

Voices of Southern Hospitality: An Oral History Project

Interviewee: Pierce, Peter

Place of Interview: Addlestone Library, 205 Calhoun Street, Charleston, SC

Date of Interview: 2018-07-09

Interviewed by: Matthews, Tanya

Date of Transcription: 2019-08-06

Transcribed by: Davis, Alexis

Length of Interview: 00:36:50

Keywords and Subject Headings: Charleston, Convention Visitor's Bureau (CVB), HOP (Hospitality on the Peninsula) Shuttle, public transportation, Park Circle, Slightly North of Broad (SNOB), southern hospitality, community, downtown, farm-to-table, floods, hospitality, hurricanes, locals, parking, peninsula, tourism

Abstract: In this interview, Peter Pierce begins by talking about his background going to school and working in the Northeast. He then goes into how he ended up as General Manager of Slightly North of Broad (SNOB) and describes what the restaurant is known for in terms of atmosphere and cuisine. He gives his definition of hospitality and the difference between normal and southern hospitality. He then describes how Charleston's identity has been influenced by travel magazine awards and a new generation of people with different culinary tastes and preferences. He gives his take on the issues of transportation, parking and flooding in and around downtown. He also talks about his experiences in the aftermath of hurricanes. In the end, he hopes that Charleston keeps its authenticity and community feel as well as incorporating the locals.

Biographical Note: Peter Pierce was born and raised on a farm in Vermont. He went to Johnson & Wales University to study culinary arts. Working seasonally at a country club in New England, he met a group of Charlestonians who took him with them to Maine to work. As they traveled back to Charleston in the winter, Pierce joined them and decided to stay. When he first arrived, he worked at Yeamans Hall Club in North Charleston for around six years until getting a job at Maverick Southern Kitchens downtown. Currently, he is the general manager of Slightly North of Broad on East Bay Street, and he has been with the restaurant for over 18 years.

Project Details:

In the summer of 2018, student researchers from the College of Charleston conducted oral histories for the research project, *Voices of Southern Hospitality*. The project documents diverse opinions and stories about southern hospitality in Charleston, South Carolina, but also offers a

deeper and more intimate history of a changing community. Over the past thirty years (early-1990s to 2018), the Charleston peninsula and its surrounding islands have experienced rapid economic growth and rapid cultural and ecological changes. The *Voices of Southern Hospitality* project chronicles this profound transformation with the personal histories of Charleston residents.

The project was launched in June 2018 with funding from The Committee for Innovative Teaching and Learning in the Liberal Arts and Sciences at the College of Charleston. In addition to documenting important stories, the project was designed to train College of Charleston students in oral history research methods.

Interview Begin

[Interviewer Initials]: T.M.

Interviewee Initials]: P.P.

TM: Alrighty. Hello. My name is Tanya Matthews and I'm sitting down with Peter Pierce at Addlestone Library on the 9th of July in 2018. To start, Peter, do you mind telling me where you're from?

PP: I'm from Vermont. Born and raised on a farm in Vermont up until I went to school in Rhode Island.

TM: Sure. Where did you go to school?

PP: Johnson and Wales. I went for culinary arts because I thought I wanted to be a chef.

TM: Sure. What brought you down to Charleston?

PP: There was a little country club in the town that I worked in seasonal summertime, and I worked there summer right before school and there was a group of kids from Charleston. This provided housing; you know, it was a big resort, provided housing for kids. So, I met them, and they were a great bunch and they would go from New England to Charleston, New England to Charleston, you know, summertime, wintertime. And after college they said, "Hey, come with us to Maine." And I said, all right. So, we went up and worked at a yacht club up in Maine. And then when winter came, everybody headed to Charleston. So, I hopped aboard.

TM: Sure. And what do you do now in Charleston?

PP: I work at Slightly North of Broad. General manager at Slightly North of Broad.

TM: How long have you been there?

PP: In September will be my 18th year.

TM: Wow. 18th year.

PP: Crazy.

TM: How would you describe Slightly North of Broad? What kind of--?

PP: Eclectic. Very local-driven. You know, a real family. Very passionate about what we do. Take pride in it.

TM: Kinds of food? Recipes and everything.

PP: It's American style food with a French twist. Lots of French techniques but southern food, also. Lots of local products. Try to keep it fresh and exciting.

