

Manhattan Project National Historical Park – an update

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on February 1, 2016)

To say the last few months have been amazing is a huge understatement. I can still remember clearly a time when I could mention “national park” and people would look at me like, “Yeah, in your dreams!” Well, now I get an entirely different response.

The most recent Friends of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory lunch meeting filled the room and my presentation updating the status of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park was filled with questions from the audience. I was pleased to have the opportunity to speak and pleased to be told that this might have been their largest audience ever! Such is the interest in OUR National Park!

Let's take a brief look at some of the key events of the last few weeks.

The Department of Energy and the Department of Interior completed the Memorandum of Agreement ahead of schedule.

Twenty scholars were asked to help identify the major themes to be used to interpret the Manhattan Project National Historical Park and I was able to spend two days in Washington, DC, working with an amazing team that included Japanese representatives of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, several authors, and other well-known scholars.

The Signing Ceremony that established the Park was held in Washington, DC, on November 10, 2015. Press coverage was huge and the ceremony was most impressive. Glad I was able to attend along with several others from Oak Ridge.

The Signing Celebration in Oak Ridge was held on November 12, 2015. It included taking 10 buses of the public on enhanced access tours of Y-12's Buildings 9731 and 9204-3. Touring these buildings is an experience that must of necessity remain limited access for some time as operations and security requirements prevent routine access by the public. As access is expected to remain restricted for some time into the future, online virtual tours of these buildings are planned. The Graphite Reactor at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory was also included in the tours.

Several other special and highly successful activities were held as a part of the Signing Celebration in Oak Ridge such as the fully attended celebration in the Oak Ridge High School Auditorium featuring the Oak Ridge High School Chorus and remarks by Mayor Gooch and others. Then there was the gathering in Jackson Square to remake the famous Ed Westcott “War Ends” image with a “Park Opens” one. What a great day of celebration of the establishment of OUR national historical park!

Niki Nicholas, who is the superintendent of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area and Obed Wild and Scenic River, has been given the responsibility for the Manhattan Project National Historical Park – Oak Ridge. She immediately placed a Park Ranger at the Contact/Visitor Center located in the American Museum of Science and Energy main entrance. That ranger is there only on Saturday's at present.

Niki also advertised the job opening to fill the position on a daily basis. She plans to have that done by March, 2016. When we discussed this, she indicated she had received numerous applications indicating substantial interest in the position. I learned on January 26, 2016, at the Volunteer Orientation that a person has been hired and is expected to start working five days per week by the middle of February.

Additionally, a Junior Park Ranger program was initiated on Saturday, January 16, 2016. It was my pleasure to help create the Answer Key to the booklet for this neat program for youngsters (and others as well).

The January 2016 Newsletter states: “The Manhattan Project Junior Ranger Program starts on Martin Luther King weekend. The Manhattan Project's Oak Ridge site has its own Junior Ranger Booklet which debuts Saturday, January 16. Children who finish the booklet earn a badge. Bring the kids by to AMSE or

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go to <http://www.nps.gov/mapr/learn/kidsyouth/beajuniorranger.htm> to download your copy at home.”

Wow, now what about that! I was doubly excited when I was asked to review the booklet. It is well prepared and I think will be well received. Get copies for your children or grandchildren now!

Natasha Klug has often been staffing the Contact/Visitor Center desk at AMSE. She sent an email asking my help to identify destinations in Oak Ridge that she could include in Park Ranger guided tours. I sent her a long list of things like the Birth of the City monuments in front of the Municipal Building, the Secret City Commemorative Walk, The Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell and many more to include Jackson Square, The Alexander Guest House, Chapel on the Hill and the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge.

It is good to see such personal interest by the Park Rangers and to see them be so supportive of Niki's additional responsibility for the Oak Ridge park site.

The American Museum of Science and Energy Foundation has established a Friends of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park Fund to serve to provide some of the identified needs of the newly forming park. <http://amsefoundation.org/friends-of-manhattan-project-national-historical-park-fund/>

The kinds of things that are being considered are printing an Oak Ridge park site newspaper, printing the Junior Ranger Program booklets, creating an exhibit at the McGee Tyson airport and several more. Check out the above link to the web site for more details.

The stamp for the Park Service Park Passports can be obtained at the desk in AMSE. They have arranged for one of the AMSE staff to be approved to stamp passports when a Park Ranger is not there. It is a three-part stamp with one third being Oak Ridge and Hanford and Los Alamos each having a third of the stamp as well. So, to get them all, one must visit all three sites.

Newsletters have been published for December 2015 and January 2016. They can be seen at: www.manhattanprojectnationalhistoricalparkoakridge.com.

Niki Nicholas briefed the Oak Ridge City Council on Tuesday, January 19, 2016, where she described the actions taken since November 14, 2015, when the first Park Ranger was stationed at the contact/visitor center located in the American Museum of Science and Energy. She also outlined actions being taken now and those immediate activities planned for the next few months.

On Tuesday, January 26, 2016, a Volunteer Orientation was held from 10AM – 12PM at the Midtown Community Center where Park Service staff answered questions to let interested individuals know what volunteer opportunities exist and when they can begin to help. Over 120 people attended and packed the Wildcat Den to standing room only.

Niki and her staff did a superb job of addressing all questions from the crowd and letting them know precisely where the volunteer needs exist. You could tell this is not the first time they have created a volunteer force to assist with park activities. It is good to see professionals at work!

On Monday, February 1, 2016, at the Oak Ridge High School Cafeteria, a public input session is planned at 5:30 PM. PLEASE PLAN TO ATTEND! The input will be used to supplement the main themes from the recently published Scholars' Forum Report also available at: www.manhattanprojectnationalhistoricalparkoakridge.com

The Park Service will also conduct a Foundations Workshop in conjunction with the public input session on February 1 – 3, 2016. This session will be the first of similar ones being held at the three sites. Oak Ridge is scheduled first and the other two sites follow over the next few days.

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At the end of those field sessions, the Park Service staff will gather in Colorado at the Park Planning headquarters and compile the information gained from the site visits. A report will be published soon after the final session.

This document will form the main elements to be the primary focus areas for interpretation of the park. It will be important for the sites to then look closely and see what specific needs will be required to enable the interpretation. I will make sure you readers are aware of the report when it is published.

Finally the DOE Public Tour that runs from March – November each year will continue to be a main element of access for the public. This popular tour that leaves from AMSE will soon be available for registration online at www.amse.org.

So, exciting things are surely happening with the Manhattan Project National Historical Park in Oak Ridge. I am sure the other two sites are also moving out with implementation strategies, but I am most proud of what we are accomplishing here in Oak Ridge!

One more note, the official abbreviation for the Manhattan Project National Historical Park is MAPR. While the specific name (always include the word “Historical”) is important for clarity, the official abbreviation is important to learn as well. Did you know the official Park Service abbreviation for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is GRSM?



Niki Nicholas providing an update on the status of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park to the Oak Ridge City Council (Photo by Russ Langley)

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Over 120 people attended the Manhattan Project National Historical Park – Oak Ridge Volunteer Orientation on Tuesday, 1/26/16