# Prelude

He stares into the camera lens. Upright and poised. Jaw slightly set, but still an open and pleasant expression. Light hair combed back. Four upper buttons of his cadet uniform open. His right hand, gently fisted, rests in front of him. John Pelham of Alabama—as captured in a portrait photograph before the Civil War. Years later, a Confederate veteran described this image:

> *The inclosed[sp] is the best picture of Pelham that I have seen. It looks like he did when he first returned from West Point and also when he was killed. At other times he was thinner, because of active service. . . . A perfect picture of Pelham cannot be had, because his most remarkable feature was his eyes. In social life they were gentle and merry, 'laughing eyes;' but in the animation of battle his eyes were restless, and flashed like diamonds.*

**John Pelham: son, brother, friend, artillerist, "Gallant."** (loc)

Something in Pelham's expression holds the viewer's attention. Who was he? A popular internet

search engine offers a quick answer: Pelham was a "soldier." True, but this young man trained as a West Point cadet for five years followed by barely two years of active military service in the Confederate cause. He only lived to age 24. There is more to Pelham's life story than simply soldier. Who was he . . . really?

In more than a century and a half since Pelham lived, numerous articles and biographies have been written about him. His death at an early age during the Confederate cavalry's zenith in the Eastern Theater and when the embattled South had time and an inclination to publicly mourn a fallen officer gave rise to stories even before his coffin arrived in his home state. After the Civil War, Pelham's place in the Lost Cause memory soared and admirers placed him in the upper ranks of the Confederate pantheon; a youth from Alabama rode alongside the "war-gods" of Virginia: Lee, Jackson, and Stuart. His youth balanced their age. His battlefield successes contributed to theirs. But the Lost Cause hero status exacted a price—in the memory of his life, Pelham had to conform to the ideals of active veterans and later generations as they justified their view of the war. The unknown details of his life could be filled in to reflect the agenda of a retrospective Confederate memory narrative. Pelham could be their ideal young martyr because of his battlefield victories and his sudden death, but post-war chroniclers would ensure that his bachelorhood also fit their image of a legendary hero.

**Pelham's experience and command during the Civil War was not all daring gallantry. He managed the logistics for the Stuart Horse Artillery, including ensuring that there were spare wheels and plenty of ammunition.** (skb)

Through unfortunate circumstance, most of Pelham's own writings—particularly his letters to his family—disappeared in the early 20th Century. Whether accidental or intentional, the loss of these letters has effectively silenced Pelham. In most of the important battlefield moments of his life, his side of the story does not exist. A few official reports and military correspondence remain, but these do not contain his thoughts or feelings. Surviving letters from his West Point days, his account of the battle of First Manassas, and a few other notes to friends or acquaintances suggest that he would have penned

thoughts and even feelings, making the absence of his private papers a deep loss to his family, researchers, and those crafting his memory.

With his own voice mostly vacant, others offered their primary source versions of Pelham's experiences. Contemporary accounts from peers, subordinates, and lifetime admirers emerged. People described how they saw or remembered Pelham during his lifetime . . . and, more frequently, after his death. Then secondary sources picked up the banner of Pelham's memory, usually influenced by historiographical trends and even later social movements. Finally, summary-style sources recycled the views of the secondary sources, treating opinion as fact and lessening the chance of sorting out the truth. Pelham the legend exists in popular mythology, but Pelham the man seems lost to history.

**Welbourne is a historic home in Loudoun County where Pelham breakfasted at the beginning of the late autumn 1862 campaign . . . and, according to family lore and evidence, carved his name into a glass windowpane.** (skb)

Across the decades, Pelham has been cast as a hero, a womanizer, an innocent, a warrior, an artillery genius, an ill-fated lad, a secessionist, and—more recently—a villain who got the death he deserved. But did any of these labels fit the man? And if some should stay in our studies and historic memory, are there others that need to be added or amended to help us understand him?

Through necessity, we are forced to see Pelham through the eyes of others. We must evaluate if those perceptions are accurate, masked by legend, or clouded with ideology. But in the moments where layers of historic varnish and propaganda are stripped away, truths need little embellishment. For example, during the Loudoun Campaign in November 1862, Pelham had a stellar moment, employing a blend of traditional and innovative horse artillery tactics which shines through the account of an observer:

> *He had been greatly annoyed during the day by a squadron of Federal cavalry which operated with great dash against his batteries, rapidly throwing forward their sharpshooters and as rapidly withdrawing them, after their muskets had been discharged, behind a piece of wood which completely hid them from view. This*

