



The Historical
Society of
Pennsylvania

Collection 3040

Pierson Family
Papers

1917-1928 (bulk dates 1917-1919)
2 vols. (in 3 boxes), 0.8 lin. feet

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Abstract

Major Ward W. Pierson of Company L of the 315th Infantry was killed November 9, 1918, during the World War I Meuse-Argonne Campaign in France, just two days before the Armistice. Prior to his military service, Ward was head of the Commercial Law Department at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and also a partner in the law firm of Pierson and Shertz. He was born October 22, 1879, in Iowa. His wife was Harriet Pierson.

This collection consists of two items: a scrapbook, created by Harriet Pierson, which contains newspaper clippings, letters, photographs, maps, condolences, and memorabilia relating to her husband's military career and World War I experiences; and Major Pierson's World War I diary, which chronicles the last five months of his life.

Background note

Ward Wright Pierson, son of J.C. Pierson, was born October 22, 1879, on a small farm in Scott, Iowa. Working as a carpenter, farmhand, and ranchman, Ward supported himself through school and received an A.B. from Northwestern University in 1902. He earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania in 1908. Ward and his wife, Harriet, who were residents of Somerton, Pennsylvania, had no children.

In 1917, as a partner in the law firm of Pierson and Shertz, Ward and his firm pursued and won a well-publicized case against the railroad companies to prevent an increase in the price of coal. Ward was also a member of the faculty at Penn's Wharton School for sixteen years and served as the head of the Commercial Law Department prior to volunteering for military service in 1917. Ward was among eighty professors (then, one-tenth of the staff) from the University of Pennsylvania who volunteered for army or navy service. Upon his enlistment, the law firm of Pierson and Shertz was dissolved.

Ward trained for the army at Fort Niagara, New York, from May 13 to August 14, 1917, along with many scions of prominent Philadelphia families. He was commissioned a captain following his training and was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, from August 29, 1917 to June 28, 1918, where he led Company L of the 315th Infantry, known also as

“Philadelphia’s Own” because so many of its members called the city their home. Ward was well-liked and respected by his men and posthumously in 1932, the Citizens’ Military Training Camp at Fort Meade was renamed “Camp Ward W. Pierson.”

Ward was selected to serve overseas in France, where he was in command of the First Battalion, 315th Infantry, 79th Division. He sailed to that country from New York City on June 30, 1918. Ward died less than five months later, on November 9, 1918, just three weeks after being commissioned major of his company for his performance in battle in and around Verdun. While discussing tactics in a dugout, Ward and one sergeant were killed by a high explosive shell. He was the sixth and last infantry battalion commander of the division to be killed and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. Major Pierson is buried in the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery at Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, France.

Scope & content

The collection consists of two volumes: Ward Pierson’s pocket diary, which he kept while serving in France during the last five months of his life, and a scrapbook created by Harriet Pierson that commemorates the military career of her husband.

The entries in Ward’s pocket diary begin in early June 1918 and end October 27th of that year. Entries were often written in pencil, and several pages are badly smudged, but on the whole the diary is well preserved. Most entries range from one-half to one full page and contain a brief summary of every day’s events during that period. Pages are numbered.

Several pages at the beginning of the diary have weapons information sheets pasted onto them that indicate “No. rounds per gun” and how many and what types of weapons were kept by company sectors, battalion sectors, and regimental sectors. Pages fifty-six through fifty-eight contain the signatures and hometowns of men in Ward’s platoon.

Ward, on occasion, recorded his deeper thoughts. On the day he sailed from America out of New York harbor, he was overcome with an “indescribable feeling” while passing the Statue of Liberty. In his entry on that day, June 30th, he wrote: “Here I am leaving all that is dear to me as an individual and facing forth to some awful end may be far from all that is dear in order that the future may be made more secure for others and yet I do so willingly and gladly without the slightest regret buoyed up by the knowledge that what I am doing is right...My dear wife has the harder part to fulfill. Her courage far exceeds mine.” His diary provides glimpses of Harriet, of which there are next to none in the scrapbook. On July 2nd, Ward wrote the following: “I’m always looking for my wife with the subconscious thought that this is just part of the trip we took seven years ago.”

In late September, nearly half of the officers were killed or wounded in battle, and matters did not improve much over the next two months. In an entry from October 7th, Ward painted a dismal picture of the situation on the front: “This job is no cinch. Men are cold and sick. Officers are not on the job at all. And it takes some big effort to

make men come through. I do my best. Angels can do no more.” Ward would die a little more than a month after this entry.

