

# SGT. YORK'S EDUCATIONAL LEGACY

*by Michael E. Birdwell, PhD, Associate Professor of History at Tennessee Technological University and Archivist of Alvin C. York's papers*

Known as the greatest hero of World War I, Alvin C. York avoided profiting from his war record, choosing instead to give something back to his nation and his home state.

On Oct. 8, 1918, Corporal Alvin Cullum York and 16 other men under the command of Sergeants Harry Parsons and Bernard Early were dispatched to capture the Decauville railroad near Chatel-Chehery in the Meuse-Argonne. After a brief firefight (nine Americans died in the melee) the confused Germans surrendered to what they believed to be a superior force.

In all 132 Germans were captured and delivered to U.S. Army headquarters by the seven survivors led by Corporal York. The army singled out York as the hero of World War I and presented him with the Congressional Medal of Honor. Upon his return to the United States, York found himself being wooed by Hollywood, Broadway and various sponsors who clamored for his endorsement. York turned his back on quick and certain fortune in 1919 and went home to Tennessee to resume private life and pursue a dream that consumed the rest of his life.

The story of York Institute is one filled with triumph and tragedy and deserves greater circulation. 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 kin in the army. Before leaving for Camp Gordon, Ga., and beyond, York's world consisted of the area within a 100-mile radius of his home. The furthest he had been from home was Albany, Ky., to the north, Celina to the west, Jamestown to the south and Harriman to the east, where he boarded the train bound for Atlanta and basic training.



**SGT. YORK, CENTER, DIGS FOUNDATION FOR YORK INSTITUTE**



**GROUNDBREAKING FOR YORK INSTITUTE**

“AMERICA’S TRIBUTE TO SERGEANT YORK”

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In appreciation of the character and devotion of Sergeant Alvin C. York, I hereby subscribe \$..... for

The Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute  
JAMESTOWN, TENNESSEE

Payable as follows:.....

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Make checks payable to Sergeant Alvin C. York, President.  
An official receipt for all contributions will be issued from home office.

The war introduced him to a progressive, mechanized, industrial world, and prolonged exposure to it made him realize the important contributions education could make for his friends and relatives at home. 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 simple religious faith would see him through, but by the war’s end he longed for something more than just his faith.

Largely unknown to most Americans, and, sadly, to many Tennesseans, is the fact that York returned to America with a single vision. He wanted to provide a practical educational opportunity for the mountain children of Tennessee. Understanding that to prosper in the modern world, people needed an education, York sought to drag Fentress County into the 20th century.

Thousands of like-minded veterans returned from France with similar sentiments, and as a result, high school and college enrollments shot up immediately after the war.

The very 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 and 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 nearly nonexistent. While regarded as a hero across America, at home York was seen as a threat to the county’s Republican Party political structure.

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. As early as 1920 York formed a nonprofit organization, the York Foundation, and embarked on a series of speaking tours on its behalf. Just as he had no experience as an educator or administrator, he had no background as a public speaker or in fundraising. Though both initially hampered his progress, York learned how to be effective as a speaker and an educator. Undaunted, he intended to provide the boys and girls of his native region with “liberating influences and educational advantages which were denied me.”

His vision was not limited to the education of children from the remote Cumberland Plateau region. He wanted to include interested adults as well. He set a tremendous example, for when he spoke he reminded them of his own former limitations and that by reading, thinking and asking questions, he broadened his own understanding of the world. York realized that one is never too old to learn something new, and he led by example. He hired a private assistant, Arthur S. Bushing, who played a crucial role in improving York’s education.

As genuine as York’s mission was to reporters of the *New York Times* and other media organs, in Tennessee 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 of 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.

In 1925 the York Foundation drafted plans and proposed a site for the school one mile north of Jamestown near the recently constructed Highway 127. Taking the \$12,000 he had raised on speaking tours, York purchased 400 acres, including the Poor House, which

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.”

York called a national press conference and held a groundbreaking ceremony on May 8, 1926, at the Poor House site before a crowd of 2,000, though Governor Austin Peay was conspicuous in his absence. The first students enrolled at York Institute began taking classes in the fall of 1925.

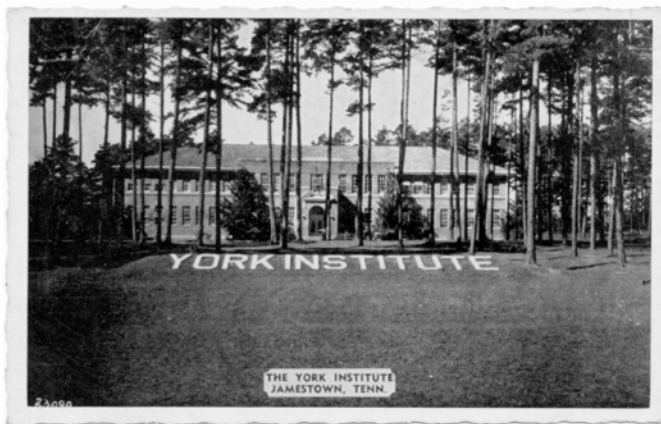
On Sunday, Jan. 16, 1927, the *Nashville Banner* announced the launching of a \$100,000 fund-raising effort to insure York Institute's completion. Supported by the recently organized American Legion, each post promised that it would deliver one dollar per member. University of Tennessee president H.A. Morgan pledged his unwavering support as well. Pursuing his goal of improving the education of Tennessee's youth never proved easy. York's enemies launched a counterattack to his groundbreaking event and were intent on humiliating him. They concluded that York, by holding classes in the old Poor House, was guilty of trespassing. Classes continued and construction on the new school neared completion. As construction continued, the state legislature passed the mandatory education bill of 1925, further insuring the success of York's school. That legislation insulted many people in the county, for it stipulated that in order to teach in Tennessee public schools, teachers had to be certified and have degrees from one of the state's teacher training schools.

