

## Alfie Pierce

Generations of Queen's students are familiar with the name "Alfie," but few are aware of the story behind the legendary man.

Accounts of Alfred Pierce's life differ dramatically, but the traditional narrative claims that he was born on the Queen's birthday, May 24, 1874, in Kingston to two fugitive slaves, Margaret and Albert Pierce. They escaped from the United States to settle in Kingston. He was christened at St. James' Anglican Church and attended Gordon Street Public School, which was originally located where Ban Righ Hall, the women's residence, now stands. When he was only twelve years old, Pierce is said to have been orphaned and left in the care of his half-brother from his mother's first marriage, David Dempster, for a short while. This said, official records contradict several elements of this story, including the date of Margaret Pierce's death. Records show that she passed away in 1903, which means that her son would have been around thirty years old at the time, if his alleged birth date is correct.

What is certain is that Pierce was a talented athlete from a young age. At fifteen, Guy Curtis, football captain and one of Queen's University's senior athletic students, is said to have noticed him and invited Pierce to a football practice the following day. After this initial meeting, Pierce became the water boy, handyman and masseuse of the team, but was primarily viewed as being the team's mascot. Regardless of whether or not Curtis was indeed Alfie's patron, Pierce idolized him. In fact, a photograph taken of the 1892-93 hockey team shows Alfie lying on the floor at their feet, with Curtis' left foot placed on his hip. As Amina Ally points out in "Deconstructing the Queen's Spirit" (see PHP Archives, Black History), first published in *Wahenga*, "a young black man became the charm piece or object of amusement for the Queen's football team of white men," and "given the historical background it is but a liberal statement to say that the Queen's football team had their very own public slave."

To many, Alfie was an integral part of Queen's football and played an important part in the pre-game ritual. In Mervin Daub's *Gael Force: A Century of Football at Queen's*, a chapter called "A Gentleman of Colour" (see PHP Archives, Black History) describes the ritual as follows:

Alfie stood on the playing field to greet the players, headed by their captain, as they ran in single file from the dressing room under the stands. He was flamboyantly dressed in the University's colours- blue tunic with red cuffs, yellow waistcoat with red buttons, and red trousers- a tall, stooped, dusky man, with large feet, gnarled hands, and a certain nobleness of countenance and dignity of bearing. He threw a football to the captain, who then led his men into a pre-game warm-up. If this took place during the various times when the team boasted a bear mascot, the bear would be somewhere near the head of the procession.

Flanked by a couple of comely cheerleaders, Alfie then made his way in a plodding shuffle, as if his feet hurt him, and they did, to the bleachers on the student side of the field. The ritual that followed is engraved in the memories of thousands of alumni and Kingstonians.

“What’s the matter with Alfie?” demanded the cheerleaders.

“He’s alright!” the fans roared.

“Who’s alright?”

“Alfie!”

“Who says so?”

“Everybody!”

“Who’s everybody?” And then the reply would come thundering back:

“Queen’s! Queen’s! Queen’s!

Oil Thigh Na Banrighinn Gu Brath!

Cha Gheill! Cha Gheill! Cha Gheill!”

While the Queen’s Encyclopedia explains that “football captain Guy Curtis named [Pierce as “team mascot”] with the thoughtless bigotry typical of the day,” it fails to expound upon how racism surrounding “Alfie” continued to be perpetuated long after his death.

It is commonly understood that Alfie was allowed to sleep beneath the stands of Richardson Stadium in the summer and permitted to use a change room that had been converted into a boiler room beneath Jock Harty Arena as lodging in the winter. In exchange for the Queen’s Athletic Board of Control’s “generosity,” Pierce was given the task of acting as both a handyman and night watchman and ensuring the furnace stayed full of coal. According to a biography of Pierce’s life by Wendy E. Grant, this furnace also doubled as Pierce’s stove for quite some time:

In his tiny room in the Jock Harty Arena, Alfie initially had no facilities for cooking meals. Before going to bed, he would...place a can of soup or beans, bought at a Red and White store on Alfred Street, on top of the hot water boiler so that he could have a hot meal ready for him the next day.

