

Pelham, Charles ^[1]

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by H. B. Fant, 1994

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Charles Pelham, Confederate officer, Alabama judge, Republican congressman ^[2], and District of Columbia lawyer, was born in Person County ^[3]. His grandparents, Major Charles and Isabella Atkinson Pelham, left Virginia after the American Revolution ^[4] to settle in Mason County, Ky., where his father, Dr. Atkinson Pelham (1797–1880), was born. Perhaps because of Atkinson family roots in North Carolina, Dr. Pelham began a medical practice in Person County and in 1833 married Martha M. McGehee (1808–76), daughter of William and Elizabeth Clay McGehee, Carolinians who migrated to Alabama. In 1838, with their first child Charles and still younger son William, the Pelhams followed to Benton (later Calhoun) County, Ala., and located in the Alexandria neighborhood near Jacksonville (the county seat until displaced by Anniston).

The Pelham offspring, increased by a daughter and four sons born in Alabama, had the benefit of local schooling and paternal encouragement. Charles may have been influenced towards the law by the proximity of Thomas A. Walker, a Jacksonville lawyer and circuit court judge who was married to the children's aunt Sarah. By 1858, at age twenty-three, Pelham had read enough law to gain admission to the bar at Talladega, court seat of adjoining Talladega County, where noted J. L. M. Curry was then a leader.

Eleven days after Alabama seceded, Charles Pelham married, on 22 Jan. 1861 at Louisville, Ky., Margaret Louise Johnston (1836–83), daughter of Judge George W. and Rosalinda E. Talmadge Johnston. Charles's brother William, who had been graduated from old Oglethorpe University in 1859, quickly entered the Calhoun State Guards and was sent to Fort Morgan. Their brother John, then in his final year at the U.S. Military Academy, broke away for a meteoric Confederate artillery career that ended in 1863 in his death as a major, "the gallant Pelham." Charles, joined by the fourth brother, Peter, an Oglethorpe student, enlisted at Talladega on 1 Apr. 1862. They went into the Fifty-first Alabama Partisan Rangers, a fighting regiment organized by Colonel (later brigadier general and postwar U.S. senator) John Tyler Morgan. Into this mounted unit, also known as the Fifty-first Alabama Cavalry, soon came William Pelham and eventually the teenage Pelham brothers, Samuel C. and Thomas A. The more mature Charles and William drew commissions as second lieutenants. William in Company A was captured, but Charles in Company C was promoted to first lieutenant and at the war's end was paroled at Talladega on 16 May 1865.

In resuming a legal career there, Charles Pelham seems to have gained rapport with Lewis Eliphalet Parsons, Sr., or certainly with his son, L. E., Jr. The senior happened to be the Talladega resident whom President Andrew Johnson ^[5] tapped in June 1865 to be provisional governor of Alabama. Lawyer Pelham, becoming one of the founders of the Republican party in Alabama, was in 1868 elected judge of the Tenth Alabama Judicial Circuit and while still on the bench in 1872 was elected to the Forty-third U.S. Congress (4 Mar. 1873–3 Mar. 1875). Placed on the District of Columbia Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives, he proved assertive in introducing, reporting, and supporting liberal legislation for the District. When added to a select committee on the Washington Monument, he reported on a bill for a monument to Washington's mother. When the Alabama Republican party was being denounced for dishonesty or fraud, Pelham rose in the House to its defense.

In what L. E. Parsons, Jr., termed the terrible and bloody campaign of 1874, the Republicans lost Alabama. Failing to be renominated, Pelham turned to full-time legal work as a member of the District of Columbia bar, dealing particularly with claims. In 1887, when he published his 233-page compendium of *Hints and Helps to Lawyers, Applicants for Positions in the Civil Service, and All Others Having Business of Any Kind with the Government at Washington City*, he practiced in the firm of Pelham, Reid, and Stevenson.

In 1889 Pelham in vain sought from Secretary of the Treasury William Windom some position where he could be of service to the Republican party, to the government, and to the country "and at the same time earn a salary sufficient to pay for a modest living in this City." In the 1890s he did indeed shift his residence to nearby Virginia. For a decade, from 1897 until his final resignation on 20 Apr. 1907, he held somewhat tenuously to minor assignments with the Treasury Department in Washington.

His two children were born in Calhoun County, Ala., during and just after the Civil War ^[6]: Martha Rose (31 Mar. 1862) and John Charles (23 Aug. 1865). After he was graduated from Columbia University with two law degrees in 1888, John Charles Pelham pursued a successful legal career at Anniston; he was already judge of the Seventeenth Judicial Circuit in Alabama before his father retired and left Washington. Less than a year after that move, Charles Pelham, aged nearly seventy-three, died at Poulan, Worth County, in South Georgia. This was the community where his Confederate veteran brother, known locally as Major Peter Pelham (1840–1924), had been established since the 1880s. The marble slab in Poulan Cemetery identifying the grave of "Charles Pelham of Alabama, Born in Person Co. N.C." enjoins, "Let me lie

where I fall."

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Thomas McAdory Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography*, vol. 4 (1921). <https://archive.org/stream/historyalabamaa03owengoog#page/n352/mode/1up> ^[7] (accessed August 1, 2014).

Charles Pelham application file (1889) and appointment file (1897–1907) (General Records of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, National Archives).

Mrs. Roger Williams, data from a Bible once owned by Dr. Atkinson Pelham, copied at pp. 126–27 of *Report of the Genealogical Records Committee, District of Columbia Daughters of the American Revolution*, 1934–36 (typescript vol. 29, pt. 3, Library, National Society DAR).

Additional Resources:

"Pelham, Charles, (1835 - 1908)." *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*. Washington, D.C.: The Congress. <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=P000192> ^[8] (accessed August 1, 2014).

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