Although originally in one binding, the scrapbook now exists in two parts (see processing note below). The first page of the scrapbook (on which a photograph mount is attached without a photograph) begins a story that has already ended—the life and death of Major Ward Wright Pierson. Harriet Pierson apparently began creating the scrapbook after receiving word of her husband’s death in 1918, although the materials it contains would have been amassed both prior to and after this event. The scrapbook spans eleven years and represents the devoted efforts of a woman who wanted to memorialize the military service of her valiant husband.

The scrapbook begins and ends with materials that concern Ward’s death: poems, a University of Pennsylvania Memorial Service pamphlet, newspaper clippings, letters of condolence, and photographs of the major’s grave marking in the Meuse-Argonne cemetery in France. In a newspaper clipping a Lieutenant Graham had this to say of Ward: “The major took every care of his boys and went as far as to personally examine their shoes to see that none of them would catch cold or suffer unnecessary hardships. Major Pierson was the most loved of officers in the division and his death was a shock to his men.” In a 1918 letter to Harriet from Captain D.E. Williams, Ward’s death is recounted: “Ward was standing in the door of a dug out going over some instructions with a sergeant as to the location of a machine gun nest which had troubled the advance of our troops... A high explosive shell burst almost in the door itself and blew the sergeant to pieces and killed Ward more by shock than anything else as he was not disfigured.”

Arranged roughly chronologically in the middle section of the scrapbook are materials that tell the story of Pierson’s military career: two letters written by colleagues in 1917 to the commanding general of the Eastern Division recommending Ward for service; photographs and memorabilia from his 1917 summer at the Officer’s Training Camp at Fort Niagara, New York; government-issued certificates stating Ward’s promotion first as captain of the Infantry Division (1917) and later as major of Infantry (1918); photographs (including a 10”x13” of Major Pierson, a 10”x13” of the members of the 315th Infantry, and 2- 7”x10”s of Company L of the 315th Infantry, “Philadelphia’s Own,” marching in a 1918 Philadelphia parade to support the War Chest), newspaper clippings, and memorabilia relating to his time at Camp Meade; cablegrams from Ward when stationed in France; and newspaper clippings reporting news from the front overseas.

Also included are: a lock of Ward’s hair contained in an enveloped dated September 22, 1918; several letters spanning 1925 to 1928 from the chief of the American Graves Registration Service in Europe that confirm the placement of a wreath on his grave; maps of France; and a 1919 War Department-issued General Orders pamphlet listing many men who received awards of distinguished service. There is one photograph of Harriet Pierson in the scrapbook and it is mentioned in several newspaper clippings that she was involved in government “war work,” in connection with the fuel administration in Washington, for over a year.

The scrapbook ends with a lengthy news article from an unknown source about the actions of the 79th Division, which consisted largely of men from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. Contained in the article is a list of the Philadelphia casualties, which includes addresses.

Separation report

None.

Subjects

Fort George G. Meade (Md.)
Law partnerships—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—20th century
Lawyers—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—20th century
Military education—United States—20th century
Military training camps—United States—20th century
Mourning customs—20th century
Old Fort Niagara (N.Y.)
Soldiers—Diaries—20th century
Soldiers—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—20th century
War widows—Pennsylvania—20th century
World War, 1914-1918—Campaigns—France
World War, 1914-1918—Personal narratives

Pierson, Harriet
Pierson, Ward W. (Ward Wright), 1879-1918

United States. Army. Infantry Regiment. 315th
University of Pennsylvania—General Alumni Society

Administrative Information

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Acquisition information

Gift of Lucy M. Hawkes, 1982.
Accession 82:71

Alternative format

None.

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Processing note

Processing made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this finding aid do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The scrapbook made by Harriet Pierson was extremely overstuffed. During conservation, the scrapbook was disbound and housed in polyester sleeves for protection. Due to the extra bulk, the contents of the scrapbook no longer fit into one binding; therefore the scrapbook is now in two parts.

Diary formerly known as call number Am .69971. Scrapbook formerly known as call number Am .6997.

Volume listing

Folder title	Date	Vol.
Ward W. Pierson diary	1918	vol. 1
Scrapbook, part I	1917-1928	vol. 2 part I
Scrapbook, part II	1917-1928	vol. 2 part II