*they did before Pelham could get a shot at them, and they had already killed or disabled many of his horses, when our gallant major, losing all patience, suddenly advanced with one of his light howitzers at full gallop towards the wood, where the horses were unhitched and the piece drawn by hand through the impeding undergrowth which rendered further progress of the horses impossible . . . The Yankee squadron . . . had come very quietly to a halt without the slightest suspicion that a cannon loaded with a double charge of cannister was directed upon them from a point only a few hundred yards off. All at once, the thunder of the howitzer was heard, and its iron hail swept through the ranks of the Yankees, killing eight of their number . . . wounding several others, and putting the rest to flight in hopeless stampede. Pelham and his cannoneers now emerged from the wood in a run, bringing with them many captured men and horses, and the Federal standard, amid loud shouts of applause. Before the Yankees could recover from their astonishment, the howitzer was removed, the horses were hitched to it again, and it had arrived safely at the battery.*

**General "Jeb" Stuart's hat and headquarters' scene would have been familiar sights to Pelham. Though he technically was not on Stuart's staff, he frequently dined and socialized with Stuart and the cavalry staff.** (skb)

Pelham helped to transform the concept of mobile artillery on Civil War battlefields. He did not invent horse artillery, and he was not the only American officer to attempt and refine the concepts during the 1860s. However, he was one of the most successful horse artillery commanders, learning to place his cannons on the flanks of his enemy or directly in their path and then rapidly shift to another advantageous position. On the offensive or as a best defense, he added firepower to support traditional cavalry units. He used mobile artillery to screen movements or guard the rear of a column. He positioned artillery to cover the flank of infantry. Pelham brought innovation and daring to his artillery role. He does not need legend and embellishment to enhance his military accomplishments.

During his lifetime, people commented briefly on John Pelham's actions and demeanor. After his death, they wrote his story and his memory for him, adding complicated layers to

the story to fit that needed mythical figure. Today, the temptation to continue the commentary about Pelham remains steady and enticing. But is it fair to him?

What if we restrained the passing of judgement and the crafting of legend for a moment? What if we could piece together a version of the truth drawing just from primary sources closest to Pelham's lifetime? What if we accepted that this fact-based version of Pelham may differ substantially from the man of legend . . . and then asked why the noticeable difference?

The steady gaze captured in Pelham's photograph stares back at us. The longer we look and the more we try to understand, the more we are confronted with the idea that when we paste labels, verdicts, and judgements on this man, we pass them on ourselves, too. Staring back at Pelham, we attempt to understand him as a boy, a man, a cadet, a soldier, a Confederate, a white Southerner. We try to see beyond the labels pinned on him in historical memory. Who was he? How did comrades see him? How did enemies fear him? How did civilians feel when around him?

Researching Pelham through primary sources bereft of imagination feels like watching someone's actions, but rarely getting to understand why. He can seem robotic because his thoughts and feelings are missing. He is silent while others speak about him. But he really lived—he had thoughts, emotions, hopes, dreams, fears, and anger. Recognizing Pelham as human before hero requires focusing on what is provided from the remaining historical record. To simply understand that—while it is possible to better understand his actions and the outcomes or consequences through primary sources and historical context—he will remain somewhat distant and unknown. A person can be observed, but never quite understood. A person can be seen in a photograph, but no words can be spoken.

In the end, this is not about telling Pelham's story where he is silent. This is about understanding what is known about his short life and sifting the long memory around his name. It is about working with the strongest primary sources and historical context. It is about knowing that Pelham keeps his secrets and coming to accept peace with that . . . out of respect for his humanity.

