

Alexander Guest House official opening is October 26, 2015!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on October 19, 2015)

Rick Dover is excited to announce that the Alexander Guest House plans to hold its official opening on Monday, October 26, 2015. What a great day that will be! Oak Ridgers can all be proud of the grand efforts begun by the Tennessee State Historic Preservation Officer, Patrick McIntyre who advised the Department of Energy's Environmental Management that they could provide a grant of \$500,000 to the East Tennessee Preservation Alliance to purchase and stabilize the failing Alexander Inn.

This was allowable because the DOE could not preserve the failed facilities at the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant that they had hoped to be able to preserve. It is an alternative used when extenuating circumstances prohibit historic preservation in one place but can assist preservation in a substitute area.

Dover Development Corporation then took on the task for which Rick Dover had looked at a number of times and even attempted to "make the numbers" work as he says, but could not. Yet he continued to hold out hope for years, hope of eventually being able to restore the historic old Guest House.

The following brief history of the stately old Guest House comes from an earlier *Historically Speaking* column where Bill Wilcox contributed to a series of articles hoping to influence the saving of the aging structure at the time. I think the historic information is even more appropriate now and I am sure Bill would be so proud of the stately senior living center that the Alexander Guest House is becoming!

Bill said, "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 and Townsite to arouse no curiosity and to outsiders, keep the town looking small. Many notable scientists and high ranking officials stayed at the Guest House as well as many people who were soon to be living in Oak Ridge but did not have housing assignments for several days after arriving. Many of the scientists did not use their names but chose alias names.

"For example, Arthur H. Compton was Mr. Holly, Enrico Fermi was Mr. Farmer. Later when Niels Bohr, the world famous Danish physicist came to see Oak Ridge he was introduced as Professor Baker, Nobel Prize winner Ernest O. Lawrence whose group created the Calutrons for the Y-12 process was Mr. Lawson, and so on.

"Nobel Laureates and Laureates-to-be who came to help with the Project includes: Niels Bohr, Arthur Compton, Enrico Fermi, Ernest Lawrence, Eugene Wigner, Glenn Seaborg, and Harold Urey. Some came many times. Lawrence finally got an apartment, and the Compton's finally rented a house right across Olney Lane from Colonel Kenneth. D. Nichols.

"But in addition to these, many other first-rank scientists came to consult at the plants, like J. Robert Oppenheimer, Director of Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, whose portrait by Ed Westcott, loftily holding his cigarette, is much admired and often reproduced. The portrait was taken in our Guest House Lobby just to the right of the fireplace.

"Many of Lawrence's Berkeley team from the Radiation Laboratory came to help get Y-12 underway, as did those from Compton's Metallurgical Laboratory in Chicago who were helping the Graphite Reactor at X-10 get built and into production. Similarly, top engineers and corporate chiefs of Carbide came, helping K-25 get built.

"These included John Dunning's Columbia University team and the Kellex team under Dobie Keith and Al Baker and the Carbide team under George Felbeck. Philip Abelson, the "father" of the liquid thermal diffusion plant at S-50 that utilized technology he had developed for the U. S. Navy, came often to help get that desperate effort moving.

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"And then in addition to the noted scientists we all like to brag about hosting, many top corporate officials of Y-12's Tennessee Eastman Company, K-25's Carbide, and X-10's DuPont came to visit and inspect their operations and help make key operational and contractual decisions. President Roosevelt never planned to come, but his Secretary of War Henry Stimson, the man directly responsible for the Manhattan Project all through the war did on April 11, 1945.

"Our Oak Ridge top Army boss, Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols in his memoir tells that the aging (to me a 77 year youngster), Henry Stimson arrived with his military aide and General Groves in time 'for lunch at the Guest House where they were to spend the night.' Stimson was awed by the scientific and technical achievements he saw here and was very eager to report to the President when he got back to Washington on the 12th, only to learn that Roosevelt had died that very day. It was two weeks later that he first briefed then President Truman on the Manhattan Project.

"Even more numerous categories of guests each week were the scores of Army Engineer Colonels, Majors, Captains, and Lieutenants who came periodically to report in at the "Castle on the Hill" from the dozens of far-flung Manhattan Project offices all over the U.S. and even one in Canada.

"Whether the guests were in Who's Who or not, all guests had to pay the same stiff wartime rates for rooms: The rate for a single room was \$2.00 per night with a connecting bath, \$1.50 per night for a single room with the community bath down the hall.

That concludes Bill's history. My, wasn't it good to read Bill's excellent history! I still miss him greatly.

Coming back to the present, I am proud of what Rick Dover has done with the Alexander Guest House! Jody Daugherty and her team have been busy making preparations for the operation of the senior living center. They have been working as a team with several support groups who have worked on interior decorations.

The walls are filled with many Ed Westcott images. I am proud to have been asked to assist with providing those images as well as the captions. The history wall is most unusual in that the images are printed on materials that add intrigue and interest to Ed's original images. I am amazed when I see the beautiful images Ed created being admired by the younger generation. Their vision is fresh and their artistic impressions are new but Ed's eye for photography never fails to impress regardless of the display method.

One of my favorite images is the photograph Ed made of Robert Oppenheimer sitting near the fireplace in the main lobby. A close look at that image shows the end of the mantle just above Oppenheimer's right shoulder. I have suggested that a small image of that scene of Oppenheimer be placed at the side of the mantle with a note about Ed's original photograph identifying who it is and when it was taken.

The historical marker is being moved from the west side of the building to the east side as Rick desires it to be in a more prominent location. That, to me, is an indicator of his attention to detail and his desire to assure the authenticity of the historic building is retained. I have mentioned before that he actually visited the offices of Skidmore, Owens and Merrill and they provided him a copy of the original drawings of the building when it was constructed in 1943.

The future of the once neglected and deteriorated "Alexander Inn" is being reborn in exterior appearance as the original Guest House with many original features retained throughout the modern facility. The Alexander Guest House is now closer to being a luxury hotel than a utilitarian place to stay in a secret city carved out of Appalachia.

Many of the residents will have fond memories of the Guest House or the Alexander Inn. Don't you know it will be a pleasure for them to live there! I understand one man and his wife are going to live in an apartment located on the very spot where they spent their honeymoon in a room in the Guest House.

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The main lobby will be offered as a tour “spoke” on the Manhattan Project National Historical Park’s “hub and spoke” concept. The historic old structure will once again reverberate with the sounds of life, fun and joyous chatter as the many gathering places designed into the center fill with residents and guests.

Thanks to the Department of Energy, Rick Dover and Dover Development, East Tennessee Preservation Alliance and to the long years that members of the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association called attention to the deterioration and neglect, we now have a proud historic icon in our midst that will stand for generations to come! The Historic Alexander Guest House is a showplace, yet it is a comfortable home for many seniors.

You have done it, Rick! Restored the simple yet elegant Guest House and created a luxurious senior living center that is second to none! We are proud and say a heartfelt “Thank You!”



Alexander Guest House is ready for tenants!

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The new front door graces the entrance and welcomes guests



Ed Westcott images abound in the halls – here Ed poses with an early photo of him and his camera