TM: Definitely. Could you describe the environment when you first moved here? Like what were your first impressions?

PP: I worked out at a place called Yeamans Hall Club, which is out in North Charleston. It's a very, very private country club. Thousand acres, kind of gated. So, I was a little sheltered. I didn't know a whole lot about downtown Charleston, what it was about. You know, we'd go to the beach or so, but we kind of stayed up towards the club. And then I worked there for six years or so, and then got a job downtown in the public, down with Maverick Southern Kitchens. And that was kind of a shock for me because I'd always worked private clubs, you know, and private clubs means you see the same people every day. So, to be out in the public was great. It was fun, met a lot of people, but it was very different for me.

TM: Definitely. And are you involved in the communities in any way?

PP: Through work, we are. We do a lot of that farm-to-table and all that. We do a lot for the children's hospital. We just did a great event the other night with Big Chef Little Chef. It's part of Louie's Kids to help childhood obesity. There's always something going on, something we're involved with. Composting; we composted 14 tons in three months, you know, not going to the landfills, which we're all very proud of that. So, I've done mentors. We do lots of apprenticeships. You know, we've got a lot of high school people in the restaurant working to get credits towards school. Going out to the schools; I've gone a couple of times for, like, Career Day stuff. First graders, they're brutal. (laughing) They are. They tell it how it is. And I'm sure I'm

missing many, many things, but we're very... You know, we do our part, we try to do our part for the community.

TM: Thank you for that. This is a bit of a different question here. How would you personally define hospitality?

PP: You know, friendly, welcoming. I think true hospitality has to be sincere. You know, anybody could say "How are you" or something, but to really mean it. I think, you know, you can tell when somebody is sincere, that they mean "Have a great day" and wants you to enjoy yourself and wants you to enjoy our city and our food.

TM: Sure. Would you say that southern hospitality is different from that definition anyway?

PP: Yeah, I do. I mean, it's our way of life, I think, is different. You know, it's a little bit more slow pace and friendly, welcoming, "y'all". And Charleston itself has just got like this warm vibe to it. I mean, you can't help but be happy in Charleston. (laughing) So, did that answer--I mean, I don't know if I answered the question.

TM: Sure. Are there specific behaviors or phrases that you would associate with southern hospitality?

PP: Y'all. I'm trying to think. You know, just very welcoming and sincere. Want to get to know people, you know. Somebody was saying, "We went to New York one time," [inaudible], but just about not making eye contact. Just go down the street, just do your thing. Go. I couldn't live in a place like that. I want to say hi to people. I want to smile at them, you know, get a lot back just easy as smiling at somebody, you know? Walking down the street, saying hello to somebody. That's where I want to be. I couldn't be in a hustle and bustle. Go, go, go. Do your thing, get out, get in, get out. I want to say hi.

TM: Sure. Do think that the southern hospitality identity plays into the appeal of Charleston and tourism?

PP: Yes. Mhm. So, people come for that. They want to probably slow down and relax from their day to day life, and Charleston's the best place to do it, I think.

TM: Could you explain why you think it's the best place?

PP: You know, I keep saying friendly and stuff and I hate to keep repeating myself, but clean and historical. Great food, beaches. I mean, there's a little bit of everything here. You know, you could do one thing one day with the family and then be on the beach the next and eating, you know, from one world famous restaurant to another, right in a row. It's a one-stop shop.

TM: Sure. Has this identity influenced development in the recent days, do you think?

PP: Yeah. I mean, we keep winning all these awards, "Number 1 City in the World", "Number 1 City in the US" and, you know, we keep telling people about it. They're going to come, and they certainly have, you know. Driving in the city is different than it was, you know. Parking and.... But on the other hand, it's great. We're busy all the time. From my line of business, you know, this time of year used to be really slow and we used to, you know, January and--we don't have a slow time of year anymore, which is great because, you know, a lot of these people that work with us do this for a living. This is what they want to do with their career. And it's hard to get good people if they're busy one day, slow the next. So, that's a good plus to Charleston's growth.

TM: Yeah. Have you noticed changes in the types of people that would come to Charleston based on your experience?