No one in Fentress County was qualified under the new rules, and the first teachers employed at York Institute came from outside the region with degrees from Peabody Normal (teachers') College in Nashville. Viewed with suspicion and outsiders, their presence added to the growing hostility against York and his dream for better and mandatory education of Tennessee children.

Attorney L.A. Ligon investigated classes being taught at the Poor House for the county, deeming York's action as "unwarranted, unauthorized and illegal."

The County Board of Education served York notice to vacate the premises by July 11, 1927, or be forcibly evicted. At 5:15 p.m. on Saturday, July 9, 1927, York received the summons. York referred the matter to his attorney, focused his attention upon raising money, rallied supporters to his side and hit the road again. For the first time in his public speaking career York discussed his war record to insure that he would play to packed houses and garner much needed funds to continue his fight.

Encountering foreigners and people of other faiths for the first time in the military, York told audiences that his time in the service 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 uneducated 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."**

York, by this time, was an accomplished, entertaining speaker, and by finally giving the public what it wanted – exciting war stories – he played to packed houses everywhere. Though he enticed the crowds with the recreation of his role in the battle on Oct. 8, 1918, he always ended with a plea for support of York Institute. Unfortunately, the speaking tour proved lucrative and costly at the same time. Though pledges came in supporting the mission, York's political capital at home continued to plummet. Local papers blistered York while praising his enemies. Articles argued that the children of Fentress County would be endangered by York's personal ambitions.

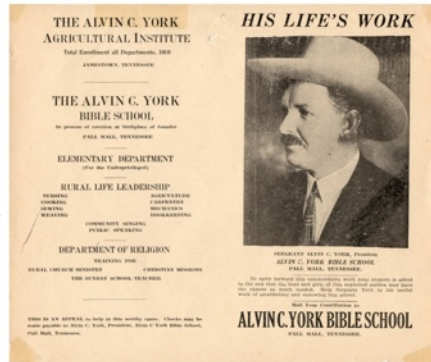
York continued speaking engagements throughout 1927 and 1928. New Englanders provided the majority of the financial commitment as well as the greatest interest in his endeavor. On Armistice Day he spoke to a packed audience at Carnegie Hall in New York about the importance of his work and the benighted souls who stood in his way back home, comparing the Fentress County elite to a pair of mules working against each other. His appeal to outsiders, especially northerners, further alienated York's support at home. After a protracted series of legal challenges, York opened the new school in the fall of 1929.

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. The court 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. This was true heroism, endangering the fate of his family to ensure that the school remain in operation. As the Depression worsened Wright badgered York, ultimately declaring him delinquent in his business transactions and moving 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.

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 worse.

As a result the state of Tennessee assumed control of the school and assumed operation of York Institute. They removed York as the school's administrator but named him "president emeritus." The title recognized him as the school's founder but stripped him of any power.



**YORK USED MONEY FROM HIS PARTICIPATION IN THE 1941 CLASSIC MOVIE, SERGEANT YORK, TO BUILD A BIBLE SCHOOL AT PALL MALL.**



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"To the end that 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."

SERGEANT ALVIN C. YORK.

**PORTION OF AN EARLY PROMOTIONAL BROCHURE  
DESIGNED TO RAISE MONEY AND SUPPORT FOR  
YORK INSTITUTE.**

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. York's dream of free education for Tennessee's mountain children at last became a reality. He presided over every graduation ceremony until his stroke in 1954 and continued to make regular visits to the school into the late 1950s, until he grew too frail.

York fought valiantly in a war waged not on distant battlefields in France but on his own doorstep. Because his tenure in the military made him painfully aware of his intellectual limitations, York dedicated the remainder of his life to the improvement of education — his own and his region's.

Because of his vision, thousands of students have benefited from his largess. Eyes have been opened and imaginations given flight by his dream made reality. Thousands of York Institute graduates went on to become leaders of industry, bankers, lawyers and educators.

York Agricultural and Industrial Institute, north of Jamestown, stands as a monument to his embattled dream. Yet the condition of the building that he helped build, digging its foundation by hand and overseeing every aspect of its construction, long stood near ruin.

The building, which should have become monument to that achievement, had in recent years become a derelict shell of what it should have been, falling into such disrepair that the State of Tennessee slated it for demolition. That led to a struggle that literally lasted 364 days. After a series of hearings at the State Capitol and in Jamestown, the forces for restoration prevailed thanks to the dedicated hard work of the Tennessee Historical Commission, the Tennessee Preservation Trust, the non-profit Sergeant York Patriotic Foundation (SYPF) and other concerned citizens.

The state agreed to deed the property to the SYPF and allow it to use the money designated for demolition to stabilize the structure. Construction and remediation crews arrived at the site in late March 2009 to perform stabilization and remediation. Also in 2009 the Tennessee Historical Commission received word from Washington, D.C., announcing that the building's status in the National Register of Historic Places had been upgraded. Its previous designation recognized the structure for its importance locally, while the new status declares that the building is significant nationally.

To learn more or contribute to the historic preservation and adaptive reuse of York Institute, please visit [www.sgt.york.org](http://www.sgt.york.org). Millions of dollars are needed to save Sgt. York's legacy, and this money will not come from taxes or government grants. It must come from individual donations from those who honor the commitment of a hero.