

Guest House/Alexander Inn - a look at the history, part 1

(as published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 1, 2011)

This series of *Historically Speaking* will bring you some insights into the history of the Guest House/Alexander Inn that will help put perspective on the decisions needed regarding one Oak Ridge's most historic structures. The text will be taken from a presentation made by Oak Ridge City Historian, Bill Wilcox.

Why Save the Secret City's Historic Guest House? Why Not Just Tear that Eyesore Down?

By: William J. Wilcox Jr., Oak Ridge City Historian, for the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, presented on July 14, 2011

Folks around Oak Ridge are once again asking why bother saving this barely standing, 68 year old relic of Oak Ridge's founding years? I'd like to give you four reasons and then some rationale behind them.

First, Because of its historical value in showing and telling what a key building of the Secret City looked like, a building that played a big part in our City's proud and major role in bringing the so longed-for peace to the world after six long years of the terrible WWII. This historic Guest House is one of just a handful of remaining relics of our founding years whose exterior form and appearance has not been altered.

Our goal is not to save the whole structure, but rather to save its exterior character and charm which was unique to our Secret City's hotel with its grand front porch and façade, and not the interior except for its historic Lobby and maybe a restored wartime guest room or two as showplaces.

Second, because of the history the people made who came to stay there through its wartime years and in its post-war years as the Alexander Inn. The hotel's clientele was so unusual. During the war the nation's leading scientists, engineers, the Corporate managers running the atomic plants here managers, the Army Engineer overseers and procurement contractors, as well as to nation's top political leaders who shaped the nation's nuclear policies all came here to help solve the incredibly difficult problems of the never before attempted U-235 and Plutonium production technologies.

Last Monday Ray Smith, Jim Campbell, and I visited the National Archives Center in Atlanta, to look at the hundreds of banker boxes full of early Oak Ridge records. One file that caught my eye was the Army's security office's listing of the people who they authorized to visit in September 1943, just as the construction of the Graphite Reactor was being finished, and some buildings at Y-12, and K-25 was just being sited.

Their 396 names during September include a who's who of DuPont and the Met Lab building X-10 (Arthur Compton, Crawford Greenwalt, Glenn Seaborg, Al Weinberg, Henry Smyth (Princeton) , Eastman at Y-12, and Carbide at K-25. What other city our size has a hotel that night after night hosted such history makers. What conversations those walls and rockers on the front porch heard.

Third, just last week the news was released of one more major milestone in establishing a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. This Park will include Oak Ridge, and the Historic Guest House/Alexander Inn needs to be the primary place for the National Park visitors to Oak Ridge to come to see the iconic public building of Oak Ridge's wartime town center, "Townsite" and Jackson Square.

Fourth. And of great importance to the City and its future citizens, with the old building "stabilized" according to the City's code requirements and with the exterior restored so that it is attractive again, not an eyesore, then the interior should appeal to developers and offer a variety of end-uses that can support and be a vital addition to a rejuvenated Townsite neighborhood area..

Now for some of the details, first, save it because it's a rare original: One of my treasured documents of the war years is a much worn paperback dated December 31, 1946, the very last day of the Army Engineers tenure as builders and managers of our Secret Cities.

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This gem of a resource tells me the Army built 7,356 buildings here in three categories: housing, commercial, and public. The 7,356 does not include trailers or hutments. When I am asked to take someone on a tour who wants to see some original buildings of wartime Oak Ridge which have the same appearance they did then, my list to choose from has now dwindled down to a little over a dozen.

I'm including only those with minimal exterior changes like the Townsite Apartment Houses that do have new windows, but not buildings where they have been changed in shape or complete exterior appearance trims. That leaves out all that remain of the original 3,050 Cemestos (Alphabet) houses, since I know of none which still has its wartime casement windows and its thick green, eave-less roof. There are a still a dozen or more Cemestos here and there that still have their Cemestos uncovered. But I don't know of any of the original 3,373 flattops except for AMSE's which still have a "flat top". Please let me know of any original looking Cemestos or flattops you know of.

Think of all the buildings of the Secret City that are "Gone with the Wind": the seven wing Castle which administered the nation-wide Manhattan Project", the original ORHS at Jackson Square, the 90 "H" and "S" type dormitories for 13,000 singles all over town (some part wings still stand), the so essential Army cafeterias in East and in West Village, on Louisiana and on Central Avenues; the Elm Grove and Cedar Hill Schools, the Army Hospital, and on and on. We need a renovated Historic Guest House exterior with its original simple "green" environs to show citizens and visitors what one of the major buildings the Secret City looked like.

Those fine folks who have come to town after the 1960's do not see the Secret City at all, but a transformed city created by the post war civilian government agency, the US Atomic Energy Commission, who built five brand new neighborhoods, and thankfully wiped out some 30,000 temporary living spaces.

One now has to look closely to see real remnants of the Secret City. The Guest House/Alexander is one of a handful of those remaining which even in its deplorable condition today still has the characteristic look of our original wartime hotel about it. It can, indeed, be rescued and its exterior and its environs restored to being an attractive and recognizable icon and key public building of early wartime Oak Ridge's center, the Townsite.

Second, We need to save it for its great historical value. As Mary Oster of Clinton said so well in her Letter to the Editor in a recent Thursday's Oak Ridger writing about the Guest House/Alexander:

"Through her doors walked some of the greatest minds of the 20th century, men who were instrumental in bringing about an end to a terrible world war... Is this to be forgotten?", she continues, "If so this town of Oak Ridge will also be forgotten, faded into the mist of a thousand small American towns with no particular distinction."

A consultant on urban issues, Ed McMahon, Blount County Tourism Summit, 2003, made the same point this way,

"The image of a community is fundamentally important to its economic well being, The more a community looks like every other, the less reason for visitors to come. The more a community preserves its uniqueness, the more reason to come."

Mary ends with this call,

"Wake up Oak Ridge and save this venerable symbol of why you came to exist because that is a history of which sons and daughters should be proud."

Grand idea – Why don't you write a short letter of how you feel to one of the paper's Editors? It will help get the word out.

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When the Army Engineers decided on this area of East Tennessee as a location of their uranium enriching plants and plutonium plant, they knew they needed a hotel for this town to accommodate the many people who would be coming in to consult, to monitor progress, to inspect, and to oversee the awesome science and technology of its four plant facilities.

The Guest House was built in six months starting in the spring of 1943, and was finished about the end of July 1943. The end of the war fully furnished price was \$202,266 which sounds puny, but that's equal in today's money to \$2.4 million.

The Guest House name was chosen like Clinton Engineer Works (the entire area-CEW) and Townsite to arouse no curiosity and to outsiders, keep the town looking small. Quite naturally, our Hotel was scheduled to be one of the first buildings in town to be finished in August, 1943.

Next we will see Bill look at some of the many important guests who stayed at the Guest House.

To see the construction of the area of Oak Ridge where the Guest House is located on historic film footage, go to <http://www.youtube.com/user/y12nsc>



A very early image of the newly constructed Guest House