PP: I don't know about the types. We've always had, you know, a very eclectic crew, different times a year. You know, we've got the summer crowd now, which is different. But what I have noticed is that people are more knowledgeable about food and beverage now, just all the cooking shows, you know. It's everyday people know what they should be getting and what to expect more than I think they have in the past. A lot more.

TM: Sure. So, Slightly North of Broad is more busy throughout the year, but have you noticed trends like month to month and year to year? Just in the community itself?

PP: Yeah, but it's always been that way. You know, spring and fall are the beast, you know; it's packed all the time. It's a lot easier for people to get in, get around, Uber, you know, OpenTable and Resy and, you know, then you don't even have to talk to anybody. They can get their reservation, get in. Being around for so long, you know, a lot of our people we see are word of mouth. "My Aunt Margaret said, if you come to Charleston, you have to go to SNOB." You know, you get a lot of that. People have their hit list before they get here. You know, back in the day, you just go and bop around and see what--but they know where they're going now and reservations months in advance. So, you know that if you want 7:00 Friday night, you better plan.

TM: That's very true. In your memory, is there a specific time where things drastically changed?

PP: Not drastically, no. In the last five years, it's busy all the time. Maybe even more than that. And people are dining better. They know what they want, and they are trying different things and, you know. Squab, you know, before people would be like, "Ahh!". Now it's just an everyday, you know--

TM: What is squab?

PP: Squab is like--it's pigeon.

TM: Oh wow.

PP: Yeah. And lots of... There's, recently, a lot of dietary needs. Gluten, in the last two or three years, it's... I don't know if "out of control" is the right word, but we have to have separate menus, and there's whole tables of people who are celiac, which, you know, I thought was one in 10,000 would have celiac, but now it's a very common thing or just it's a... maybe not an allergy, but a preference. People don't want to have gluten in their diet. And they expect it now. They expect you to have separate menus and gluten-free bread and, you know, it's challenging.

TM: Yeah. Would you consider these changes positive or negative?

PP: You know... Positive, yeah, that we're busy all the time. Positive that people eat and drink well and that they're passionate about what we're doing. That's a lot of fun. You know, we work real hard to get these great product and knowledge and stuff, so it's nice when people appreciate it. Challenging. Yeah, it's challenging to be busy all the time and to give 110% all the time. That's the business we're in.

TM: Sure. Do you think there's any negatives for the community as a result of mass tourism?

PP: You know, it's, you know, it's a double-edged sword. You know, we want our city to be busy. We want--you know. But it's hard, you know, that if the tourists make a reservation at 7:00 months in advance, then that takes away from our locals who can't get in. Or to drive downtown and find parking, you know, that's a challenge. And cruise ships scare a lot of our regulars. It's like cruise ship in town, you know, they'll call and say, "Is there one there? I don't want to come down if there is", which I think they're a little bit wrong in that because we don't see a lot of the cruise ship people in our restaurant because they all eat on board and they're all encouraged to eat on board, and they have parking for the cruise ship. So, I think they're a little misled that it affects how crazy downtown is.

TM: Sure.

PP: Don't get me wrong, I'm not for it or against it, I guess. But, for us personally, you know, we don't see a lot from it.

TM: What are your--this is a bit of a different question. Do you have any favorite places in Charleston to go to, like, yourself?

PP: Restaurants or...

TM: Anywhere.

PP: Anywhere? I live in Park Circle and I love Park Circle, and I tend to leave work and head that way. Have you been to Park Circle?

TM: Maybe once.

PP: There's a little strip. It's like Mayberry, it's this cute little strip. It has restaurants, there's a big clock in the middle of the street and you can eat outside, and it's come a long way that you can now get good food up there. You know, before it was just burger and stuff. But now there's a Vietnamese restaurant up there, which I'm there two or three nights a week. I just love it, love it. And you can get great wine and charcuterie and sit out in the streets and, you know, it's kind of where I like to go on my downtime.

TM: How far away from the downtown area would that be?

PP: How far from downtown Charleston...?

TM: ...would Park Circle be?

PP: 20 minutes? It depends on the time of day you're going. But it's nice because there's three different ways you could get there. Like, on my way to work from Park Circle, I'll take a back road 'cause it's 8:00 in the morning and everybody's on their way to work. But when I leave, everybody's already gone by the time I'm leaving, so I take 26. So, it's nice to have, you know, alternative routes to get there. Yeah. 20 minutes.

