

World War II Secret City Gates

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on April 5, 2006)

From 1943 to 1949 the city of Oak Ridge (fifth largest city in Tennessee) was not on any maps and existed as a secure gated community. The installation of fences and guard portals at the various roads entering the area were among the first activities to be initiated after possession of the land became official. There are no remains of the seven original guard gates constructed to protect the secret activities planned at the beginning of the Manhattan Project - except for photos of some of them. Even the exact location of some of the gates is often questioned. Elza Gate seems to be the gate location most easily recalled. Its location is most easily determined because of the historical marker placed nearby that tells of the area's history. None of the other six gates have signs or anything else to locate them exactly.

While not a "gate" there is a solitary guard observation tower atop Pine Ridge that remains visible today. The Pine Ridge tower still overlooks the East Fork Valley and Bear Creek Valley and provides a panoramic view from atop the ridge. This tower was not among the original structures, but was added near the time the city was opened to the public and the three sites were isolated.

The tower provides a grand view of almost 360 degrees and would have provided a most secure location and excellent lookout post during the secret activities at the Y-12 site in Bear Creek Valley. The view into East Fork Valley and the city of Oak Ridge is commanding. Trees have been cut to afford a view of the tower from the base of the gap in Pine Ridge by looking south up the point of the ridge to the tower. Look closely next time you pass the white guard post on Scarboro Road and you will be able to see the tower on the top of Pine Ridge by looking up through the gap in the trees. It is best to stop in the parking lot just south of the guard post for the clearest view.

While its appearance from a distance may be deceptively that of possible wood construction, it is actually concrete and is quite substantially built. There is no finish or paint on the exterior and the concrete still holds the impressions of the wooden forms used to shape the structure when the concrete was poured. There is no access to the tower as the stairs have been removed. It is located behind the gates of the Oak Ridge City Water Plant atop Pine Ridge and thus is not accessible to the public. It is also inside the security fence for the Y-12 site boundary.

Recently the Atlantic Productions film company visited Oak Ridge to film a segment of their "Lost Worlds" series for The History Channel and obtained permission to film the Pine Ridge tower as a subject of their film. The name of the one-hour segment will be the Manhattan Project and may be seen when the series airs in June or July 2006. The reason for the Manhattan Project officials choosing that location atop Pine Ridge for that observation tower is obvious. The production company also filmed from the top of a building at the water plant to get an overview of the city.

The seven original gates to the World War II Secret City of Oak Ridge were located as follows. 1. Elza Gate was on Oak Ridge Turnpike (Highway 95) just east of Melton Lake Drive (then River Road). 2. Oliver Springs Gate was on Highway 62 (now Illinois Avenue) just north of West Outer Drive. 3. Poplar Creek Gate was on Blair Road where it crosses Poplar Creek. 4. Gallaher Gate was located on the Oak Ridge Turnpike at the junction with the southwest end of Bear Creek Road at the Clinch River. 5. White Wing Gate was located on the White Wing Bridge Road (Highway 95) at the Clinch River. 6. Solway Gate was located on Highway 62 at the Clinch River. 7. Edgemoor Gate was located on the Edgemoor Road at the Clinch River.

Three other "gates" sometimes called "checking stations" were constructed in Oak Ridge and remain today. They are the three white reinforced concrete structures that can be seen when entering our city from the west and south. They are located on the Oak Ridge Turnpike to the west of the main part of the city toward K-25, on Scarboro Road near the junction with Bear Creek Road and on Bethel Valley Road near the intersection with Kerr Hollow Road. According to Bill Sargeant, the construction of the three white guard posts visible today was completed in late 1948 as was the lookout tower on Pine Ridge.

These structures were constructed prior to the 1949 opening of the gates when four of the original seven gates were opened and those routes opened to the public. The gates opened on March 19, 1949 were Solway, Edgemoor, Elza and Oliver Springs' gates. The three reinforced concrete structures are referred to as "checking stations" on a map on page 27 in *City Behind a Fence – Oak Ridge, Tennessee 1942-1946*. If anyone has

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specific construction dates for these structures, please let me know the date. I would like to further document their specific history. Ed Westcott photographed the construction of one of the checking stations in the accompanying photograph. I believe it is the checking station located on the Oak Ridge Turnpike.

Bill Sargeant confirmed the 1948 construction year and also noted that miles and miles of chain link fence was installed to isolate the three main government sites from the rest of the city. The earlier perimeter fence was barbed wire or regular fence wire. Bill further stated that Patrol Roads were built to follow the fence lines at that time.

