

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

The Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute Historic District was listed in the National Register on September 20, 1991 for its statewide significance under criterion A in education. The period of significance went from 1926, when York began the school until the state took over management of the school in 1937. The Old Main Building, original Agricultural Building, and the Poor Farm building were listed as contributing resources. The York Institute sign was listed as non-contributing since it was thought to be outside the period of significance. The additional documentation does not change the boundaries or contributing resources count, but it does change the level of significance to national and the period of significance to 1954, when York's involvement with the school ended.

Statement of Significance

The Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute Historic District is eligible for the National Register for its national significance under criterion A for education. York's military significance has been recognized in countless ways, with the best known probably the 1941 movie starring Gary Cooper. The part of the county he grew up in has been documented as the National Register-listed York Historic Area. Alvin York was given land by the state and funds from the *Nashville Banner* and the Nashville Rotary Club to construct his house, now a National Historic Landmark, in gratitude for his military service. However, York's post WWI significance in the area of education has not been recognized. York spent much of his time and money to provide an education for children in Fentress County. He used his military fame and took his campaign for education nationwide when he was refused help locally. In doing this he set an example of how important rural education was to the country. Understanding that to prosper in the modern world an education was necessary, York sought to bring Fentress County into the twentieth century. Thousands of like-minded veterans returned from France with similar sentiments and as a result college enrollments shot up immediately after the war. York's efforts are representative of his own desires for improved education and also are emblematic of the broader post- WWI efforts to improve children's' education. In York's own words "To the end that my people of Pall Mall and of Fentress County and the boys and girls of this mountainous section may enjoy the liberating influences and educational advantages which were denied me, I dedicate this institution and my life to its perpetuation and seek from the American People support in keeping with the great need."¹

Many Americans are familiar with the story of Sergeant York largely due to the eponymous 1941 Warner Bros movie that earned Gary Cooper his first Academy Award for best actor, but they know little else. Called by General John J. Pershing "the greatest civilian soldier" of the First World War, York could have cashed in on his fame and settled down to a life of leisure. Instead he rejected lucrative offers from Hollywood, Broadway, and manufacturers who clamored for his endorsement to pursue a dream that consumed the remainder of his life. He wanted to improve his own education and use his fame to provide a

¹ Alvin C. York Institute. <http://www2.york.k12.tn.us/YorkHome.html> , accessed August 28, 2008

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 2 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

better future for the children of Tennessee.

When Alvin York responded to his draft notice, he typified the underprivileged, undereducated conscript who traveled to France to “keep the world safe for democracy.” Possessing what he called a third grade education (a subscription school education which amounted to only nine months’ total schooling over three years) York discovered a larger world beyond his imagination in the army and overseas.² Both introduced him to a mechanized, industrial world, and prolonged exposure to it made him realize the importance of education in navigating that world. Literally a stranger in a strange land, York recognized that he was ill-equipped to fully understand or appreciate his foreign surroundings. Initially, he immersed himself in the *Bible*, hoping that his religion would see him through, but long before the war ended he longed for something more than simply faith.

Largely unknown to most Americans today is the fact that York returned home with a single vision. He wanted a practical educational opportunity for the mountain children of Tennessee. Understanding that to prosper in the modern world, children needed an education, York was determined to make his dream a reality. The thought of this barely literate veteran launching a campaign for education was fraught with difficulty, for it struck most of Fentress County’s political and social leaders as ludicrous that York could build or administer a school. Possessing no background in education or administration, his intentions, though noble, struck them as absurd because his ability to evaluate instructors, curricula, textbooks, and administration was virtually non-existent. While regarded as a hero across America, at home York was seen as an irritant. Celebrity made it possible for the Sergeant to express his *desire* for education to the world at large but gave him little clout when dealing with the old guard Fentress County elite.