TM: Is that a new development to have different routes or is that--

PP: No, I think it's always been, but they're, I think, safer now. Like, before, you really wouldn't go to Spruill Avenue 10 or 15 years ago. It wasn't safe, but it is now.

TM: What do you mean by safe? Like the trees or...?

PP: The people. Yeah. It was kind of a rough part of town. And, you know, didn't want to break down there or lots of crime. So, it's gotten a lot better. North Charleston itself in the last 10 years is a complete 180.

TM: Sure. Do you think that tourism has a play into that?

PP: Sure. I mean, people come to Charleston, fall in love with Charleston, want to live in Charleston. And 99% of the population can't afford to live downtown, so that's where you're going to go is the towns outside of downtown Charleston.

TM: Yeah. Have you noticed the changes in rent prices on the peninsula?

PP: Oh yeah, absolutely. Double, probably. So, you know, if you were to be a hospitality... most of the time you lived in the not so great parts of town 'cause you could afford it, but there's less and less not so great parts of town. So, that means you're paying higher rent. But I think most people commute to work. Not a lot live downtown.

TM: For those who work in the hospitality industry?

PP: Yes, yes.

TM: How does that make you feel? Does that make you feel any way?

PP: Well, if you're gonna... You know, if you're gonna bring people in to work, you know, you need to have--if you don't want everybody driving in because there's no parking, then you have to have an alternative for them. You have to have better public transportation. You know, a lot of people, if you're coming into work lunch, you don't make a lot of money at lunch, but you pay \$20 a day to park if you could find parking. So, you know, it's hard to get people to come downtown to pay, to deal with the traffic. But they're working on that. The HOP is something new that the city has done. The CVB, I think, has helped with it, and it seems to be on the right track. I think it's going to be very successful. I'm very excited about it.

TM: Sure. Could you describe the HOP?

PP: The HOP is Hospitality on the Peninsula; I think is what it stands for. And they have a big parking garage down by like Royal American or down by Santi's, and people in the hospitality or people who work downtown could park there. It's \$5 for 24 hours and they have four buses that go every 15 minutes. And it's just a loop. It goes Meeting Street, Broad Street, East Bay. Meeting Street, Broad Street, and it just goes, and you could have an app and you see where the bus is and you say, "All right", and you could just hop on it. So, it's... Friday night, 5:00, behind SNOB, there was 11 open parking spots, which is insane. So, it's working, you know, because they increased how much it costs to park in the meters and then they increased the time, it goes to 10:00 at night now. So, that's big. Even if you can afford to park in them, can't stop what you're doing and run out and feed your meter. So, they're working on it. I'm hoping that...you know... Our people asked for it and they provided it. I hope we use it so it will stay around.

TM: Sure thing. What about housing? Do you think that there's any alternative developments for housing?

PP: I don't know that answer. I would say no. If there's a spot, it's going up for a hotel, you know. I don't feel that they're gonna give, you know, I don't know how many people want to do low-income housing. You know, the land on the peninsula is worth a lot of money and there's people, I guess, who take advantage of it or use it, you know, but if they build a new hotel, it's gonna be full.

TM: Yeah. That's an interesting thing. So, this is a different question as well, more related to the environment. Have you experienced any hurricanes here?

PP: Yes. Two in the last two years. Matthew, and I forgot what the one was before that. Yeah, they're tough. Even the mention of one, it doesn't even have to hit. Just the mention of one. You know, people aren't going to risk spending their vacation money and stuff and hope that the hurricane doesn't hit or so. But it just wipes out the city. I mean, everybody's gone, and they're gone before and they're gone for days after, and it takes a while to bounce back. But that's Mother Nature. I don't know, you know. I guess it's how we handle it more than the actual storm itself.

TM: Could you describe how you saw the community handle any types of hurricanes?

PP: You know, I think years ago, 19 years ago or something like that, we had one and they just... Everybody just left and it was an absolute disaster getting out of Charleston. People were in their car for 30 hours, you know, it took 20 hours to get to Columbia. And they learned from that. They have evacuation routes now and if you live in this neighborhood, you go this way and they reverse both lanes and they've learned from their mistakes. And so, it seems to be a lot more organized. And don't wait for the last minute. Get out, you know, way before.