In 1953, these three gates still standing today were taken out of service along with the three remaining of the seven original gates – Poplar Creek (then named Blair Road Gate), Gallaher and White Wing. At this time the public could travel all the main thoroughfares in Oak Ridge. Additionally, there were seven zones established to cover the roads other than the main thoroughfares. Fences and crossbars were placed on these side roads and signs placed at the entrances warning all unauthorized traffic to avoid these roads.

As a side note, there were two very unusual bridges at two of the original gates. At the Poplar Creek or Blair Road Gate there was a “Bailey Bridge” which was a military troop movement bridge designed to be installed on a river crossing from one side to the other enabling troops to quickly cross a body of water. It served to cross Poplar Creek. The second unusual bridge was at White Wing Gate and was a floating bridge. See photo accompanying this article for a most unusual bridge.

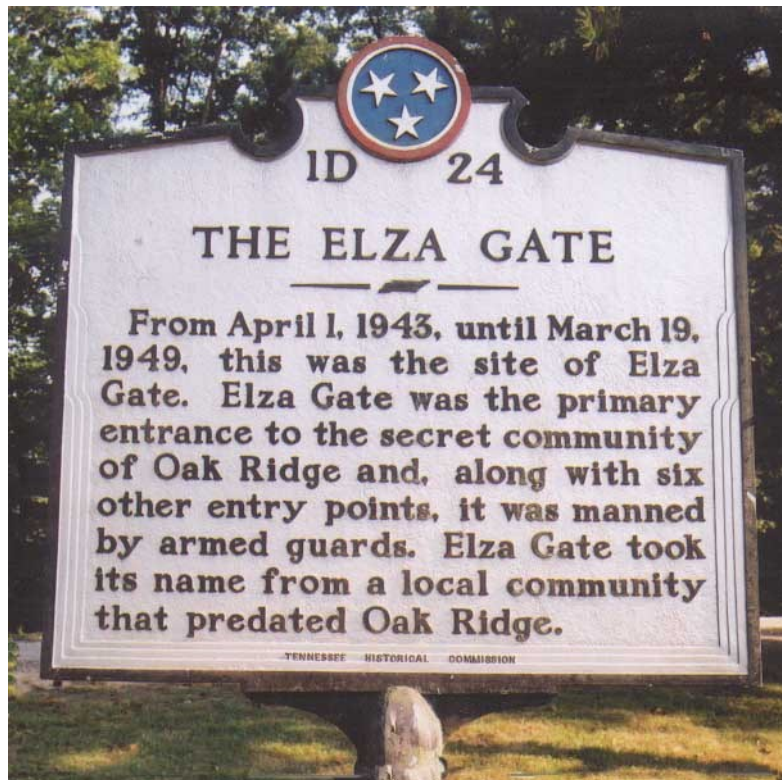
The purpose for the gates and the chain link fences were to isolate the three main government sites from the rest of the city. The gate located on the turnpike just west of the Oak Ridge Country Club served to isolate the city from K-25. The one located on Scarboro Road at the East Fork Poplar Creek gap of Pine Ridge did the same for Y-12. The one located on Bethel Valley Road near Scarboro was at the junction of Kerr Hollow Road and Bethel Valley Road and served to isolate the X-10 site or Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Its location is easily missed today as it is no longer on the main road except for the southwest bound traffic on Bethel Valley Road.

Two of the three guard posts (checking stations) have been recently renovated and now serve as meeting rooms – the one located on the Oak Ridge Turnpike and also the one on Scarboro Road. They contain some excellent examples of artifacts from the early days of Oak Ridge. The Ed Westcott photographs that are hung on the wall are historic scenes. The setting is great for meetings where people coming to Oak Ridge have not yet been exposed to our unique history as the “World War II Secret City.” Just to attend a meeting there gives one a quick history lesson on the Manhattan Project and early Oak Ridge. The guard post on Bethel Valley Road is not renovated, but did have the vines removed from it and was painted last year. We need to find a use for that structure as well to assure it is properly maintained.

While all physical evidence of the original seven gates are gone, one can still see photos of some of them and even maps locating them in the Oak Ridge Room of the Oak Ridge Public Library. These gates are but one of the many elements of Oak Ridge - the World War II Secret City - that survive only in memories and photographs. If you have information on them, you have treasures that should be shared and documented.

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Historic Marker for Elza Gate



Close up view of the Observation Tower atop Pine Ridge

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Construction of the "Checking Station" on the Oak Ridge Turnpike (Photo by Ed Westcott)



One of the original seven gates – do you know which one? (Photo by Ed Westcott)

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Floating bridge at White Wing Gate (Photo by Tom Goodpasture)