

The HISTORIC Guest House/Alexander Inn – why save it? – part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on August 27, 2012)

As you may have heard, there is the possibility of a grant from the Department of Energy in the amount of \$500,000 designated to be given the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance to purchase and stabilize the historic Guest House/Alexander Inn structure. This grant results from the Memorandum of Agreement regarding the preservation of the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant history.

This type of substitution is an acceptable practice when historic preservation efforts are limited at one site and a need to preserve something related at another site exists. To help understand why this is so important to Oak Ridge, Bill Wilcox, official Oak Ridge City Historian provides some additional details that may help.

Bill said, “[The Guest House/Alexander Inn] was added as one part of the mitigation for demolishing the wartime [K-25] building - that relic [Guest House] was a vital part of our WWII Townsite and has meant so much in the life of our City in the years since. The grant will be made to the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance (ETPA), a relatively new regional organization that was founded by Knox Heritage – a group with outstanding success in historic preservation like the Bijou and Tennessee Theaters among many, many others.

“The grant will make possible the first two steps in the saving the historic building – purchase from private owners and stabilization to comply with our City's Building Codes. ETPA, after taking these first steps, then hopes to find a developer who will turn the property into a self-supporting business venture, saving the exterior appearance – especially its façade.

“Folks around Oak Ridge have been asking why bother saving this barely standing eyesore, this 68 year old relic of Oak Ridge's founding years? Here are 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 during our Secret City years - 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 during its wartime years and in its post-war years as the Alexander Inn. The hotel's clientele was most unusual. During the war the nation's leading scientists, engineers, the top 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.

“In the fall of 2011 Ray Smith, Jim Campbell, and I visited the National Archives Center in Atlanta, to look at the hundreds of file 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 were just being sited.

“Their 396 names for that very first September include a who's who of: DuPont and the Univ. of Chicago's 'Met Lab' who were building X-10's Graphite Reactor (Nobel Laureate Arthur H. Compton, DuPont's Crawford Greenewalt, Univ. of Cal's Glenn Seaborg, Met Labs' Al Weinberg, Princeton's Henry D. Smyth; and many Eastman and TEC of Y-12, and Union Carbide leaders of K-25.

“What other city our size has a hotel that night after night hosted such history makers? What conversations those walls and wooden rocking chairs on the long front porch heard.

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"Third, just last month the news was released of one more major milestone in establishing a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. That milestone was the drafting of the legislation to create the park coming from the Congressional Staffs of the relevant committees both in the House and in the Senate.

"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 building will appeal to developers and can offer an end use that can be a vital addition to a rejuvenated Townsite/Jackson Square neighborhood area.. Now for some 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 Dec. 31, 1946, the very last day of the Army Engineers tenure as builders and managers of our Secret Cities. This gem of a resource tells me the Army built 7,356 buildings here in three categories: housing, commercial, and public. 7,356, not including 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 very close to the same appearance they did then, The choices have now dwindled down to a little more than several dozens. I'm including 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 trim.

"That leaves out all that remain of the original 3,050 Cemestros (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 Cemestros here and there that still have their Cemestros uncovered. And I don't know of any of the original 3,373 flattops - except for the one at AMSE - which still have a 'flat top.'

"Think of all the buildings of the Secret City that are 'Gone with the Wind' -- the seven wing 'Castle' (where the Federal building now stands) which administered the Manhattan Project all across the Nation and in Canada, the original ORHS at Jackson Square, the 90 'H' and 'S' type dormitories for 13,000 singles that were all over town (three part wings still stand), the so essential Army cafeterias in East and in West Village and 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 who have come to town after the 1960s do not see the Secret City at all, but a transformed city created by the post war civilian government agency, the USAEC, 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 Inn 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 a Letter to the Editor of the 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?, 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.'

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"A consultant on urban issues, Ed McMahon, at the Blount County Tourism Summit in 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 one, the less reason for visitors to come... The more a community preserves its uniqueness, the more reason visitors have to come.'

