceedings of State functions. So that there was a pattern, and yet the pattern was subject to change somewhere along the line — which made it interesting for everyone. You didn't feel that you had gotten into a rut in the way you did things.

One of the interesting things that I observed about President Kennedy, and I thought it was a marvelous idea, was the fact that he had the Head of State, or the guest of honor at any State function, sign his menu. The first time a butler came to our office for a pen. We didn't know what type of pen the President would like, so we sent a regular desk pen and also two or three different ballpoint pens, but he didn't care for any of them, so when the butler came back I said, "Here, take this one," and I handed him my own ballpoint pen, and that was the one the President used to sign guests of honor menus and to have the guest of honor sign his menu. Unfortunately, I don't have a record of the people who have used this pen — I use it every day, and I've never had a refill, and I am sure when a refill is required, I am going to put this one away and keep it as a souvenir.

TUCKERMAN: He was apt also to write little messages, wasn't he, across the table to people? It is strange he never carried

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his own pen?

PIERCE: Never carried his own pen. Of course, he probably had a pen into his regular suit but for the social functions he put on a tuxedo and wouldn't bother to take the pen out of his suit and put it in his tuxedo coat. So I was always there with my pen whenever he needed it — one of the butlers would come in....

TUCKERMAN: I also remember one time — I think he was coming to see the King of Afghanistan. He wanted to meet him downstairs and he sat in the Ushers' Office. Were you there?

PIERCE: Yes, he did that quite often. He usually was early and would be downstairs a few minutes before the guest of honor arrived. He would come in and sit and talk with us in the office or make a phone call while he was waiting, and then we would notify him as soon as the guest of honor was on the way up the drive to the North Portico.

TUCKERMAN: He didn't meet all of them downstairs, did he?

PIERCE: Almost all of them he met at the front door, and then he would take the guests to the second floor Oval Room where there would be an exchange of gifts followed by the procession with the Color Guard down the Grand Stairway.

TUCKERMAN: Then the President was always prompt to meet the guests. He was on time for luncheons and dinners — or were there some close calls?

PIERCE: Oh, there were quite a few close calls. We'd get a call — or a buzz — from the West Wing that the President was on his way and then get a call that he had stopped at the pool, and we knew that the guest of honor was eight or ten minutes away, and it was always amazing that he could get into the pool and out of the pool and be at the North Portico to meet the guest of honor in that length of time. But, of course, his swimming in the pool was for therapy and a couple of lengths of the pool was all that was required.

TUCKERMAN: So, he was fairly punctual?

PIERCE: Very! Very rarely was he late. This is particularly true when there was a Head of State — I don't know of any time when he was ever late when a Head of State was coming in.

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Now, for some of the luncheons — a matter of a few minutes — very often he would be busy in the office and, as a result, be five, ten, or fifteen minutes late for a luncheon but on those occasions, of course, he wouldn't stop off at the pool. We knew that he was busy and that he would be over as soon as possible. I'll never forget the first time I announced him at one of the luncheons. He got off the elevator and the group in the Red Parlor was quite loud that particular day, so I decided that they should hear me when I announced the President, so I opened up both lungs that day and said, "GENTLEMEN, THE PRESIDENT" and then backed away from the Red Room door and turned and faced the President, and he had a wide grin on his face and mouthed words, "Thank you," and then I went back into the office and sat down and shook like a leaf for about five or ten minutes. I was fine always until after I had announced the President and then the nervousness would come.

TUCKERMAN: But he was always friendly and cordial and knew everyone by their names?

PIERCE: Always — he always said "hello," or "good morning," or "good afternoon" whenever he came over.

TUCKERMAN: And did he call often to the Ushers' Office and ask them to do special things when he was up in the family quarters or...

PIERCE: Not too often. He was not demanding at all. He would call mainly for information — about the dogs — about some of the decorating that Mrs. Kennedy was planning — special lighting for a bust over the mantel — on the mantel on the second floor....

TUCKERMAN: So he regarded the Ushers' Office as a sort of catch-all for all kinds of information?