Pierce’s acquaintances said that he later managed to acquire a small stove with which he could cook his meals. It was not until later that the Board decided to provide Alfie with a weekly “allowance” of ten dollars, a Christmas bonus and “clean underwear every week.”

Grant’s biography provides some limited information about Pierce’s personal financial decisions, or tales of his “money-making schemes as an elderly man.” According to these stories, one local merchant would regularly stop by Jackson Hall after work to chat with Alfie and give him fifty cents:

Alfie never failed to leave whatever he happened to be doing at that time of day and hobble to the Jackson Hall steps to meet Mr. Waldron. As soon as he had his fifty cents, a very pleased Alfie would return to work.

Pierce would also receive gifts of dollar bills in the mail at Christmas, but he had to wait for superintendant Dutch Dougal to bring him these letters, as Alfie was “discouraged from wandering around the gymnasium complex” where the mail was delivered. Around Christmas, Grant claims that each year Alfie would look forward to the delivery of one card in particular, describing his response as follows: “He supposedly gave the message written on the card scant attention once his eye had located the enclosed five dollar bill and he had pocketed the cash.” Grant also describes some of Alfie’s so-called “less legitimate means of acquiring money.” He allegedly sold and then resold his last remains to the university and subsequently several different university personnel to cover any funeral expenses. One professor of Medicine at Queen’s, Dr. John Orr, is said to have asked Alfie about his “shabby attire.” When Alfie told him that he did not own anything else, Dr. Orr “sent over two expensive suits for which he had no further use.” Alfie is said to have “promptly sold the suits for five dollars each.” Similarly, after “[chiding Alfie] about his disreputable clothes,” the owner of a men’s wear shop sent him a chinchilla coat: “Once again, Alfie turned a handsome profit by selling the fine coat.”

The criticism of Alfie’s “less legitimate means of acquiring money” is certainly covered in ample detail, yet few have critically focused on the conditions that made Pierce’s actions necessary. Given the conditions within which Alfie lived, it should come as no surprise that social etiquette surrounding gift-giving was of lesser importance. Amina Ally points out that rather than “buying practical items or necessities, John Orr bought Mr. Pierce two suits because he felt it was important for the Queen’s mascot to look presentable.” Dutch Dougal, who is said to have been a close friend of Alfie’s and referred to him on occasion as the “Black Bastard,” was “responsible for Alfie’s personal hygiene”:

In his elder years, Alfie was not fond of bathing or showering and as a result it was often said that Alfie could be smelled, before he was seen. In retaliation to Alfie’s loyalty to the Queen’s hockey team, Dutch gained some satisfaction in dragging a very reluctant Alfie to a hot bath. Alfie’s hoarse objections (legend has it, that he lost his voice cheering for Queen’s) could be heard loud and clear.

While there may be some truth to the stories about Alfie’s “money-making schemes,” they are but a fraction of the story and are merely a symptom of the racism that exists on campus. The focus must shift from a critical analysis of Pierce’s behavior to one that considers what conditions on Queen’s campus made Alfie’s actions necessary.

As research conducted by the Stones Project highlighted, Alfie did not always reside on Queen’s campus, particularly during the years of WWI :

From 1906 to 1908, Alfie was listed as a laborer in the directories, boarding at 468 Albert Street. From 1909 to 1912 he worked at the Locomotive Works and boarded at 380 King Street East. In the 1914/15 and 1915/16 issues he was a hack driver for Eves Brothers, boarding at 31 John Street...In 1923, Alfie Pearce [sic] is shown as a liveryman at Finkle's residing at 120 Clarence.

When Alfie returned after the war years, he shared the spotlight, and accommodations, with another mascot: a bear. Grant's account states that Queen's had a bear cub mascot named "Gee Whiz" in 1921 who was poisoned and replaced with a female bear named "Queen Boo Hoo." For the couple of years that the bear was at Queen's, Alfie shared his living space at the Jock Harty Arena with the animal and was responsible for feeding her. However, as legend has it, a prank pulled by rival students caused "the [usually] playful bruin [to go] plumb nasty after being painted McGill colours in Montreal." In response, Queen Boo Hoo was moved to a zoo in Watertown, NY. As Ally aptly points out, despite the bear's viciousness, "none [of the articles written about Alfred Pierce] even bothers to explore the consequences of the bear's violent behavior on Mr. Pierce's safety." Rather than investigating the safety of Pierce's living conditions, the Board instead chose to replace Queen Boo Hoo with a series of six black bear mascots each successively named "King Boo Hoo."

