
Pelham, Robert A., Jr.

(4 Jan. 1859–June 1943),

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inventor, newspaper publisher, and editor, was born the second son and fifth child to Robert and Frances Pelham near Petersburg, Virginia. In the year of his birth his family moved to Detroit, Michigan, seeking better educational and economic opportunities. Pelham attended the public schools of Detroit and managed to finish a twelve-year educational course in nine years.

In 1871, while still in high school, Pelham sharpened his journalistic skills while working at the *Daily Post*, a leading Republican newspaper of the time. At the *Daily Post* Pelham worked under Zachariah Chandler, who not only was the owner of the *Daily Post* but also was a prominent Republican who went on to become mayor of Detroit and a U.S. senator. This close working relationship probably explains Pelham's later involvement with the Republican Party.

Pelham wrote for the *Detroit Daily* from 1883 to 1891. While in this position he created, edited, and managed the *Detroit Plaindealer*, a black weekly newspaper that went on to become the most successful black newspaper in the Midwest. Although the newspaper had closed by 1894, Pelham still benefited from its success. He then became active in the Republican Party and served as the Republican National Convention sergeant-at-arms in 1896. Pelham also held a number of significant jobs, such as deputy oil inspector for the state of Michigan from 1887 to 1891. From 1893 to 1898 Pelham was active as inspector for the Detroit water department, and in 1899 he was given the title special agent for the United States Land Office.

In 1893 Pelham wed Gabrielle Lewis of Adrian, Michigan. Gabrielle Lewis was influential in the musical world of Washington, D.C., and was also the first black person to hold an official position in the Michigan State Music Teacher's Association. Robert Pelham and Gabrielle Lewis had three children; their eldest son went on to carry out experiments in wireless telegraphy, becoming one of the few blacks in Washington, D.C., to hold a license for operating a wireless telegraph. The Pelhams moved their family to Washington, D.C., in 1900, where for thirty years Robert Pelham worked as a clerk for the U.S. Census Bureau. While in Washington, D.C., Pelham also studied law at Howard University and received his law degree in 1904.

As a clerk for the U.S. Census Bureau, Pelham compiled groups of statistics on sheets that included data sent in from manufacturers all over the country. Clerks also had to paste statistical slips manually onto sheets and then organize them. This process was labor-intensive and required many clerks. To speed up the process Pelham invented a prototype pasting machine using two cigar boxes, a wooden rolling pin, some curtain fixtures, two wood screws, a piece of tin, and a strip of sheet rubber. The pasting machine was a tabulator that automated the process of the clerks and was used in the census count of manufacturers. The machine was patented in 1905, and the U.S. government leased the

machine from Pelham, paying Pelham a royalty in addition to his regular salary. By using the pasting machine the U.S. Census Bureau saved more than three thousand dollars just in 1905. The machine made the census count quicker and required fewer clerks to operate it than the old method used to organize data sent from manufacturers. In 1913 Pelham invented a tallying machine, which assisted in the tabulation of census information. Like the pasting machine, the tallying machine saved much time and money.

After retiring from the U.S. Census Bureau, Pelham purchased the *Washington Tribune*, a black newspaper, from the Murray Brothers Publishing Company. Pelham served as editor and publisher of the paper until he resold it back to Murray Brothers. While in retirement Pelham also created the *Capital News Services*, a news agency that was dedicated to addressing African American issues. At age eighty-four Robert Pelham died in Washington, D.C., leaving behind a long trail of accomplishments. He was an intellectual who left his mark on the fields of both journalism and politics. One of his greatest contributions, however, was his tallying device, which ultimately led to the invention of the calculating machine.

Further Reading

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See also

Pasting Apparatus Patent (1905) <https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-33868>