York embarked on a series of speaking tours on its behalf in 1920. Just as he had no experience as an educator or administrator, he had no background as a public speaker or in fund-raising. Though both initially hampered his progress, York grew into a polished and effective speaker. He intended to provide the boys and girls of the Cumberland Plateau with “liberating influences and educational advantages which were denied me.”³ His vision was not limited to the education of children; he wanted to include interested adults as well. He set a tremendous example, reminding audiences when he spoke of his own former limitations. By reading, thinking, and asking questions, York broadened his own understanding of the world. His private tutor, Arthur S. Bushing, played a crucial role in improving York’s own education. A pamphlet issued in 1926 stated, “. . . it will be the aim of the Institute to afford an opportunity for mature men and women to get an education, regardless of how backward they may be, and also to send out only such graduates as are prepared to succeed in the work they have chosen to do.”⁴

York continued to travel the country throughout the early 1920s. He championed the cause of York

² Prior to embarking to Camp Gordon near Atlanta, Georgia, York had never traveled more than fifty miles from his home in Pall Mall, Tennessee.

³ Arthur S. Bushing, “A Heap O’Learnin’” speech written for Sergeant Alvin York, and delivered during the 1920 Speaking Tour. (Pall Mall, Tennessee: York Speeches, Box 1, Folder 1, 1920).

⁴ *This Pamphlet Contains Information About York Institute* (Jamestown, Tennessee: The Courier, 1920): 1.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 3 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

Institute while improving his own education. Arthur S. Bushing initially wrote York's speeches that were filled with hokey colloquialisms that capitalized on the Sergeant's hillbilly roots. By the mid-twenties, however, York played a more substantive role in the creation of his speeches. The grammar improved; and so did York's delivery. Because he often attended education conferences across the United States, York believed that acting like a yokel actually hampered his cause. He took great pains to speak precisely and effectively. Educators from Florida, Massachusetts, Ohio, New York, Indiana, and other states rallied to York's cause. They wrote letters on his behalf to the Tennessee State Legislature and helped publicize his goals. The *Literary Digest* followed the story closely, and published a number of articles on the progress of York Institute.⁵

As genuine as York's mission was to reporters of the *New York Times* and other media organs, in Fentress County he encountered raised eyebrows, guffaws, and outright hostility. Parents eking out a living in rural areas needed their children to work on the farms since few families could afford to hire labor. They depended on their children to help plant crops, milk cows, slop hogs, and carry out all the other daily chores that made farm life. York's proposal for a mandatory eight-month school term angered a host of local farmers who perceived education as frivolous, impractical, and a waste of hard-earned money. Simply stated, York Institute would never have become a reality without national support, because much of the state of Tennessee and the citizens of Fentress County failed to comprehend the importance of compulsory public education.

In 1925, at the urging of Ransom Isaiah Hutchings, an educator and legislator who believed in York's dream, the state legislature passed the first mandatory education bill. The national attention York generated played an invaluable role in making that legislation possible. It followed the lead of bills passed in northern states and stipulated that in order to teach in Tennessee public schools, instructors had to be certified and have college degrees from one of the state's normal schools. No one in Fentress County qualified under the new rules, and the first teachers employed at York Institute came from outside the region, with degrees from Peabody Normal College (Peabody College for Teachers, NHL 12/21/65) in Nashville. Viewed with suspicion as outsiders, their presence added to the growing local hostility against York and his dream.⁶

Later that year, York and his supporters drafted plans and proposed a site for the school one mile north of Jamestown near the newly constructed Highway 127. Taking the \$12,000 he had raised on nationwide speaking tours, York purchased 400 acres, including the County Poor House (included in the nomination). York called a national press conference and held a ground breaking ceremony on May 8, 1925, before a crowd of 2,000. Among those present at the ceremony were a number of dignitaries from seven

⁵ Arthur Bushing hailed from New York. He witnessed the ticker tape parade where York and Cordell Hull rode in a limousine down 5th Avenue. Fascinated by York's heroics, he moved to Tennessee and offered to work for York for one dollar a year. His role in orchestrating York's public career cannot be overstated. York attended education conferences and sought the counsel of professional educators until his debilitating stroke in 1954. See the appendix for one of the *Literary Digest* articles.

