

**The Piedmont Institute
Rockmart, Georgia**

The first private school to be established in Polk County (then Paulding County), was the Raccoon Creek Academy in 1836, followed by Cedartown Academy in 1837 and Williams Academy in Van Wert in 1838.

Piedmont Institute no longer remains standing instead is replaced by Rockmart High School. The once eloquent and architecturally pleasing to the eye structure, was ran by the Methodist Church for nearly 22 years (1889 to 1912).

Rockmart in 1889 was limited to six elementary school grades. The demand was not there for much higher education due to child labor laws that allowed children as young as eight years old to work in factories, or on the farms. It was not because a family did not wish their children to have more education; it was just simply not feasible nor affordable. There were many parents that did wish for a higher education level and a better way of life for their children, and promoted this ideal to the churches that they attended.

On July 24, 1889 the membership of the Rome District of the United Methodist Church met in Cave Springs and the attendees there decided to establish a school somewhere in the piedmont area.

Notes - “The conference widely decided to leave its location to the best inducement by any town in the bounds of the Rome District, and Rockmart thought it might as well have it as any other place – and she got it”. (Notes from the Dallas, GA library genealogy box with the name G. Graber on the top, no indication as to where this information came from).

Apparently several of the towns did compete to win the nomination, but Rockmart’s offer to provide a five acre piece of land and a new brick building estimating \$10,000 for both, was a powerful inducement and Rockmart won the location.

Rockmart quickly raised the funds to build and a site was donated equaling the 5 acres by Colonel Seaborn Jones although some newspapers say that Judge Wiley Crawford Barber donated it and had his name inscribed in the cornerstone – locals today state that it was Seaborn Jones, but without the original deeds no one will know for sure.

While the new building was being built the Methodist decided to get the new project underway and the first term began on January 20, 1890 – classes were held nearby at the Myers Academy with the faculty consisting of: Rev. E. W. BALLENGER, who was assisted by the Reverend G. J. Orr. Miss Eula Stubbs headed up the music department. Rev. Ballenger laid the first cornerstone which was inscribed: Piedmont Institute 1890, on one face and on the other the names of the building

committee – Messrs. E. W. Ballenger, W. C. Barber, W. B. Fambro, M. L. Troutman and J. A. Peek.

In 1890 a two-story building was erected which utilized local products including limestone, slate and brick. Each classroom had electric bells and patented desk. The main building included: office, music room, library and a very large chapel.

An annex was added in 1901 that increased the number of recitation rooms and nearly doubled the size of the chapel. Almost directly in line with the Piedmont Institute across Piedmont Avenue a house was built for the Ballenger family (Ballenger was the President). The Ballenger family consisted of E. W. Ballenger, wife Louisa Elizabeth Upshaw (to whom he had been married 15 years), and their three girls – aged 10, 7 and 4. Their names were: Mrs. Mabel Ballenger Klunder; Mrs. Ludie Ballenger Morgan and Mrs. Mayme Ballenger Haney.

The Ballenger home remains on Piedmont Avenue and is privately owned today. The street (Ballenger Street) which runs from Piedmont Avenue to Jones Avenue was named for the Professor.

Other items of note:

A girls dormitory was built on the campus after a considerable amount of time – Young Harris Hall. It as named for its benefactor L. G. Harris of Athens, Georgia who donated the \$750 to build it.

For several years the male students lived off campus until the Ballenger home was converted to be used as a dormitory. It became known as Ballenger Hall and was inhabited by the female students. After that point the male students resided in the Young Harris Hall.

In 1898 Rev. Ballenger was forced to give up his reign due to poor health and turned over the institute to the Rev. O. L. Kelly.

The Institute grew famously for a very long time. In the early 1900s the population of Rockmart was about 1,000 and the monthly tuition in 1911 showed that it was \$1.50 for the lower grades and ranged to \$3.50 for the upper two high school levels. Boarding was \$12.00/month and music and elocution was \$3.00 each – washing was estimated to be about \$1.00.

In its early years the Institute was basically a Junior College. Graduation requirements for graduation from Piedmont Institute included four years of English, four years of Latin, two years of French, four years of social science and one year of botany and chemistry. A diploma from there guaranteed a student admission without an exam to the sophomore class of colleges like Emory, Mercer, Wesleyan and LaGrange. Although the Methodist Church sponsored and managed the Institute, students were encouraged to attend the church and Sunday School of

their choice in Rockmart. Attendance at the daily prayer meetings were compulsory.

The Institute was forced to close in 1912 in spite of all its progress, but had graduated in the 22 years of being, 110 students an average of 5 per year. Not long after its closure the building was purchased by the City of Rockmart and became the community's high school building. By a mere coincidence the same year it closed the Georgia legislature had authorized funds for the creation of public high schools in the state. With the building already in place Rockmart made an easy transition into publicly-funded higher education. The structure which was thought to be fireproof with its stone and brick masonry burned to the ground in 1915 and was rebuilt the following year – it burned once again in 1940 and a new high school building was rebuilt on the site – Rockmart High School.

About E. W. Ballenger (Elbert) -

In an article of the Rockmart Journal dated January 11, 1968 Leonora Ferguson Mintz stated that “Mr. Ballenger had crusaded for and dreamed of a school for all children, where any boy or girl would be able to work his or her way through if unable to pay for the schooling”. Mrs. Mintz was a educator and native of Rockmart.