"Mary ended 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.'

"When the Army Engineers decided on this area of East Tennessee as a location of their uranium enriching plants and plutonium pilot plant, they knew they would have to have 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, as well as folks coming to work that needed a place to stay until they could get settled down.

"The Guest House was built in six months starting in the spring of 1943, and was finished about the end of July 1943. The fully furnished cost to the Army was \$202,266 which sounds puny, but that's equal in today's money to \$2.5 million.

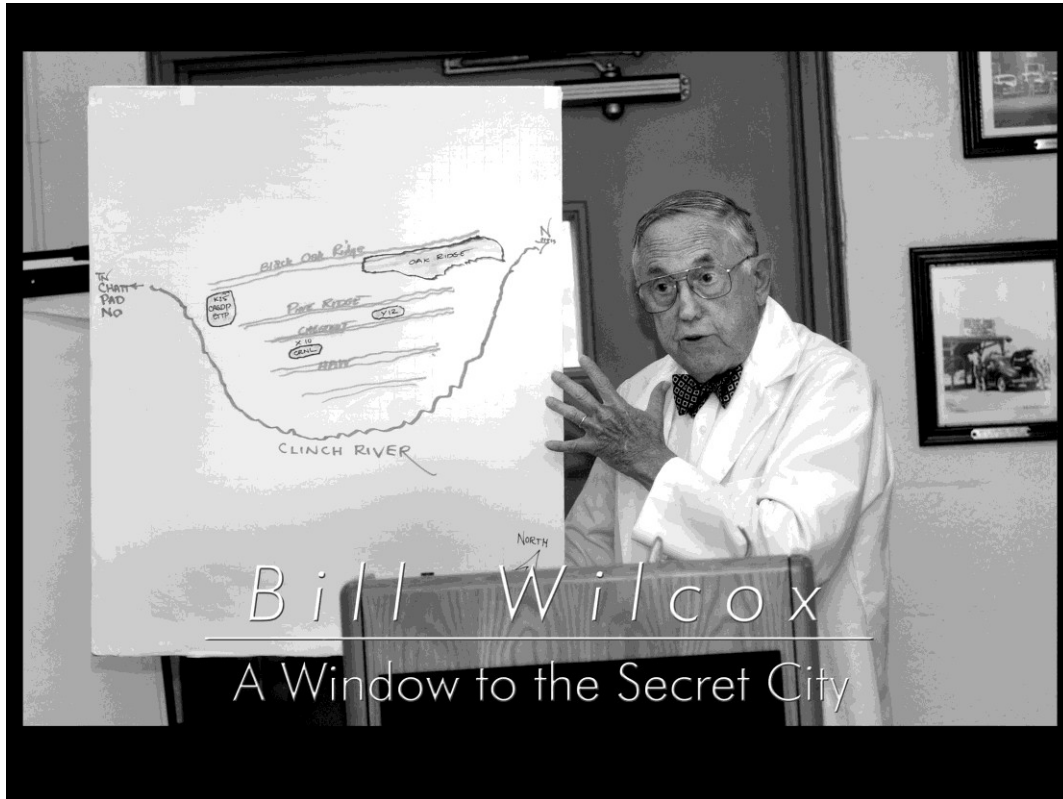
"The Guest House name was chosen like 'Townsite' and 'Clinton Engineer Works' (our entire 90 square mile area) so as to define a place yet to arouse as little curiosity and to keep the fast growing city looking rural and small to outsiders. Quite naturally, the Hotel was scheduled to be one of the first buildings in town to be finished in August, 1943, and this is how it looked in its WWII days.

We will continue Bill's commentary on the Guest House/Alexander Inn next week.



This is how the Guest House looked in its World War II days

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Bill Wilcox, Oak Ridge City Historian – photo and artwork by Lynn Freeny



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