⁶ York Institute Files, York Papers (Pall Mall, Tennessee: York Institute Box 1, Folders 9-15, and Box 2, Folders 1-3).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

different states, as well as Harcourt Morgan, the president of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. York and a crew of men that included World War I veterans dug the foundation of the school, as photographers snapped their pictures. Reporters from the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and other prestigious newspapers covered the event. While support at home was minimal, the nation rallied around York's dream to provide an education for Tennesseans. His original vision intended for the school to provide education from pre-school through college on a campus that eventually comprised 1400 acres.⁷

Classes began in the fall in the old Poor House while construction on York Institute got underway. Pursuing his goal never proved easy. York's enemies launched a counter-attack to his ground breaking event, intent on humiliating him. They alleged that by holding classes in the old Poor House, York was guilty of trespassing.

York referred the matter to his attorney and hit the road again. For the first time in his public speaking career, York discussed his war record. That speaking tour culminated in York addressing a sell-out crowd at Carnegie Hall in New York on Armistice Day in 1925.

York told audiences that encountering foreigners and people of other faiths for the first time in the military opened his eyes to an entirely new and exciting world. As he sailed to Europe it occurred to him that he was beginning to understand fellow soldiers who were Greek, Italians, and Jews, who were "smart soldiers and pretty good pals too." As he concluded, York said he survived war and achieved fame because he had been chosen to perform a specific mission:

When I went out into that big outside world I realized how un-educated I was and what a terrible handicap it was. I was called to lead my people toward a sensible modern education. For years I have been planning and fighting to build the school. And it has been a terrible fight. A much more terrible fight than the one that I fought in the war. And so I head into the frontline and fight another fight. And I can't use the old rifle or Colt automatic this time. And it has been a long hard fight.⁸

York, by this time, was an accomplished, entertaining speaker, and by finally giving the public what it wanted--exciting war stories--he filled auditoriums across the country. Though he thrilled audiences, retelling his role in the battle on October 8, 1918, he always ended with a plea for York Institute. Unfortunately, the speaking tour proved lucrative and costly at the same time. Though pledges came in from all over the country supporting the mission, York's political capital at home plummeted. Local papers

⁷ Today York's vision has become something of a reality. Pre-K classes are held on the campus as well as high school, and Roane State Community college operates four classrooms. The campus today is reduced to the original 400 acres. York sold off parcels of the property over the years, and on one of the parcels roughly 1000 yards away is a new elementary school.

⁸ Alvin C. York, "A Hard Fight," speech presented on the 1925 speaking tour (Pall Mall: York Papers, York Speeches, Box 1 Folder 8).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 5 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

blistered York while praising his enemies. Articles argued that the children of Fentress County would be endangered by York's reckless and personal ambitions.

After a protracted series of legal challenges, York opened the new school in the fall of 1927. The school's opening coincided with the onset of the Great Depression, and in 1931 the state ended all appropriations for bus transportation, effectively crippling the struggling Institute. The very nature of the school--a mountain school where children could come for a free education--required buses. York went before the County Court and asked for help; they refused.

On two occasions, first in 1931 and then later in 1935, York secured a mortgage on his farm from his political enemy and banker, W. L. Wright--to hire drivers, buy buses, and even pay teachers' salaries--something the county refused to do. This was true heroism, putting the fate of his family at risk, to ensure that the school stays in operation. As the Depression worsened Wright badgered York, ultimately declaring him delinquent in his business transactions, and moved to foreclose on his farm. Had it not been for his longtime friend and neighbor, Susie Williams, York would have lost his farm, for she twice loaned him the money necessary to pay off his note.⁹

On another occasion in the 1930s York was approached by a number of students who requested the creation of a music program at York Institute. He listened to their plea, and agreed that a music program could enhance the school. After consulting with other schools in Tennessee that had music education, York traveled to Nashville with his son George Edward. They went to Strobel's music store, produced a list for the proprietor, and returned to Jamestown in a school bus filled with instruments. York paid for those out of his own pocket, with no support from the county. He did it for the sake of the students.¹⁰

Far from crediting York for his selfless efforts, the state never reimbursed York for his altruism. Rather, he was criticized for his behavior which led to a fact-finding investigation in 1933 that resulted in York's eventual removal from the school in 1937. The investigating committee recognized that York was the driving force behind the school and feared its demise if he were removed from the picture. They also acknowledged that if the school were turned over to Fentress County, the situation would be much worse. As a result the state of Tennessee assumed control of the school and operation of York Institute. They removed York as the school's administrator, but named him "president emeritus," because he did not have a college degree. The title recognized him as the school's founder but stripped him of any power.¹¹

In spite of his loss of position, York continued to promote York Institute, raising private donations for expansion of the school facilities and, when possible, contributing his own money. Legislation forced the

⁹ Personal interviews with Guy Williams, George Edward Buxton York, Andrew Jackson York, Betsy Ross York Lowrey, David Lee, and Lorene Cargile, from 1989-present.