TM: Right. Did you have any experience personally where your home or your life was affected by it?

PP: I did. You know, it was a long 24 hours. We lost power towards the end of it, which we were fortunate we had power the whole time. It was flooding. Like I've never--in front of my house, it never floods. I've never seen it flood. And it was up to my house. I mean there was, it was four feet of water in front of my house for the first one, and the city came after that and put in new drainage ditches, so this last one, nothing at all. So, we keep learning from previous events. Personally, no, I didn't lose anything. Restaurant-wise, you know, of course we lost revenue, but nothing happened with the restaurant. No flooding inside the restaurant. The city bounced back quickly.

TM: Is flooding a problem down by East Bay or--

PP: Yes, yes it is. You know, there's spots behind Harris Teeter, and the Market floods all the time. We got a blast just Friday, maybe it was Saturday; rained really hard. And, you know, one of our servers was a block away, walking a block away and he couldn't get there and he came, and he said he was up to his knees in water and that was, I mean, it happened fast. Of course, high tide. If it's a full moon, sometimes it floods, and it doesn't even rain and it still floods because of the full moon. Yeah. So, you know, and just, it's a mess when it happens. And the city...I don't know too many details about it, but they've been working on it. Put millions and millions of dollars into it. It could be helping, but it's still a problem.

TM: Sure. If you were a tourist, would you say that that kind of issue would affect your experience?

PP: Yeah. You know, doesn't happen often. And if you don't know the problem places, but it's pretty quick though. It doesn't, you know, once the tide goes out or show it doesn't stick around long. So, I wouldn't say it ruins anybody's vacation or would deter anybody from coming. Just gotta be smart. I say, "Don't drown. Turn around." (laughing)

TM: (laughing) Okay. Well, did you see any changes in the tourism industry afterwards? After these events of--?

PP: No. It's just like--directly after, a lot of people, you know, weren't coming to town, but it bounced back quickly. We saw, you know, Florida got hit really bad and saw a lot of people coming up from there to Charleston. And it's tough. You know, they're not here for good reasons. You know, they're losing their houses, their belongings. So, I feel bad for them. But we've been real fortunate since I've lived here over 20 years, you know. Nothing, no major events.

TM: In downtown. Are there places around Charleston Peninsula that were hit a little worse?

PP: You gotta take it with a grain of salt. You see it on the news, you know, like they saw the Battery, you know, flooding over there. But it's all how they word it. And yeah, it was flooded with water, but nothing major, you know. But you wouldn't know that if you were outside looking in, you know. Like people, family members from up home, they're like, "Oh my goodness, Charleston!" Like, we're fine. Don't watch the news.

TM: In the future, do you think that that would be a concern though in the next 10, 50 years?

PP: For flooding? Hurricanes, all the hurricanes?

TM: Mhm.

PP: You know, I don't know. It's just always been there. It's just always something. It just kind of comes with the territory, you know. Tornadoes in the Midwest and fires in California and hurricanes on the East Coast. It just kind of... It's part of the deal, I think. I've never--it's never deterred me not to live here or be here. Certainly doesn't seem to deter anybody coming here. I don't know if I answered your question or not, but it's just part of the package, for me anyway. It could happen. It could not. I'm always on the fence, whether... It's only happened a couple times, but do I stay or do I go, you know. If you decide to stay, you're on your own and there's no one going to help you. I stayed both times and been lucky, I guess, that nothing's happened, but I don't know where I'd go over. Telling everybody to plan ahead. I guess I should do that for myself. (laughing) Hypocrite.

TM: So, some of the last thoughts I wanted to touch on: do you have a vision for the future of Charleston and how would tourism play a role in that vision?

PP: I hope that we don't grow faster than we can handle. I hope it stays friendly and hospitable, and we do what we do so well. We're such a community, you know, our restaurant communities. I had a guest telling me the other day how blown away they were that I could tell them that one of my favorite restaurants, they should go there. And it's not part of our company or part of our business since we all will go across to another restaurant and borrow a pork chop or something, you know. It's a community. And we're all, for the most part, here for the same reason. We all have the same goal: to do what we do, do it really well, make money, and keep Charleston number one. I hope so. I hope that everybody's on the same page. The places that I consider Charleston are on the same page and then, of course, you got some other spots, but you need a little something for everybody.