In 1948, Alfie had a stroke that left both of his arms paralyzed. He had a second stroke in 1951 and was found unconscious on the floor of his room in the arena. According to one account, "[h]ospital officials said he also suffered severe frostbite to both feet which had become gangrenous." He died shortly thereafter.

After his death, Alfie Pierce's body lay in state in the gymnasium for two hours as students, staff, faculty and alumni filed past. Four former football captains and two recipients of the Alfred Pierce Award, created during his lifetime and presented to the top male and female athletes in first year, were the pallbearers. Alfie was buried in the Church of England Cemetery at Cataragui near his mother. His gravestone, a gift of the Class of Medicine 1934, bears the following inscription:

Alfie Pierce  
1874-1951  
A faithful servant of Queen's University  
Erected by Meds '34

This "faithful servant" is often remembered as the personification of Queen's spirit, and some believe that he never left.

In the 1970's, the *Queen's Journal* and the *Whig-Standard* published articles claiming that Alfie Pierce's ghost had returned to haunt Queen's campus. When a student was found dead outside the alumni office, a *Queen's Journal* article blamed the ghost of

Alfie Pierce. In 1975, one letter to the editor published in the *Queen's Journal* and signed as "Alfie Pierce" read as follows:

If you'll pardon the expression, you're dead wrong about a couple of things you printed on Tuesday. You shouldn't even joke about me being a murderer. Unless the students are smarter today than they used to be (and not just drunker) somebody will read too fast, put two wrong ideas together, and in a few years it will be in Queen's history that I was a murderer. Could put a bad complexion on me.

As Ally points out, the "reason was given that Mr. Pierce was taking revenge for the 1974 dismal football record of the Golden Gaels." An article published by the *Whig-Standard* in 1989 describes how an actor playing the part of the "ghost" of Alfie Pierce "[appeared] from beyond the monuments and [joined] the crowd" during a two-day festival celebrating Cataraqui heritage. There are several articles published in both papers that "treated the concept of Mr. Pierce's ghost visiting the Alumni office with amusement."

In 1979, a vote was held to determine the new name of the campus pub. The three options were Alfie's, the Underground and the Crumpled Kilt. "Alfie's" won by a landslide, but the choice was later questioned. In 2006, the Culture Shock chair organized an event called "Free Alfie's." About 150 people attended the event, which was coffee house style and featured dub poetry. Pins that read "Free Alfie's" and "Respect Mr. Alfred Pierce" were sold and played an important role in creating a dialogue to help student learn about Alfred Pierce. In the article from *Wahenga*, Amina Ally called for the name of the campus pub to be changed:

It is crucial for us to educate ourselves regarding the unspoken history and blatant racism behind the Queen's tradition. It is also crucial for us at Queen's University (students, staff, faculty, administration and alumni) to be committed to concrete action. Thus, knowing the background regarding "Alfie's" campus pub, and understanding the followed by action needs to be taken concerning what this "strong tradition at Queen's" really means and what "the spirit of Alfie Pierce" truly represents. An important and symbolic anti-racist action this institution can commit to is to change the name of our campus pub. This kind of action is long overdue and our inaction simply confirms the anti-racist reform policies and statements echoed over many years of lip service.

In 2013, the name of the campus pub was changed to "The Underground." The AMS vice-president of operations at the time, Nicola Plummer, told the *Queen's Journal* that "The name change comes as a result of concerns raised by students that the club negatively reflected on the memory of Alfie Pierce." Furthermore, Plummer stated that "[The Underground is] a non-offensive name...it's an honest name that reflects [the venue]." However, measures should be taken to ensure that the

reasoning behind this name change is remembered, as erasing Alfie Pierce's story does not change the history of racism on Queen's campus.

Ally explains that "Alfie's treatment by Queen's is an example of how members of a dominant culture failed- and still fail- to see how their treatment of a marginalized person robbed him of autonomy and dignity." Many feel that "Alfie Pierce was, and is tradition," but perhaps this is one tradition that requires a bit more fleshing out.