

**Jackson Square – Oak Ridge’s original “townsite”**  
(As published in *The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking* column on October 18, 2011)

On Monday, October 10, 2011, Oak Ridge City Council approved the proposed attempt to pursue a Tennessee Department of Transportation grant for improvements to Jackson Square. This icon of our history, the earliest and original commercial site, should be maintained and enhanced to become the showplace and centerpiece of our Heritage Tourism and should be promoted as THE “downtown” or better yet, “Townsite,” of Oak Ridge.

Oak Ridge has something that many cities would give much to have...a heritage. Not just any old heritage of when it was created and who settled there or what minor events might have happened there, we have the HUGE and SECRET Manhattan Project and more. Actually, we may well have the greatest heritage in the nation...maybe even the world!

What was done here (and I am not just referring to the Manhattan Project), literally changed the world. Think on that a bit and then wonder why we don't take more advantage of it? We are certainly NOT taking full advantage of our Manhattan Project, Cold War, War on Terrorism, technology advancement to the betterment of the world and other key elements of the Department of Energy's and National Nuclear Security Administration's presence here.

I am even more convinced than ever by the discussion at the October 10, 2011, City Council Meeting, that we may well be missing a significant potential for our city. It is NOT about spending a mere \$200K to get \$800K more, it is NOT about what process is used to bring an item before City Council, it is NOT about which project gets the most coverage in *The Oak Ridger*.

It **IS** ABOUT getting funds to renovate a deteriorating icon of our city's history...**HISTORIC JACKSON SQUARE!** And, yes, it **IS** about supporting our struggling retail merchants there. But it is far more than the success of a few merchants. Many who attended this council meeting came to support the entire city, not just Jackson Square and the merchants there.

We should be looking for any grant that would bring money to our city, in fact anytime you can get \$800K for a \$200K investment to maintain the closest thing we have to a downtown, we should go for it without hesitation. Forget the mall, there is evidently nothing we can do about it. We should take the transportation grant (if we can win it) and move ahead to more important and more costly issues.

I fear we may begin to see the history of neglect shown over the years to the Guest House/Alexander Inn begin to be repeated at the Oak Ridge Mall, but in a much larger magnitude. It is in private hands and not much can be done until those private owners choose to do so. See the result of such neglect at the Guest House. We are finally attempting to deal with that now and hope it is not too late to do so.

The Manhattan Project National Historical Park can be a boost to Oak Ridge's economy, IF WE KNOW HOW TO TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF IT! I applaud Mark Watson, our City Manager, for putting something out there, in the form of an interpretive center addition to the Oak Ridge Public Library, that can be discussed to help us gain citizen support and interaction for the national park. There will be a lot of work required for us to realize that dream...keep that in mind as we move forward over the next several months and even years.

I appreciate all members of City Council and encourage each of them in their dedication to public service. Please know that I am among their key supporters and am willing to help in any way possible.

My support for the Jackson Square grant application should be interpreted in a broader sense as I see this as a small portion of much larger efforts that need to be made and other grants that need to be applied for. I am convinced that the Main Street Program is something we can qualify for...but am told we tried and were told that was not the case.

Maybe I am just hardheaded, but I think we should try again. If ANY city can qualify for it, WE CAN TOO! Not having a “town square” should NOT prevent our being considered. Surely we are not going to give up so easily. Other cities are making good use of it.

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Certified Local Government is another potential that should be explored. Their web site has the following statement, "The Certified Local Government Program is a preservation partnership between local, state and national governments focused on promoting historic preservation at the grass roots level." That is us! Why aren't we certified as such and using that as a tool to bolster our abilities to qualify for additional grant money. Is there any advantage that we are missing? Some think not, I don't know! We should be clear on that and the citizens should understand why or why not!

The Preserve America community designation is a great one and the funds provided are exceptionally good for our preservation efforts, but we need to go after more such opportunities. I don't mean to complain, I am proud of this distinction. I just think we should be getting more of these type grants and using them to enhance our heritage tourism potential and reality.

Let's seriously go for Heritage Tourism as one of the primary vehicles for bringing funds to Oak Ridge. Many other cities have far less heritage and would certainly like to have our historic legacy of the Manhattan Project, Cold War, Medical Isotopes, astounding discoveries that have literally impacted the world. They do so much with so little and we do so little with so much!!! I am sad that we fail to capitalize on our heritage as much as I feel is possible.