¹⁰ Personal interview with George Edward York, My 24, 2008.

¹¹ Robert L. Forrester, "Report of Findings Concerning York Institute," (Nashville: Tennessee State Library and Archives, Education Files, York Institute, 1937).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 6 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

state to have a vested interest in its success and York's dream of free education for Tennessee's mountain children at last became a reality.

Additionally, York used the school as his headquarters for a number of projects, including the creation of a demonstration farm on the campus grounds (agriculture building included in nomination). He conducted the bulk of his correspondence with people from all over the country on York Institute stationery. He enjoyed the company of students and teachers and continued his education through his ongoing exposure to the school.

During World War II York launched an hour-long radio program that aired over the Mutual Broadcasting Service, *Tennessee Americans*. When he was home the show was broadcast by remote from the auditorium of York Institute before a live audience. The show ran each Sunday evening and featured live music, discussions, letters from soldiers, and words of encouragement from the sergeant. One of his first guests was General Douglas MacArthur who was in Tennessee visiting his in-laws. Over the course of the shows existence, untold thousands of Americans heard about York Institute.¹²

York remained active in the school's life long after he was relegated to emeritus status. It was the proudest accomplishment of his life and how he wanted to be remembered. He presided over every graduation ceremony until his debilitating stroke in 1954.

York Institute is important nationally because the citizenry of the United States assisted in making York's school possible. It was funded by monies raised throughout the country. Among its graduates are an astronaut and a United States Congressman. York Institute acted as the headquarters for a man whose fame is international in scope. The building represents not only a specific period in institutional architecture, but also the vision of one of America's greatest heroes of the 20th Century.

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¹² Personal Interviews with Doyle Jones, George Edward York, Steve Cotham; *Tennessee Americans* files (Pall Mall, Tennessee: York Papers).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 7 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

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Personal interview with George Edward York, My 24, 2008

Personal Interviews with Doyle Jones, George Edward York, Steve Cotham; Tennessee Americans files (Pall Mall, Tennessee: York Papers).

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York, Alvin C. "A Hard Fight," speech presented on the 1925 speaking tour (Pall Mall: York Papers, York Speeches, Box 1 Folder 8).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number appendix Page 8 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

Photographs

Photos by: Claudette Stager
Date: December 2006
Digital neg: Tennessee Historical Commission

Old Main Building
East façade, facing northwest
1 of 4

Agriculture Building
East façade, facing northwest
2 of 4

Old Main and Agriculture buildings
East facades, facing northwest
3 of 4

Poor House/dorm
West façade and north elevation, facing southeast
4 of 4

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number appendix Page 9 York, Alvin C., Agricultural Institute Historic District
Fentress County, Tennessee (additional documentation)

List of articles included with the nomination:

1. Eighth Annual Convention of the Kansas Department of the American Legion, September 8, 1926
2. Official Proceedings Eleventh Annual Convention International Association of Lions Clubs, June 15, 1927
3. National Educational Association of the United States, Proceedings of the Sixty-fifth Annual Meeting held at Seattle, Washington July 3-8, 1927
4. Letter from The League for Political Education, November 17, 1928
5. Letter from Associated Service Organizations, September 29, 1937
6. *The Literary Digest*, "Sergeant York's Greatest Fight," July 3, 1926
7. Knoxville newspaper, "More About Alvin York's School"
8. Pittsburgh newspaper, "Sergeant Alvin York, Greatest Hero of World War, Asks Donation for Mountain Vocational School"
9. "State Will Run York Institute," November 28, 1929
10. "Fentress Feud," May 25, 1936
11. Sunday *Chattanooga Times*, "Berry Tells York Will Build Road,"
12. Western Union telegram from York school, November 13, 1928
13. Catalog, Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute, 1940-41
14. York Correspondence, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, 1935-1930
15. White House correspondence, 1954