PIERCE: Right. If he needed information, he knew that he could call us and, if we didn't have the information immediately, he knew that we would get it for him and call him back as soon as possible.

TUCKERMAN: Did he take great interest in the restoration program? Can you think of any particular times when he visited the work in progress?

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PIERCE: It was quite often that he visited it and, of course, being in close association with the First Family as we were, and are, we heard conversations between the President and the First Lady discussing projects. I don't believe Mrs. Kennedy did any of the restoration at all without first discussing it with the President and getting his approval, and I knew that on two occasions he objected to what she was planning.

TUCKERMAN: Can you recall what they were?

PIERCE: No — right at the moment I can't. One of them concerned the Blue Room, but I don't recall the details of that. But she usually won out. Her taste in decorating, I feel, is excellent.

TUCKERMAN: Did he seem to have a sense of history? Was he interested in why something was being done? Did he ask for the historical reason behind the change?

PIERCE: Yes, in fact, the Curator's office wrote several resumes of history about the furnishings, wall coverings, and some of the portraits that were hung in the various parlors. One of the rather unusual requests that we had from Mrs. Kennedy was when she called us and said that she would like to have a pregnant rabbit for the school. She thought it would be nice if the children could see a mother rabbit and her babies. So a man at our church was President of the Rabbit Breeders' Association here in this area, and I knew that one of the boys in the Sunday School there had a rabbit called Annabelle — pure white with beautiful pink eyes — and had had it as a household pet. They let it out and it ran around the kitchen and all over the house. So, I felt that would be a wonderful rabbit to have for Caroline and the children in the school. So I called him and asked him if it were possible for us to have Annabelle in the condition stated, and he took care of all of the details for us and sent the rabbit in to us and she had four young ones, and the children had a marvelous time watching them grow. At the end of the school year we, of course, had to get rid of the rabbit so one of the men down in the shop has Annabelle now. But Annabelle had been handled and she was just a marvelous pet. Then, they had a hatchery that the teachers made and they had some baby chicks in the nursery. So it was — there was never a dull moment in that solarium — school.

TUCKERMAN: Did you ever see the school children? Did they ever come up the main elevator?

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PIERCE: Yes — they always used the main elevator — and at times this presented a problem when we were waiting for President Kenendy to come down and it was time for the school children to go upstairs. So

naturally the President took preference and the children might be five or six minutes late for school on some mornings. That didn't happen too often.

TUCKERMAN: Did you ever observe the President with the school children?

PIERCE: No, I didn't. Mrs. Kennedy, quite often was with the children but not the President. However, I knew he did meet with them several times and gave permission for them to use the pool several times — they had swimming parties.

TUCKERMAN: Could you tell us where you were at the time of the assassination?

PIERCE: I was on my way from my part-time job to the White House. Actually, I left my part-time job over here on 15th Street, just a block and a half from the White House at twenty minutes to two. Whenever the family was out of town — the Usher on duty in the afternoon always came in an hour early or an hour and a half early because he would get off early that evening. So it was exactly a quarter of two when I arrived at the East Gate and the policeman said, "Pierce, hurry and get to the office — the boss has just been shot." Well, of course, my mouth dropped open and he said, "I'm on the level." And just the way he said it, I knew something had happened. So I got up to the office as quickly as I could and, of course, the television in our office was on and that's when it hit me.

TUCKERMAN: Who else was in the office at that time?

PIERCE: At that time — let's see — yes, all the ushers were in by then. Mr. West and Mr. Scouten and, of course, the others — they were there. I can't recall whether Mr. Carter or Mr. Hare was the day-man but whichever one was on duty was there and the other one was in within just a matter of minutes after I got there. And then, of course, the most wonderful thing about this period was the fact that Mrs. Kennedy made all of the arrangements — radioed ahead from the plane to tell us exactly what she wanted. Of course, that afternoon was spent in finding the details — looking up the details of the Lincoln funeral so that we could have things as near as possible the way they were at the time Lincoln was assassinated.

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TUCKERMAN: So almost immediately after she started back you got word from the plane as to how she wanted the house to look and you started going to work right away?

