

Pennington, John L. ^[1]

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by William S. Powell, 1994

May 1829–14 July 1900

John L. Pennington, newspaper editor and governor of the Dakota Territory, was born in [Wake County](#) ^[2], N.C. The names of his parents seem not to be recorded, but he probably was the son of John Pennington of Wake County who had two sons under age five at the time of the 1830 census; or perhaps of Smith Pennington of the same county who also had two sons under five. In either case, his father was a native of Virginia and his mother of North Carolina. His only education seems to have been in a local school after which he served an apprenticeship on the [Raleigh](#) ^[3] *Star*, an attractive, highly regarded newspaper with features far advanced for the times.

Unsubstantiated accounts of his life record that in 1856 he established a newspaper, the *Columbian*, in Columbia, S.C., but no evidence has been found that any such newspaper was ever published there. Soon afterwards, however, he became editor of the [New Bern](#) ^[4] *Progress*, established in 1858. It had daily and weekly editions, announced that it published telegraph reports furnished by the American Press Association "from all quarters of the globe," and stressed both local and state news. The 1860 census of [Craven County](#) ^[5] includes the name of the thirty-year-old editor, his twenty-four-year-old wife, Kate A., and a two-year-old daughter, Kate D. His household also consisted of a printer and two printer's apprentices. Among other local benefits, his newspaper advocated improved schools for New Bern, and with the approach of the Civil War it anticipated an early Southern victory. On 20 Sept. 1861 Governor [Henry T. Clark](#) ^[6] commissioned Pennington a first lieutenant in a battery of heavy artillery formed in Craven County but because of ill health he resigned on 17 July 1862.

New Bern fell to the invading enemy in March 1862, and when Pennington returned from his brief military duty his newspaper was reestablished in Raleigh as the *Daily Progress*, continuing the same volume and numbering as the New Bern paper. In 1862–63 Pennington alone was shown as the publisher, but in 1864–65 "Pennington and Co." was indicated as publisher; after 10 Mar. 1866 it was in the hands of Guthrie and Orr, the latter, Captain H. E. Orr, having previously had the editorial management, probably while Pennington was in the army. Pennington early recognized that the North was fighting "to *elevate* " blacks while the South was fighting "to retain" them "and defend our homes." During the war Pennington advocated peace without reunion of the two sections and expressed the belief that such was the desire of people on both sides. He advocated the naming of commissioners to agree upon peace terms, a subject on which he corresponded with President Jefferson Davis. He also advocated a strong Home Guard in every county to apprehend all deserters on the same day so that they could not escape from one county to the next.

In 1865, at the end of the war, Pennington served on a Raleigh committee to draw up resolutions following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln to be presented to newly arrived General William T. Sherman. He also announced for his newspaper that "we shall give a zealous and cordial support to the views and principles of the great National Union Party and endeavor at all times to perform our whole duty to the State and country." This party was the forerunner of the [Republican party](#) ^[7]. Pennington soon left North Carolina for Alabama where, regarded as a carpetbagger, he served in the state senate from [Lee County](#) ^[8] as a member of the Reconstruction legislature during the sessions of 1868, 1871–72, 1872–73, and 1873. On friendly terms with George E. Spencer of New York, another carpetbagger in Alabama, Pennington supported Spencer's campaign for the U.S. Senate; Spencer then brought his supporter's name to the attention of the president.

President Ulysses S. Grant named Pennington governor of the Dakota Territory and he served from January 1874 to May 1878. Pennington's first wife—and perhaps his daughter as well—apparently was no longer living, as he was accompanied to his new post by his wife Amanda and children, Lulu, sixteen; Mary R., fourteen; and John L., Jr., twelve. All except the son, who was born in Alabama, were natives of North Carolina. They lived in Yankton, the capital of the territory. His household according to the 1880 census also consisted of a male and a female servant, both aged twenty-one, the latter born in Michigan, the former in Wisconsin. In Yankton Pennington built a two-story brick home for himself and three brick rental houses, all of which still stand.

The previous governor had been ineffective so Pennington set about to make improvements. He presented a very progressive program to his first legislature to reduce interest rates, to extend rail service, to seek appropriations for a capitol building, and to provide relief for farmers. His program met with initial success, but a plague of grasshoppers destroyed crops for several years. The discovery of gold on land occupied by Indians led to extensive conflict, and a scheme by land speculators to divide the Dakota Territory produced political unrest. Pennington's plans came to naught and he was not reappointed at the expiration of his term in 1878. He was, however, named by President Rutherford B. Hayes to be internal revenue collector for Dakota. Although out of office, Pennington remained interested in territorial affairs and attended the constitutional convention in 1883, while in 1887 he was active in a movement for unified statehood. Returning to his first love in 1885, he established a weekly, the *Telegram*, in Yankton which he continued until he

returned to Alabama in 1891 following the death of his wife.

In 1900 the census of Calhoun County, Ala., recorded Pennington as a resident in the household of his daughter Lulu, her husband Alex J. Adair, and their six children at Oxford, Ala. Adair and Pennington owned the newspaper, *Alabama Home*, of which Pennington was editor. He died after an illness of several months, and his funeral was held at the Presbyterian church; he was buried in the Oxford ^[9] city cemetery, where two adjoining graves are marked Adair [a child] and Pennington [an adult].

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Additional Resources:

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