# Alabama Home:

## "He was like other boys"

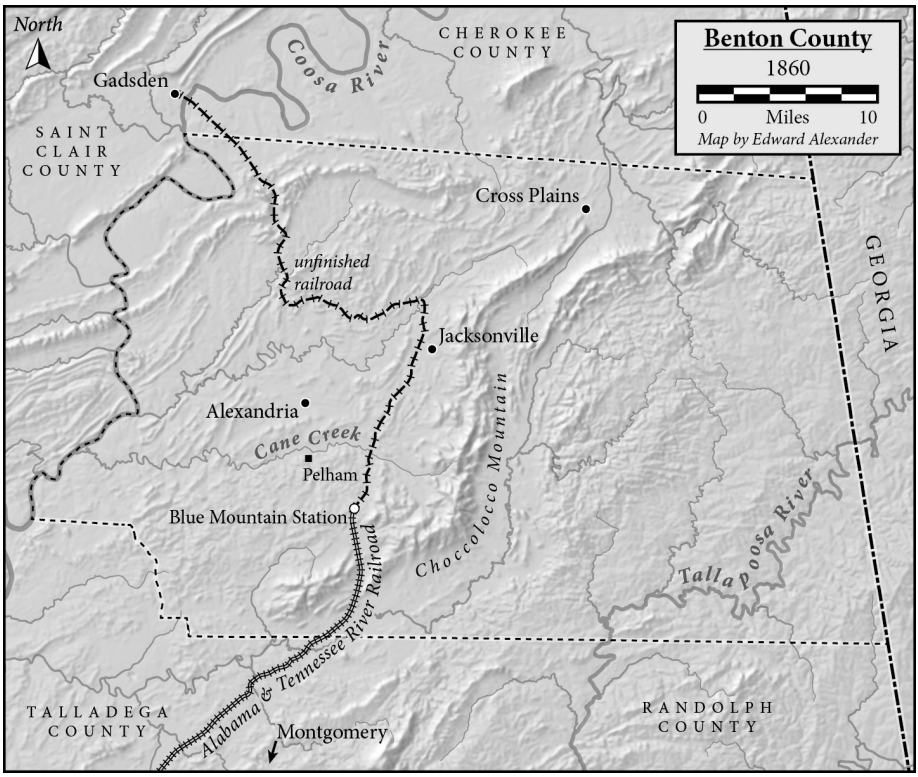
## Chapter One

A little one in his mother's arms, blinking and crying at the great world for the first time, has no idea of his future. Neither do his parents. Later, people beyond a family circle may remember the otherwise insignificant details of a child's birthplace once his place in history is established. On September 7, 1838, in a small wooden house near Cane Creek in Benton County, Alabama, Atkinson and Martha Pelham welcomed their third son and named him John.

One day, John Pelham's name would be in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic. Men would enter the room that family stories marked as the place of his birth and hack wood from the walls to make relics connected to their boy-hero. But that would all be in the future, after the baby grew through boyhood, then found his place as a man in the ranks of a Confederate army that few had imagined in the 1830s.

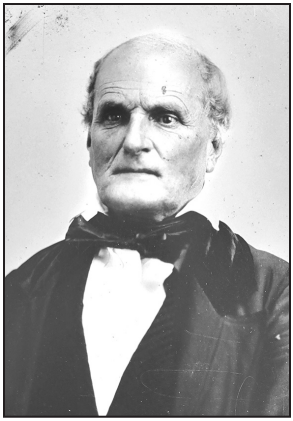
Security and safety marked the early days and years of Pelham's life. His father, a doctor and farmer in an agriculturally developing county in northeastern Alabama, was respected in the community and looked

**The sun sets near Cane Creek, Alabama, and this high ground overlooks the vicinity of John Pelham's birthplace and early youth. (skb)**




**BENTON COUNTY—Pelham grew up in Benton County, Alabama—but the county changed its name to Calhoun County in 1858 in memory of John Calhoun of South Carolina and his fiery, southern rhetoric.**

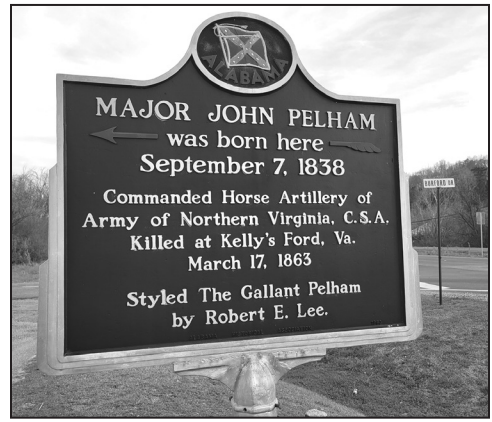
**Dr. Atkinson Pelham—John's father—was a community leader, physician, and planter. His sons accused him of not wholeheartedly supporting the secession cause at the beginning of the 1860s. (jpha)**



after the physical well-being of his family. Atkinson Pelham had graduated from Pennsylvania's Jefferson Medical College in 1826, one of the few medical schools in the United States at the time. He married Martha McGhee in Person County, North Carolina, on December 22, 1833. The couple's first two sons were born in North Carolina, Charles (1835) and William (1836). Shortly before John's birth, the family moved to Benton County, Alabama, settling near Cane Creek.

Benton County—later split by politics to include Calhoun County in 1858—formed part of the southern frontier in the 1830s. When the federal government forced the removal of indigenous nations from the lower South, native lands in Alabama and Georgia were opened to white settlers who eagerly purchased land to expand their agricultural economy. Cotton made a firm foundation in that economy and with that cash crop's expansion, slavery continued and increased.

County records suggest that Dr. Pelham's medical practice kept him busy, but he also purchased land and slaves in an effort to achieve economic success for his growing family. Over the years, the family lived in Jacksonville and later in Alexandria. As his sons reached their teen years, Dr. Pelham relied on them to oversee his various farms. Though he had occasional disputes with his sons, Atkinson Pelham was remembered for his strong character and his happy family.

