



Charles Pierce was the first African-American to get a chemical engineering degree in the U.S.

IIT ready to honor trailblazing alumnus

By Monique Garcia
Tribune staff reporter

In the half-century after his death, much of Charles Warner Pierce's legacy slipped away, forgotten even by family.

But Friday, after a long and unusual scholarly project, dozens of Pierce's descendants will gather at the Illinois Institute of Technology to celebrate the life of a man who was the school's first chemical engineering graduate in 1901, the first black man in the nation to earn such a degree, and, ultimately, a beloved teacher in Chicago public high schools.

"He's a man with his footprints across history," said Courtney Leigh Bisel, a spokeswoman with the school's department of chemical and biological engineering, who helped research Pierce's life.

Rev. Leon Scott, a great-nephew of Pierce and pastor of Berean Baptist Church on Chicago's South Side, said the researchers reclaimed the memory of man who not only broke society's barriers, but also enjoyed teaching his siblings' children and grandchildren how to fix broken gadgets or take apart a radio.

Scott, who graduated from

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IIT with a degree in electrical engineering in 1961, said he is honored to accept the award on his great-uncle's behalf.

"I can only imagine what my uncle went through," said Scott, who was 17 when Pierce died. "I admire him for the hurdles that he overcame, many only he can tell about. It's something that young African-Americans need to heed today."

IIT's quest for its own history led researchers to Pierce and his remarkable story. More than six years ago, in preparation for the chemical engineering program's centennial celebration, officials set out to find its first graduate.

They were surprised to find that it was a black man. In 1901, doors of higher education institutions were practically closed to African-Americans.

Researchers pored over thousands of records, fascinated that Pierce went on to become a highly respected teacher at the nation's first historically black colleges, and later a science teacher in Chicago high schools. He served in World War I and gained a reputation for refusing to let his students skate by—even the star athletes.

Charles Warner Pierce was born in La Grange, Ga., in 1876. He and his twin brother, Cornelius, were the youngest of 14 children. Shortly after their birth, the family moved to Texas, where the brothers later toured the state as musicians.

At a fair, the teenage brothers met two women who ran a school for girls in Chicago, sisters Anise and Albertine Butts. The sisters persuaded the young men to move to Chicago, where educational opportunities were better. At 17, the boys packed their bags and headed north.

"In a way, they were the pioneers of Chicago's first wave of black migration," Bisel said.

Once in Chicago, they worked for the Butts sisters at the Kenwood Institute for Girls. In 1896, Pierce applied to what was then known as the Armour Institute of Technology—an unusual school opened just a few years earlier with the goal

of training students of all races and classes in the practical sciences.

Since Pierce had never graduated from high school, he first was admitted to the Armour's preparatory program. He completed that program in a year, and was accepted as a full student in September 1897.

He took calculus, carpentry, mechanical drawing, theoretical mechanics and quantitative analysis. He participated in the Glee Club, the mandolin club, the orchestra and the Technical Society. Although by all accounts he was popular, his struggles in the pre-civil rights era were hinted at in the school's yearbook.

"Mislake me not for my complexion," Pierce was quoted as saying.

His complexion kept him from landing a job in industry upon graduation, so he went into teaching.

He joined the faculty at what is now Tuskegee University, where his colleagues included Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. In 1907, he moved to Greensboro, N.C., where he eventually became head of the mechanical engineering department at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.

As Chicago's reputation as a place of opportunity grew in the African-American community, Pierce returned to the city in 1910. He worked as an electrical contractor, ran a small radio shop and was heavily involved with the YMCA.

He became a physics teacher at Phillips High School in 1921, later transferring to the new DuSable High School, where he taught physics and science until he retired in 1941.

In "Bridges of Memory: Chicago's First Wave of Black Migration," Chicago author Tamm Black and a former student of Pierce remembered that coaches at Phillips would advise athletes not to take his classes because Pierce refused to "fix" grades for stars.

Pierce, who was married and had one daughter, died of heart disease in 1947.

His daughter has since died. But IIT officials hope that others touched by Pierce's life will be on hand Friday when the award for distinguished alumni in chemical and biological engineering is named for him.

"He's an inspiration," Bisel said. "You look at what we complain about and how our lives are today, and then you look at what he accomplished and it's like, 'Wow.'"

mcgarcia@tribune.com