The Cedartown Standard reported in May 8, 1890 issue that the Reverend Ballenger as an educator and Methodist Preacher was more instrumental in the Institutes’ establishment than any other one man. He was a splendid instructor and a fine disciplinarian.

Reverend Ballenger was born in 1847 and joined the Confederate Army at an early age. He contracted a fever while in the Confederate Army (assumed to be malaria), and while he was recovering in a field hospital fell from a second story window and suffered an injury to his leg which did not heal properly and left him with a permanent limp. He continued to suffer the rest of his life with the recurring fever.

The University of Georgia reopened after the Civil War and Ballenger attended there for several years, but left without graduating. He taught school for several years and then joined the North Georgia Conference of the Methodist Church. He first served as itinerant circuit rider and later as a minister at several churches. He became a minister through some unusual circumstances. His youngest brother was born and his mother dedicated him to the church – he was to become a minister but the boy dreaded the prospect and ran away from home to avoid it. Elbert felt that he had been called to be a lay preacher and went into the ministry full-time. I am sure some must have speculated that he did so partially for his mother’s sake as she had so set upon having the youngest child be a minister. It was during his ministry at Rockmart Methodist Church that the Conference agreed to sponsor the Piedmont Institute in 1889.

In 1898 Rev. Ballenger was forced to give up his reign due to poor health and turned over the institute to the Rev. O. L. Kelly. He did continue his ministry in Austell, GA for a number of years, and while filling in for a minister at Fairburn Methodist Church suffered a severe stroke in the pulpit. He spent a few months at a retirement home in Milledgeville and died on Friday, June 24, 1904 and was buried at Rose Hill Cemetery in Rockmart. His graves are flanked by those of his wife and daughter. His tombstone is shaped like a pulpit with an open Bible.

Notes on Family: Mabel Elizabeth (Mrs. Mabel B. Klunder) (Mrs. Mamie B. Haney); and Lude (Mrs. B. T. Morgan) Mamie was the wife of Mr. William B. Everett, a Rockmart Banker and he passed away, she married Mr. Haney, who left her a widow the second time. (Ballenger Family of Oconee, SC).

PIEDMONT INSTITUTE GRADUATES

1893
Lula B. Caldwell
J. S. Davitte, Jr.
Mrs. Hocker Smith (nee Davitte)
W. W. Mundy
Mrs. W. J. Nix (nee Davitte)
J. J. Simpson
Kate Stephenson
J. J. Waits
R. P. White
1896
Mabel Ballenger
Mrs. C. C. Bass (nee Montgomery)
Mrs. Eugene Cook (nee Simpson)
M. L. Harper
J. L. Ingram
Walter P. Jones
1897
Rev. T. J. Branson
Mrs. W. E. Everett (Ballenger)
Mrs. C. E. Pearce (nee Lawson)
1898
Ollie Allen
F. P. Branson
Philip A. Kirton
T. E. McBryde
O L. Wozencraft
1899
Jessie Bransom
Joe Dean
Kittie King
Rev. P. A. Kellett
Mrs. F. D. Lane (nee Lewis)
Mrs. I. F. Mundy (nee Algood)

1901
A. D. Barber
W. W. Morgan
1902
Jno. W. Brooks
Mrs. B. J. Fisher (nee Morgan)
Ruby Johnston
Loyd Perryman
S. T. Sims
1903
Fannie Bulloch
Annie Camp
Mrs. Geo Dansby (nee Ferguson)
Mrs. Allen Davis (nee Perryman)
Minnie Hendrick
Annie Williamson
1904
Ada Camp
Mrs. J. W. Fincher (nee Davitte)
Van Hunter McCormick
Smiley Nichols
1905
Mrs. Chas Jones (nee Connally)
Mrs. M. D. Jones (nee Bulloch)
Milton D. Jones
Ernest Mundy
1906
Mrs. Allsman (nee Simmerville)
Mrs. Tom Clements (nee Williamson)
Mrs. T. B. Crawford (nee Davitte)
Aileen Fambro
Jennie Hubbard
James McBryde
Lula McRae
Parker Mosely
Conley Strange
Ozzie Strange

1907
Mrs. B. F. Burnette (nee Davitte)
Ezra Carleton
Mattie Carlton
Charlie McGarity
Hugh McRae
Mattie Mundy
Hopkins Perryman
Sara Ramsaur
Jasper Tilly
Lucy Williams
1908
Leo Bidez
Willie Belle Cannon
Mrs. Irby Henderson (nee Mayhew)
Roy Hendrick
Robt. Peacock
Key Perryman
Bessie Sigler
1909
Roger Dodd
Hattie Hall
Annie Phinizy
1910
Gertrude Blakeley
Flossie Cannon
Myrtle Cumming
Pauline Hubbard
Lula Nichols
Ruth Tramelle
Edgar Williams
1911
Ruth Adair
Dovie Carleton
Howard Fambro
Roy Fambro
Marion Fambrough
Hermie Lane
Wendell Williams

1912 (Unknown if they graduated)
Auzy Adams
Jehu Beasley
Laura Calhoun
Fannie Cannon
Lallah Cowden
Florine Everett
Davitte Hammond
Katy Harris
John Harris
Evans Hubbard
Ida B. Huckaby
Elma Jones
Mary Jones
Mattie Lane
Lamar Lewis
Hugh Morgan

Brenda Pierce

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