

Manhattan Project National Historic Park and Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on December 29, 2009)

A Draft Environmental Assessment just released by the National Park Service recommends that a Manhattan Project National Historic Park be located at Los Alamos, New Mexico...NOT Oak Ridge.

Yes, you read that correctly, the location where approximately 4% (less than 4 cents on the dollar) was spent for the Manhattan Project is being considered as THE location for the primary interpretation of the most significant event of the 20th Century. On the other hand, approximately 63% (over 62 cents on the dollar) was spent in Oak Ridge and a major portion of the Manhattan Project was located in Oak Ridge. Colonel Nichols even managed the ENTIRE Manhattan Project's daily operations from right here in Oak Ridge.

Seems to me Oak Ridge should be considered as a part of the National Park because of the major role of this East Tennessee location in the original Manhattan Project. Not to mention that Oak Ridge is the location where a large part of the nation travels within a few miles on I-75 and I-40 and near the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Los Alamos, by contrast, is isolated and well over an hour from I-40 in Albuquerque.

Something does not seem right here...agree? Oak Ridge is NOT being given proper and deserved consideration! Let me explain how this came to be.

The National Park Service has been conducting a study described on their web site as "...the Manhattan Project National Historical Park Study Act (Public Law 108-340), passed in 2004, which directed the secretary of the interior to 'conduct a study on the preservation and interpretation of historic sites of the Manhattan Project for potential inclusion in the National Park System.'" Here is the link to the site where the report of that study is located for public comment:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkId=482&projectId=14946&documentID=30977>

This *Historically Speaking* column will provide details of this study and will discuss the potential of locating a Manhattan Project National Historic Park in Oak Ridge. I believe you will find the prospect compelling and the economic development aspects of such a possibility intriguing. Now, we just need to work to demonstrate our collective and consensus desire for the opportunity of locating the headquarters of such a National Park in Oak Ridge as is recommended by the Department of Energy's Office of History and Heritage Resources in Appendix F on page 181.

The study report begins by providing the following background: "The Manhattan Project was an unprecedented government-directed top-secret program implemented in the United States during World War II to construct a nuclear weapon in advance of Nazi Germany, which had initiated atomic energy research in the 1930s. The period of significance for the Manhattan Project is 1942 through the end of 1946. A series of events in 1942 denote the project's initiation. Army Corps of Engineers Brigadier General Leslie Groves was selected to be military head of the project; then Groves selected Robert Oppenheimer as chief scientist for the project, and laboratory sites were selected to be located at Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Oak Ridge, Tennessee."

Note the absence of mention of the production sites of Oak Ridge's Y-12 Electromagnetic Plant and K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant and Hanford's reactors. Unfortunately this is but the first of many indicators that the impact of production sites on the success of the Manhattan Project failed to be adequately included in the study.

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The report continues, "Near the end of 1942, President Roosevelt gave the final authorization for the construction of the atomic bomb, and the first controlled nuclear chain reaction was achieved at the University of Chicago under the direction of Enrico Fermi. All of these events mark the beginning of the Manhattan Project in 1942. On January 1, 1947, the Manhattan Project was taken over by the Atomic Energy Commission, thus officially ending the Manhattan Project."

It is my firm belief that the "Most significant event of the 20th Century!" as recognized by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in their report of March, 2001, designating the eight Manhattan Project Signature Facilities as being "of extraordinary historical significance and deserve commemoration as national treasures," is deserving of National Historic Park status.

However, this study produced by the National Park Service is disappointing in that it demonstrates a lack of dedication to preserving for future generations the history of what may well be the single most significant accomplishment ever considering all the ramifications that have and will probably result from it. The Manhattan Project's full implications are still being defined by the research and development coming from the nuclear-related experiments and new innovations being implemented each day.

Even though the study finds the four study sites, Oak Ridge, Hanford, Los Alamos and Dayton, OH, all meet the established criteria, as stated in the study's Significance Findings, "The Manhattan Project story, as well as a number of historic resources, meet the criteria to be considered nationally significant. As important contributors to the Manhattan Project, the four study sites, taken together, meet all four of the national park system criteria for national significance, and three of the six national historic landmark criteria," the final analysis of the study recommended against forming a national park.

That conclusion was hard for me to comprehend until I learned that the National Park Service headquarters has directed its regional offices NOT to bring ANY recommendations for additional national parks. So, the first report ignored the significance and followed the direction of its headquarters staff.