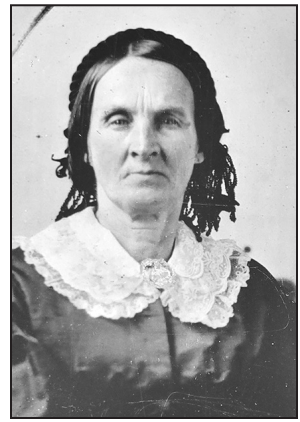



**The Alabama Historical Association placed this sign in 1963 near Anniston, in Calhoun County, Alabama. The Pelham cabin is no longer standing, but the vicinity is marked along the highway with this sign.** (skb)

Martha Pelham, and likely an enslaved woman, looked after baby John as he grew, crawled, toddled, and walked. They would have cared for him through childhood illnesses and guarded him against accidents that claimed the lives of many young children in that era. Four more children were born after John. Peter (1840), Eliza "Betty" (1841), Samuel (1845), and Thomas (1847) completed the Pelham family and undoubtedly kept their mother's days busy. In later years, Martha Pelham was described as a noble and worthy woman. A few of her own letters from the 1850s reveal her worry and care for her children.

As they grew, the six Pelham boys inspired the talk of the county for their pranks and outlandish adventures. They rode milk cows in a neighbor's pasture until the irate farmer told them to quit, leaving a loophole that they could ride the bull, if they wished. The boys cornered the bull, John climbed the fence and dropped onto the beast's back, and in time, tamed the bull so that Betty could ride it, too. In response to a punishment deemed unfair, the Pelham boys broke up their local school, removing all the chairs and desks, throwing the schoolbooks into the well, and "fixing" the teachers chair so it collapsed when he tried to sit down under a barrage of paper wad balls. Fistfights with neighbors occurred regularly, but the causes went unrecorded.

**Martha McGhee Pelham—John's mother—missed her children when they were away from home for school, work, or professions. She anticipated the times when the whole family would return to the home roof.** (jpha)



Fragments of family stories and recorded circumstances suggest that John Pelham may have been one of the quieter, more teachable, and responsible of the boys. He made a habit of studying diligently

and came to respect a male schoolteacher from the North (the replacement for the harassed teacher). In his mother's letters, which survive from the 1850s, she writes anxiously about all the absent boys except for John, almost as if she felt she did not need to worry about the morals and character of her third son.

In his mid-teens, John Pelham spent months on one of his father's farms. Several enslaved men lived and worked the land with him. "He was like other boys had his fights, loves . . . " his brother Peter later remembered, adding, "He worked on father's farm, went fishing on Saturdays & studied the West Minister Catechism on Sunday." Perhaps young Pelham thought he would spend his life as a farmer in northern Alabama. Perhaps for a time, that is what he wanted. But new influences entered his life.

Someone—likely his father—got the idea of sending John to the United States Military Academy at West Point. At first glance, reasons for this career path look surprising. The Atkinson Pelham family did not have immediate ties to the military. Stories later entered the records that John wanted to be a soldier. However, some of his West Point letters suggest that Pelham may not have approached the military academy as his first choice. It is possible that Atkinson Pelham looked for a career path for his third son that would cost less than the careers he funded for his first two sons. One of Dr. Pelham's antebellum letters reveals that his farms were not profitable, and financial hardships may have prompted sending John to West Point where the expense of his education would be footed by the United States government.

**Pelham brothers.** (jpha)

With help and endorsement of his academic skills from a local minister, Pelham applied for an appointment to West Point. According to a reminiscence, Pelham received his West Point appointment through the influence of Senator Miles Washington Abernathy. In March 1856, he received a letter that Secretary of War Jefferson Davis had approved his appointment. It would not be the last time that Pelham and Davis exchanged correspondence or knew of each other. John Pelham wrote his acceptance

and reply on March 18, 1856, and below the teenager's message, Dr. Pelham formally signed his permission for his minor son to enter military service for eight years. Enclosed with the acceptance letter, his father enclosed a doctor's note stating John was "17 years old in Sept. last, and fills all the physical regulations of the Circular attached to the appointment. He has my consent to enter into any engagement with [the] U.S." (Emphasis in original.)

When John Pelham committed himself to cadetship at West Point, the first chapters of his life closed. His path to fame lay far away from the banks of winding Cane Creek, the companionship of his siblings, and the guidance of his parents. The seventeen years he had spent there constituted most of his life. The experiences and lessons at home, school, and the farms of north Alabama forged John Pelham's character and influenced his decisions that would provoke controversy and launch him to fame.

But that last sunset night before Pelham started northward marked a significant change in life. If all went as planned, it would be at least two years before he saw his parents and siblings again. The threshold lay before him, and when he left home, the school of the soldier and the questions of national division would claim him forever.

**The earliest known photo of John Pelham—here, he appears well-dressed and with fashionably tousled hair, perhaps hinting at the escapades he and his brothers brought to their neighborhood.** (jpha)

End of Unedited Excerpt