PIERCE: Right away — and it was 4:20 Saturday morning when Mrs. Kennedy came with the President's body, and at 4:10 we had finished putting up the last pieces of crepe so that our — we were happy that things had

been delayed at Bethesda Hospital — our first word was that he was to arrive at the White House at 11:00 Friday evening and we wouldn't have had things ready. In fact, about half completed at that time.

TUCKERMAN: Can you recall what people came in to help on this project — I believe Sargent Shriver was put in charge...

PIERCE: Sargent Shriver was in charge of overall arrangements. We hadn't really had an opportunity to become acquainted with the members of the family. They were in and out but usually on business; occasionally for dinner — socially — but at those times we did not have an opportunity to become acquainted with them, and it was during this period that we got to know Sargent Shriver and the Attorney General, and they're wonderful people.

TUCKERMAN: You said that one of the things that impressed you so much was the fact that Mrs. Kennedy took a personal hand in making all these arrangements. Once she was back in the house, did she telephone the Ushers' Office directly or have people come up or....

PIERCE: Yes — she would call the ushers directly, and if there was anything she wanted, she would tell us exactly what it was and we would see that it was done the way she wanted it done.

TUCKERMAN: Then even during that period she was...

PIERCE: The most remarkable woman I have ever known — and so many people feel that she is cold because during her appearances in public she was very composed, and I so admired her being able to keep her composure. But, of course, I personally saw her when she wasn't composed, and she was as any other woman would be who had lost her husband — probably even more so because of the terrific shock and the way in which she lost him.

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TUCKERMAN: Coupled with the strain of the last few months and having lost the baby and all that....

PIERCE: That's right — and when they were through in the East Room, Mrs. Kennedy and the Attorney General and other members of the family came down the hall to go upstairs and my doorman was taking care of Mr. and Mrs. Auchincloss — and when I saw them coming, I got the elevator and I wondered what I would say to Mrs. Kennedy when I saw her. And as she came around the corner from the hall to the elevator, our eyes met and there was a rapport there just for an instant. She was

crying very hard at the moment, but there was that rapport and I knew no words were necessary.

TUCKERMAN: And all the family had gathered to stay in the house at that time, so your job must have been tripled.

PIERCE: Yes, there were. The first sleep I had was Saturday at 12:00 noon — I had gotten up at 5:00 Friday morning and got to bed at 12:00 on Saturday and slept until 3:00. Then Saturday night things were fairly quiet. We got to bed about 1:30 and up again at 6:30 Sunday morning — then I got to bed Monday morning at 5:30 and was very disappointed and unhappy when none of the other men in the office called me because I slept until 10:30, and by the time I got up, showered and dressed and so forth, it was just as the caisson pulled up in front of the Cathedral. So I missed all the march from the Capitol to the White House, the dignitaries on the North Portico — and then walking to the Cathedral from the White House — and I was very, very unhappy about not having been able to witness any of that.

TUCKERMAN: Yes, I can see why — when you played such a role in the preparation for it. Then, after the funeral, of course, Mrs. Kennedy did get away for a while. But when she was back in the White House preparing to move out, were you working very closely with her?

PIERCE: Very closely with her on all of the details of the move — what furniture she wanted to take — what furniture she wanted in storage.

TUCKERMAN: Again her very precise and orderly mind...

PIERCE: Fantastic, really — and then, of course, the day that she left, the ushers all went up and had their picture taken in

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the West Hall with her. Those are the little things — the photographs — two photographs that I have of Ray Hare and myself with Mrs Kennedy. Things that will live through my life and will be passed on to my children of course.

TUCKERMAN: I am sure she had a very special word for everyone.

PIERCE: She did.

TUCKERMAN: And the children, were they there with her then?

PIERCE: Not at that particular time. She had all the staff people up at that time — the carpenters, the maids, the butlers — everyone in the house was

invited up to say goodbye to her and it was so wonderful seeing her smile — to be able to smile. These are the little things that I admire so much in her, and, as I said at the beginning of the interview, she was my first First Lady so I have a fond, a very fond affection for her.

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