I believe the Manhattan Project National Historical Park is soon to be presented as legislation to both the House of Representatives (by Congressman Doc Hastings of Washington) and the Senate (by Senator Bingaman of New Mexico). We need our elected officials to join Senator Bingaman and Congressman Hastings on the legislation for the park. I believe they will join the bills at the right time. I know their staffs are watching the drafts being written.

Here is what Bill Wilcox and I wrote about Jackson Square to be included in the "Historical Background" portion of the Tennessee Department of Transportation grant proposal:

"In January 1943 the inspired designer of Oak Ridge was asked by the Army Engineers to layout as attractive a city for 13,000 as wartime conditions would permit, and they laid it out on the side of Black Oak Ridge with comfortable Cements homes for the professional families and with a very functional, centrally located commercial and recreational center they named 'Townsite.' It was designed around a center of two long wings for stores, still standing today and connected by the covered arcade walk.

"Making up this center were the town's post office, the Center Theatre, a branch of a Knoxville bank, a men's store, drug store, super market, gift shop, shoe repair, and insurance offices built over a privately owned Café and bowling alley. Close by encircling it to the south was the big Cafeteria for the thousands of singles living in the dozens of dorms nearby, on the west the Town Hall, the Ridge Recreation Hall and Town Library, and the town's hotel - The Guest House; and to the north one of the towns two Army style Chapels, soon called the 'Chapel on the Hill.'

"Also up the hill to the north stood the Oak Ridge High School with its important Auditorium that was used for all town meetings and performances in the wartime city. Down Broadway Avenue to the east were many other stores - a fine jewelry store from Knoxville, a big Department Store and the Ridge Theatre and finally the Service Drug Store and soda fountain where the now world-famous Big Ed's Pizza stands.

"By December, 1943, the town had already grown to 18,000 and showed no sign of leveling off. Ultimately Oak Ridge would grow to 75,000 residents and become the fifth largest city in Tennessee. But the Manhattan Project, by orders of the President, was to be kept secret, so efforts were made to keep outsiders from knowing how fast the city was growing, hence the insistence on calling this a town despite its size. Nor were there any numbered streets like so many cities have.

"The name Townsite was used until February 1945 when it was changed as part of a wholesale change of some 40 dormitories' sequential numbers to the names of United States cities. Men's dorm M-6 became Cambridge Hall. Fifty more dorms were to be added and their mailing addresses would give away the 'town's' exploding growth. The Oak Ridge Journal duly reported all the name changes and

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added that the Townsite was now to be called Jackson Square; the reporter guessed it was named for the famous square in New Orleans.

“What today remains, much as it has been for the past 68 years, is affectionately and passionately held dear as Historic Jackson Square. Proudly standing firm amid changes around it from the relocation of the Oak Ridge High School and subsequent demolition of the building, the demolition of all 20 nearby dormitories, the Administration Building - known as ‘The Castle’ being replaced by the Federal Office Building.

“The 10-story high rise Jackson Plaza with its commanding view and its huge black parking lot which sadly took the place of the beautiful green lawn (the only one in wartime Oak Ridge) of the Women’s Dorm Quadrangle across from the cafeteria. The old Center Theatre has evolved happily into the ever popular Oak Ridge Playhouse, and the so popular wartime soda fountain of Service Drug was replaced by the world-famous Big Ed’s Pizza in the 1970s.

“Throughout the wartime and ever since the community has seen continuing changes in merchants and businesses, but none have changed the ambiance and beloved feel of Oak Ridge’s Historic Jackson Square. Nearby is the stately Chapel on the Hill, unchanged in its 1943 appearance, still functioning as home to a congregation.

“Nearby too, the Guest House/Alexander Inn still stands but vacant and neglected for which plans are being developed to restore it to its former regal appearance. All contribute to the overall historic nature of Historic Jackson Square, this most significant historical area within Oak Ridge’s larger Historic District.

“A walking trail and historic markers are planned for the near future.

Jackson Square is our “Townsite” and we should embrace that fact in a strong fashion. It should be promoted as among the nation’s first planned shopping centers and should be recognized as blazing a trail that others expanded upon. Let us be proud of our “Townsite,” **Historic Jackson Square!**

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Broad view of Jackson Square including Oak Ridge's first High School in the foreground and "The Castle" in the background