TM: Sure. You mentioned in your previous statement you hope that it doesn't develop faster than it can handle. Do you think that that's happening now?

PP: Yes. You know, I thought they put a hold on building no more hotels for two years or something like that. Every day, there's a new one, you know. They tore down Charleston Cooks and there's going to be a new hotel there. Is there any new parking garages? Not that I've seen. For me, you know, somebody who has a 7:00 reservation, they pull up, they drop their guests off, they come in, say we have a reservation and then you don't see the other person for 30, 40 minutes 'cause they can't find a place to park. So, it's challenging, that, you know, there's only so much somebody's going to take. Driving around in circles. I just--you know, with the HOP, that's a step in the right direction and there could be a lot more things in the works that I just don't know about. I hope there is because we want to make it the best experience and that

means finding parking and finding hotels. And I hope it doesn't get too expensive, you know. 600 bucks a night for a room is a lot.

TM: Sure. Do you have any concerns about groceries that are available on the peninsula?

PP: No. I'd love to see, like, a fish market or something, you know. Like my thoughts are like, they have the Market here with all the touristy stuff and then on this end of the Market had like a fish market or--and maybe not even downtown, maybe have it somewhere, you know, 'cause maybe a lot of people who are staying downtown aren't cooking. So, you know, have it outside West Ashley or Park Circle. I'd love that. But there's lots of farmer's markets, you know. That's great. I love seeing that with good products. You know, I think a lot of people want to support our local farmers and fishermen and, you know, grow food. There's a lot in the last couple of years. Local, local, local. You know, they make it--then the farmers, you know, want people to enjoy their stuff too. So, the price is reasonable. You know, it's a little bit more, 'cause it's a local product, but still affordable.

TM: Do you think the increase in farmers and producers is a result of more food and bev?

PP: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, Slightly North of Broad has always been farm-to-table. Chef Lee started, you know, it was farm-to-table way before farm-to-table was cool, but it's cool now and a lot of people are doing it. And so, you know, supply and demand.

TM: Sure. When do you think the farm-to-table concept started? I'm just curious.

PP: Six or seven years ago, I think, it got real big. Maybe more than that, but, you know, when all the TV shows and all, you know, people expect it more. I'm in my own little bubble at SNOB, you know, I've been there a long time. But, you know, for us, we've always done that. Always, always. But you see a lot more restaurants, a lot more people looking for that. They don't want chemicals and fruit coming from somewhere on a train. I don't know. But you can tell the difference when you get a good product that's that fresh. It's a different animal. Literally.

TM: If you could change anything in regards to the community's tourism development, do you have anything you would change?

PP: You know... Development? Is that what you're asking?

TM: Sure.

PP: I would like to see, I don't know if I'm answering your question, but I'd like to see, you know... For Charleston being on a peninsula, there's like one or two restaurants on the water. There's just no restaurants on the water. I'd love to see some. Some more live music,

[inaudible], affordable rooms and, of course, better parking. I'm going to beat that horse to death. I just hope, you know, people who are coming in to build companies and restaurants and stuff have what Charleston is known for in mind. We want to be known as a certain city that produces great products and friendly people and if people are coming in from outside of town, I hope their on the same page.

TM: Sure. The final question that I have for you. This is an oral history project that we are developing, and I'm wondering if you have any hopes for the project itself and your involvement in it.

PP: So, the project... So, you want to make sure that Charleston stays on the right track in the hospitality--

TM: In regards to tourism and this balance of the people who are on the front lines making the dream happen and then you who live here as well as the people who are coming in to visit.

PP: Yeah. You know, I love that the people [inaudible] do have Charleston in mind and not the all dollar bill. The Charleston Visitor Center, the CVB, they are amazing people. What they're doing; getting people in, but also not hurting the integrity of Charleston. So, to answer your question, you know, I wish you all the success. I love that somebody's on our side fighting for the city and making sure that it's on the right track. So, yeah. I hope you're very successful in your project and the people involved, so.

TM: Sure. Well, thank you so much for sitting down with me today, Peter. It's been a pleasure.

PP: Thank you very much.