

Dromgoole, Peter Pelham ^[1]

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by E. T. Malone, Jr., 1986

b. 8 Feb. 1815



Gimghoul Castle (previously known as Piney Prospect). Photograph by the Wootten-Moulton Studio. North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library.

Peter Pelham Dromgoole, the student whose mysterious disappearance from the campus of [The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill](#)^[2] in the spring of 1833 inspired several Tar Heel literary works and gave rise to a university secret society, was born in [Halifax County](#)^[3] of Irish ancestry. His father was [Edward Dromgoole II](#)^[4], a [Methodist](#)^[5] minister, physician, merchant, and planter; his mother was Sarah Creese Pelham. Congressman George C. Dromgoole (1797–1847) of Virginia was his uncle. Peter's younger brother, Edward Dromgoole III (1825–95), was graduated from [The University of North Carolina](#)^[2] with honors in 1845 and, as a representative of the [Philanthropic Society](#)^[6], appears to have been in 1844 one of the three editors of the first volume of the *University Magazine*. Peter was the grandson of the [Reverend Edward Dromgoole](#)^[4] (1751–1835), a native of Ireland who renounced Catholicism and, after coming to America in 1770, became a Methodist minister. Peter's grandfather was a rider on the Virginia circuit in February 1776 when it was subdivided into three—Sussex, Brunswick, and "the other in Carolina, called Roan Oak." He played an important part in the early growth of Methodism in North Carolina.

Dromgoole was named for his maternal grandfather, Peter Pelham, who was for many years clerk of the court for Greensville County, Va. In 1802 Pelham removed with his family to Greene County, Ohio, where, on 28 Mar. 1810, Peter's mother married Edward Dromgoole II. The newlywed couple returned to North Carolina and resided for about nine years at The Oaks, a plantation Dromgoole owned in Halifax County at or near the present Roanoke Rapids. Sligo, the plantation home of Peter's grandfather Dromgoole, was located near Gholsonville Post Office in Brunswick County, Va., about fifteen miles above Roanoke Rapids. In 1819 Edward Dromgoole II left Halifax County and took up residence at Sligo, where Peter spent most of his childhood.

In 1832 his father sent him to the [Franklin Male Academy](#)^[7] in Louisburg, N.C., for college preparatory studies under the tutelage of headmaster John B. Bobbitt. There are several letters extant from Peter to his father written while he was a student at Louisburg. In January 1833 he was sent to Chapel Hill to attempt to gain entry as a freshman at The University of North Carolina. In a letter of 26 Jan. 1833, young Dromgoole told his father that he had failed the entrance examination but was studying under a tutor and expected to be accepted "with ease next June." The elder Dromgoole was extremely displeased by his son's rejection at the university. To add fuel to the flames of parental wrath, a letter from a faculty member to the father implied that the son was engaged in dissipating activities. In an exchange of bitterly phrased letters, Peter told his father "I have determined never more to see that parent's face whom I have treated with so little respect," and said he was sailing for Europe. He then disappeared from his Chapel Hill quarters under mysterious circumstances, leaving behind most of his possessions and owing money to at least one Chapel Hill merchant. [Dr. Kemp P. Battle](#)^[8], in his 1907 volume of a two-part history of the university, quoted Dromgoole's roommate, John Buxton Williams of [Warren County](#)^[9], as saying Peter Dromgoole was "a moody youth and inclined to wildness." In an October 1924 article in [The Carolina Magazine](#)^[10], a University of North Carolina publication, [Bruce Cotten](#)^[11], a Dromgoole relation, took issue with a number of statements made by Battle about the Dromgoole disappearance. Citing an 1834 letter from a Wilmington minister, Cotten maintained that in the summer of 1833 Peter Dromgoole joined the [U.S. Army](#)^[12] at Southport, then called Smithville, under the assumed name of Williams. Although unsuccessful in locating official records of the enlistment or of a subsequent military career, he was able to present evidence that much of Battle's account of the Dromgoole story was inaccurate.

Peter Dromgoole's vanishing soon became the stuff of legend. When in 1837 his uncle, the Virginia congressman George C. Dromgoole, killed a man named Daniel Dugger [13] in a duel on the banks of the Roanoke River [14] in Northampton County [15], N.C., memory of the deed soon was merged with that of Peter's disappearance. A promontory on the east side of Chapel Hill known as Point Prospect or Piney Prospect, was said to be the site of a nocturnal duel, caused by a romantic rivalry, in which young Dromgoole was killed and buried under a boulder. Dark stains on the rock are reputed to be his blood, which would not wash away with the passage of time. University students, who told many versions of the duel legend, formed in 1889 a secret chivalric society called the Order of the Gimghoul [16], whose members in 1926 completed construction of a gothic edifice called Hippol Castle at Piney Prospect. The legend became a uniquely North Carolina literary motif. It was used in the 1873 novel, Sea-Gift [17], by Edwin W. Fuller [18]; in the 1881 novel, The Heirs of St. Kilda: A Story of the Southern Past, by John Wheeler Moore [19]; in a long 1892 poem, "In Piney Prospect," by L. R. Hamberlin in The University of North Carolina University Magazine; in a 1903 short story, "Dromgoole," by Martha Fowle Wiswall in the University Magazine; in Cotten [11]'s 1924 article, "Peter Dromgoole: In Which Much Light Is Thrown on an Interesting Tradition"; in the story, "The Vanishing of Peter Dromgoole," in John Hardin's 1949 book, The Devil's Tramping Ground and Other North Carolina Mystery Stories; in a 1957 article, "The Dugger-Dromgoole Duel," by Henry W. Lewis in the North Carolina Historical Review; in "The Castle Amid the Pines," in Phillips Russell's 1972 book, These Old Stone Walls; in a February 1972 article, "Edwin W. Fuller and the Tall Tale," by E. T. Malone, Jr., in North Carolina Folklore; in a Summer 1976 article, "The University of North Carolina in Edwin Fuller's 1873 Novel, Sea-Gift," by E. T. Malone, Jr., in the North Carolina Historical Review; and in various unpublished manuscripts and portions of published books and monographs on other topics.

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Additional Resources:

"Transparency, Slide, Accession #: H.1954.73.2 [22]." . North Carolina Museum of History.

The Legend of Gimghoul Castle, UNC Graduate School:

http://gradschool.unc.edu/funding/gradschool/weiss/interesting_place/history/castle.html [23]

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Subjects:

Biographies [26]

Authors:

Malone, E. T., Jr. [27]

Origin - location:

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Franklin County [29]

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [30]

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