

The Alexander Guest House may be the most historically significant building in Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 19, 2018)

This Historically Speaking column comes from Mike Stallo, President, Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association. He focuses on the 75th anniversary of the opening of the Guest House/Alexander Inn and now the Alexander Guest House.

Oak Ridge is celebrating its 75th birthday this year. This seems very young compared to most Tennessee towns, and although lots of changes have taken place- the legacy of the Manhattan Project is still evident throughout much of the landscape. Especially the streets and houses in the east end of the city can still quickly take one back in time.

Many of the structures built during World War II are still standing. A number of the original buildings at the Y-12 site remain, as well as some of the wartime buildings at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, including the building that houses the X-10 Graphite reactor, the first industrial size nuclear reactor in the world.

In this article, I would like to highlight a few of the structures that are in town as opposed to the ones at the plant sites. These historic structures are included in the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association's annual recognition of historic structures.

Though many people like to say that Oak Ridge was built in a hurry as a "temporary town", there are still more than four thousand houses, duplexes, and apartments that remain from the wartime era. These structures were built quickly by the Army Corps of Engineers, but remain remarkably sturdy and well-suited for continued use in the modern era.

In addition to the large number of residential properties there are a few other wartime buildings around the main parts of town, including the Red Cross building on the Turnpike near the corner of Tyler road. This building is vacant now but remains sound and ready for the next tenant.

Another very nice building is the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration building on Illinois Avenue near The Outback Steakhouse. NOAA is an air research laboratory. This lab studies tornados and how they are formed as well as air quality from pollutants such as mercury and other toxins that affect air quality. The building originally served as a field hospital for the Stone & Webster Construction Company in the 1940's while they were building the Y-12 Plant. It was later the Health Department for many years.

Some of the buildings still serve a similar purpose to what they did during the war, while others have been given new life. While quickly constructed, the structures remain sound as long as the roofs are maintained.

The Jackson Square area was the original "Townsite" and was the first commercial area constructed. 75 years later, the overall look remains similar to the original. Pinnacle Bank currently sits in the same footprint where the first bank in Oak Ridge, the Hamilton Bank was located. The first church The Chapel on the Hill still sits proudly on the hill and still serves a congregation just as it did during war time when several different faiths shared the space.

One of the most prominent buildings from the World War II era is the Alexander Guest House, which was first simply called the Guest House and later the Alexander Inn.

August 5, 2018 was the 75th anniversary for the opening of the Guest House. The Alexander Guest House may well be the most historically significant building in our city.

The Guest House/Alexander Inn had at least 11 Nobel prize recipients stay there during wartime and many more after the war. Throughout its long tenure as a hotel many great scientists, military leaders, politicians, and even a future President and First Lady stayed there.

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It was granted status as a National Historic Landmark in 1993. Though it sadly began to slip into an embarrassing state of disrepair in the early 1990's, in 2013 the building was purchased by a nonprofit using a grant from the Department of Energy and then passed to a private investor - Rick Dover of Dover Development. Rick invested \$8,000,000 and converted to the Alexander Guest House, a phenomenal assisted living facility.

The new owners have taken great pains to restore (even going to the Skidmore, Owens and Merrill offices in Chicago to get the original drawings - Ray) and maintain this wartime structure beautifully. Visitors are welcome to tour the lobby and common areas.

While in the lobby you can see the original mantle where the great Manhattan Project photographer Ed Westcott took the iconic picture of scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer as he sat near the fireplace. A framed print of that photograph sits prominently on the corner of the mantle that is shown in the Westcott image.

So, if you get a chance it can be inspiring to sit on the porch of the Alexander Guest House and reflect about the fact that you are sitting where General Leslie R. Groves stood many times during the war. You can also sit where the man that ran the town for the military, Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols, sat in a rocking chair.

In 1943 when the Guest House was a brand-new building, the great scientists Enrico Fermi, Arthur Holly Compton, Ernest Lawrence, Niels Bohr Eugene Wigner, Glenn Seaborg, and Harold Urey - all Nobel Laureates - spent the night there. (Rather than use their names, they signed in under assumed names. Fermi was "Mr. Farmer," Compton was "Mr. Holly," Bohr was "Professor Brown," and Lawrence was "Mr. Lawson." – Ray)

Secretary of War Henry Stimson visited Oak Ridge on April 11, 1945, and while staying in the Guest House, the Tennessee Eastman Company managers of the Y-12 electromagnetic separation plant briefed him at the hotel on the operations at Y-12. He then drove by via Scarboro Road but did not go inside Y-12.

Stimson did, however, go inside the massive K-25 gaseous diffusion building. He was advanced in years and to keep him from having to walk so far, a ramp was installed to allow his driver to actually take him inside the building while in the car.

(Stimson later wrote, "I returned from my trip to Tennessee cheered up and braced up by the change of work and scene. I was there confronted with the largest and most extraordinary scientific experiment in history and was the first outsider to pierce the secrecy of its barricades and to have explained to me the tremendous development which has been going on not only in scientific experiment but in the creation of an orderly and well governed city, in size the fifth largest in the State of Tennessee. General Groves who went with me is the man who has done the job and a marvelous job it is. It has this unique peculiarity: that, although every prophesy thus far has been fulfilled by the development and we can see that success is 99% assured, yet only by the first actual war trial of the weapon can the actual certainty be fixed." – Ray)

Later, after the war, Later, after the war, dignitaries continued to stay there. Two-time Nobel Winner Linus Pauling visited Oak Ridge and stayed there, as did the great Quantum Physicist Paul Dirac.

The list goes on and on with dozens of some of the worlds most renowned scientists visiting our town and staying at the Guest House/Alexander Inn.

Thanks, Mike. Another good article on the history of Oak Ridge. We can take great pride in the preservation of the Guest House in its present function as a senior living center. I always include the main lobby of the Alexander Guest House in any Travel Tour Bus that I provide step-on-guide service.

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Without fail the tourists are enthralled with not only the beautiful building with much original atmosphere with the fireplace where Robert Oppenheimer sat for Ed Westcott's photo and the display of historical Ed Westcott photos along a main wall there.

An added bonus occurs when staff or residents interact with the tourists. The Alexander Guest House is sure a primary part of Oak Ridge history.

Finally, the Alexander Guest House is listed as an eligible resource for the Manhattan Project National Historical Park. In the Park Service's Foundation Document for the park is found the following statement:

"Alexander Inn (Guest House), The Manhattan Project Guest House served as the only hotel for the Clinton Engineer works. Visiting scientists, dignitaries, and many workers stayed there upon arrival in Oak Ridge. It was later known as the Alexander Inn and in 2015 was restored as a senior living center known as the Alexander Guest House. Saved from ruin by a Department of Energy grant, the front façade of the Alexander Guest House has been restored to its 1944 appearance and is protected by preservation easements. The Alexander Guest House received the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's 2016 Chairman's Award for excellence in historic preservation."



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Tennessee Historical Commission historical marker for the Guest House