

Fentress County

Established 1823 County Seat: Jamestown

Early History

Fentress County was created in 1823 from parts of Morgan, White and Overton counties. The county's name honors James Fentress, the Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives who helped pass the legislation to create the county. The county seat of Jamestown also takes its name from James Fentress. In the early 1830s, attorney John M. Clemens lived in Fentress County and served as a county commissioner and circuit court clerk. Clemens also served as the postmaster for Pall Mall until he and his wife Jane moved to Missouri. It was in Missouri that Jane gave birth to a son named Samuel, later known as Mark Twain. The family continued to own property in Fentress County and several deeds bear Samuel Clemens's signature.

Civil War and Reconstruction

Like many other parts of the Cumberland Plateau, Fentress County experienced widespread guerilla warfare during the Civil War. Captain Dave "Tinker" Beaty formed a company known as David Beaty's Independent Scouts that was at least nominally under the command of U.S. Generals George Thomas and Ambrose Burnside. The company's stated purpose was to prevent Confederate troops from entering Fentress County. However, Beaty and his men ranged throughout the countryside seeking and often killing anyone thought to have Confederate ties. Beaty's men clashed with his better known Confederate counterpart Champ Ferguson on many occasions. Beaty testified against Ferguson at his trial for war crimes in 1865. It has often been noted that Beaty's actions during the war were no better than Ferguson's, but Beaty had the good fortune to end up on the winning side. The harshness of guerilla warfare on the Cumberland Plateau left a legacy of violence and vengeance throughout the Reconstruction era.

Twentieth Century

Fentress County's most famous native son, Alvin C. York, was born on December 13, 1887 in the Pall Mall Community. After his father's death in 1911, York helped his mother care for his younger siblings by farming, logging, and helping to construct a railroad in Harriman. York belonged to a pacifist church and was initially strongly opposed to military service in World War I. After his status as a conscientious objector was denied, York had a change of heart while training and resolved to fight. York arrived in France in 1918 and took part in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. York's skills as a marksman honed while hunting for wild game served him well during the war. After many of his company were killed or wounded while trying to capture German machine gun positions, York and a small group of men were able to infiltrate the German lines and capture 132 prisoners. For his bravery, York was awarded the Medal of Honor and became an internationally known figure when the Warner Brother's film *Sergeant*

York was released in 1941. It was the highest grossing film of 1941 and earned Gary Cooper an Academy Award for the title role.

York Institute

Upon returning home from the war, York used his new found fame to bring educational opportunities to Fentress County. York created the York Agricultural and Industrial Institute to provide students with a quality education especially in technical fields. York used his status as a war hero to raise money for the school. The Tennessee General Assembly appropriated \$50,000 for building the school. However, York's plan faced opposition due to both local politics and the need for children to serve as farm labor. Another issue was that the state had recently passed a law requiring all teachers to have a degree from a state normal school. No one in Fentress County had such a degree, which meant outsiders would have to be brought in to teach children at the school. The school opened in 1929, but it struggled financially. York often paid salaries and bought equipment with his own funds. York was later accused of corruption relating to the school's finances, but was later cleared of all the charges. The York Institute was taken over by the state and remains the only state owned and operated high school in Tennessee.

For more information see,

***Celluloid Soldiers: The Warner Bros. Campaign Against Nazism* by Michael Birdwell**

***Civil War along Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau* by Aaron Astor**

***Confederate Outlaw: Champ Ferguson and the Civil War in Appalachia* by Brian D. McKnight**

***Alvin York: A New Biography of the Hero of the Argonne* by Douglas Mastriano**