

**CLASSICS ON THE CUMBERLAND:**  
**THE OLD PHILOMATH ACADEMY**

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Located in Jackson County at Tinsley's Bottom near the Clay County line, the Old Philomath Academy was just a small building in a remote rural area, only a stone's throw from the Cumberland River. But judging from the lives and careers of its alumni, there must have been something special going on there.

Parents interested in improving their children's lives erected the building in 1858 for church and educational purposes. They named their new academy "Philomath," Greek for "lover of learning." They hired brothers Garland and William Kuykendall, two well-educated ministers, as teachers. The Kuykendalls immediately established a debating society and offered a traditional classical curriculum of mathematics, Latin, Greek, rhetoric, history, science and literature. The brothers required strict discipline and stressed lessons of morality, incorporating daily Bible reading and mandatory chapel attendance into their schedules. Popular with both the students and the community, the Kuykendalls drew many of the brightest students from the Upper Cumberland to their school.

The academy burned in 1904 but not before producing many outstanding citizens. Though not an exhaustive list, the following are some of the Philomath's notable alumni:



**JOHN JORDAN GORE**, federal judge. After his studies at the Philomath, Gore trained at the Falls Business School in Nashville. A native of Jackson County, Gore departed from family tradition and became a Republican. He read law under Judge Bancroft Murray and established his law practice in Gainesboro. In 1914, he won election to the state senate by a land-slide, representing the usually Democratic-controlled 10<sup>th</sup> District. During his one term in the legislature, Gore championed the establishment of Tennessee Polytechnic Institute. When Congress authorized a new federal trial court for Tennessee's Middle District in 1922, President Warren G. Harding appointed Gore its inaugural judge. The *Carthage Courier* praised the appointment, stating, "He is a good lawyer, a good citizen and he will make a good federal judge."

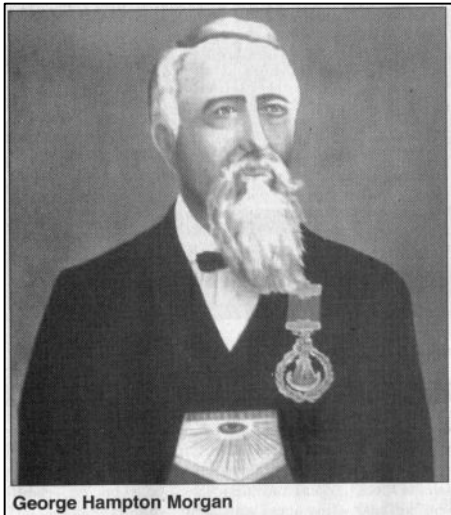
**DR. SAMUEL BENJAMIN FOWLER**; accomplished surgeon. After attending the Philomath, Fowler obtained medical training at Vanderbilt University, the Ohio Medical College and the Polyclinic School in New York. He established his medical practice in Gainesboro and earned a statewide reputation for his unusual skill as a surgeon. Dr. Fowler treated 22 cases of compound fracture of the skull without losing a patient and saved over 90 percent of all his amputations, a remarkable record at the time. He was the first surgeon in the South to successfully perform a bloodless hip joint amputation, known as "Wyatt's Method." When the steamboat I. T. Rhea sank on the Cumberland River, Dr. Fowler heroically saved a lady passenger from drowning.

**BENTON MCMILLIN**, Congressman, governor and diplomat. Following his preparatory studies at the Philomath, McMillin attended the Kentucky Agricultural and Mechanical College (later the University of Kentucky) at Lexington. He read law and established his law practice in Celina before moving to Carthage. A Democrat, McMillin represented the Upper Cumberland for 20 years in the old Fourth Congressional District. He served as Governor of Tennessee from 1899-1903, reducing the state debt, improving the

public school system and making progressive reforms for factory workers. Under President Woodrow Wilson, he served as minister to Peru and then to Guatemala.

**JOSEPH MCMILLIN**, educator. The younger brother of Benton McMillin, Joseph chose the path of a teacher. After studying at the Philomath, McMillin attended Burritt College in Van Buren County, which also offered a classical curriculum and was the first coeducational college in the South. He returned to his hometown of Celina and became the principal educator at the Montvale Academy. McMillin was a master of elocution who personally trained his pupils. His most famous student was Cordell Hull, Nobel Laureate and the longest-tenured Secretary of State in American history. Hull recalled that no students ever made more progress in a five-month term than they did under the scholarly McMillin, whom Hull credited as a chief inspiration of his early life.

**GEORGE HAMPTON MORGAN**, soldier, lawyer, legislator and writer. Morgan studied at the Philomath before the Civil War and fought as a young Lieutenant for the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, CSA, serving as Aide de Camp to General George Dibrell. After the war he continued his education at Burritt College before reading law and gaining admission to the bar.



He practiced law in Gainesboro and served as District Attorney General of the 5<sup>th</sup> Judicial District from 1870-'78. Speaker of the State Senate from 1881-83. Morgan was as formidable a trial lawyer as he was an engaged citizen. An active Mason, he served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Tennessee in 1895. Under the pen name "Stella," Morgan published numerous articles about Jackson County history in local newspapers. Reflecting his classical influences at the Philomath, young Morgan's war diary ends with the following conclusion: "Man proposes. God disposes. Sic Transit Gloria Mundi."

Scholars still tout the benefits of a classical education for developing in students not only critical thinking and communication skills, but also high ideals of citizenship.

This little country school on the Cumberland River certainly accomplished those goals. If the lives of its students are the best measure of a school's success, then the Old Philomath Academy definitely earned high marks.

*'Cumberland Tales,' created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region's history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at [cdickinson@tntech.edu](mailto:cdickinson@tntech.edu) or Michael Birdwell at [birdie@tntech.edu](mailto:birdie@tntech.edu).*

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