That is, until political pressure caused the study team to recommend a Manhattan Project National Historic Park be located ONLY at Los Alamos, New Mexico. This turn of events evidently happened late in the study process. Actually, the study was completed and the recommendation known as "Alternative E" was evidently added as an attempt to respond to this pressure. Unfortunately, Oak Ridge and Hanford evidently lacked such influence.

It is sad to note that Oak Ridge, Hanford and Dayton were relegated to an "associated with" status as noted in the study's Alternative E: Manhattan Project Historical Park section, "Other Manhattan Project sites—resources and historic districts located in Hanford, Oak Ridge, and Dayton—also contain important Manhattan Project historic resources. While the preservation of certain resources at these sites is fully recommended, these sites would be considered associated with, but not operationally part of, the Los Alamos-based National Historical Park." Wow - that stings!

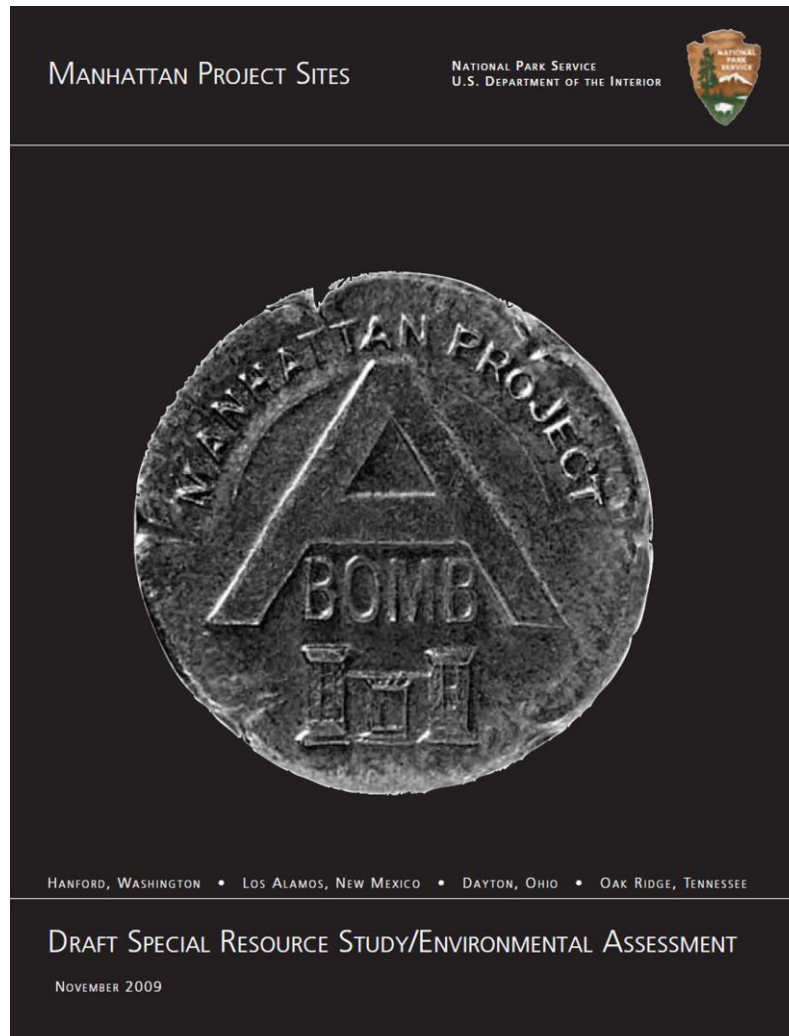
There is a public hearing scheduled for January 26, 2010, to be held at the Department of Energy Oak Ridge Operation's Information Center at 415 Oak Ridge Turnpike. A group of individuals have joined together to create a response to this study. The group is made up of representatives from Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, American Museum of Science and Energy Foundation, Oak Ridge Associated Universities, Y-12 National Security Complex, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Center and the City of Oak Ridge.

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In preparing the above mentioned response, it is the team's intent to focus on the larger picture of creating a Manhattan Project National Historic Park with National Park Service staff presence at Oak Ridge, Los Alamos and Hanford with the national park headquarters at Oak Ridge. The intent is to describe why this more inclusive approach is not only desirable, but essential for the significance of the Manhattan Project to be understood by future generations.

For more information, please contact Bill Wilcox, Oak Ridge City Historian at 483-4990, gbwilcox@aol.com or Ray Smith at 482-4224 or draysmith@comcast.net.



Cover for the recently published National Park Service's Special Resources Study concerning the possibility of creating a Manhattan Project National Historic Park