

Austin Peay's influence on roads and education in Tennessee

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Essential Question: How did Austin Peay improve roads and schools in Tennessee?

The desire to improve Tennessee's roads and schools was part of the larger Progressive Era movement to improve society for all citizens. Reformers realized that road building and school reform went hand in hand. Without good roads, it was impossible to consolidate one room school houses into more modern and efficient schools or for schools to stay open in the winter. Unfortunately for the reformers, many rural Tennesseans did not think that better roads or schools were necessary. They thought that basic education was all their sons and daughters needed for life on the farm and that their current roads worked fine for their wagons. A dedicated group of educators based at the University of Tennessee campaigned throughout the state and eventually won a number of important reforms including requiring teacher certification, a compulsory education bill and mandating at least one high school per county. However, many of these reforms existed only on paper until Austin Peay became governor in 1922.

Peay campaigned on a platform of modernizing state government and improving roads and schools. He began by reorganizing the state government into a much more efficient system of eight departments that reported to the governor and not the General Assembly. Next, Peay tackled the state's road system. Urban constituents wanted a bond issue to pay for road construction, but rural voters opposed the idea. Peay sided with the rural voters and suggested a "pay as you go" system that used gasoline tax money, vehicle registration fees and short term bonds to pay for roads. Peay's plan worked and by 1930 Tennessee had over six thousand miles of state highways. However, it cost him the support of the urban voters who had elected him. Peay won reelection in 1924 with the support of rural voters.

Peay turned his attention to school reform in 1925 when he pushed a General Education Bill through the General Assembly. The bill built on previous reform efforts by placing schools under the control of the state superintendent of schools, establishing a uniform pay scale for teachers and providing state funds to assist counties in paying for an eight month school year. The funding for schools came from a tax on tobacco. Peay's education reforms were popular with teachers who packed the state house to encourage legislators to approve the bill. The reforms were not popular with rural elites who resented the loss of local control over schools or city dwellers who recognized that they were being taxed to pay for rural schools.

The loss of support from rural voters hurt Peay's ability to push bills through the General Assembly during his third term. Additionally, Peay came down with influenza complicated by pneumonia two months into his third term. His health never recovered and he died in October

1927. However, Peay's reforms had modernized, state government, roads and schools in Tennessee. Thus, Peay is often remembered as Tennessee's best twentieth century governor.

Source:

Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith. *Tennesseans and Their History*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999.

Student Activity

Directions: Record at least three facts about Peay's road reforms and three facts about education reform in the image below. Then answer the question below.



One reason that some people opposed Peay's reform was that they wanted greater local control of schools. Peay and the reformers believed that state oversight was necessary to make sure that all children received a quality education. Use the lines below to write an argument for local or state control of schools today.
