

# Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: The Manhattan Project Underway, Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of November 18, 2024)

Barbara Scollin, great niece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols continues her series on his life.  
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Ample reasons, most notably leadership skills, personality traits and qualifications, led to choosing General (then Colonel) Kenneth D. Nichols as Deputy District Engineer and subsequently as District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District (MED). In this capacity he had supervision of the research and development connected with, and the design, construction and operation of all plants required to produce plutonium-239 and uranium-235, including the construction of the towns of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and Richland, Washington.

The responsibility of his position was massive as he oversaw a workforce of both military and civilian personnel of approximately 125,000; his Oak Ridge office became the center of the wartime atomic energy's activities. He also was responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

In this seventh installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we continue to learn of his early work with the Manhattan Project including procurement of high-grade uranium from the Belgium Congo.

Securing the procurement of high-grade uranium, securing a higher priority rating for the Manhattan Project, and clarifying chain of command were urgent priorities for Nichols and others in the Manhattan Project by September 1942.

More important than silver (see 6<sup>th</sup> article) was the need for adequate uranium to make the fissionable material for the bombs. Early in September 1942 Nichols heard from Thomas Finletter of the US State Department that 1200 tons of high-grade uranium ore from the Shinkolobwe mine in the Belgian Congo was stored on Staten Island. The mine was owned by Union Miniere; Edgar Sengier, as head of the company, was ready to negotiate terms with the United States regarding sale of the ore.

On September 13, 1942, Nichols met with the S-1 committee at the elite Bohemian Grove where "there was no rest for Nick that weekend" recalled Jackie Nichols many years later. She explained that Nick assumed there would be multiple opportunities to ask questions of the scientists attending, but instead they fully engaged him in answering their questions.

The meeting was critically important in establishing focus for the Manhattan Project, including acquisition of the Elza site in Tennessee and the purchase of uranium ore from Mr. Sengier.

Returning to the east coast, Nichols immediately met with Mr. Sengier on September 18, 1942, at his office in New York City. (Not until 1957 did Sengier belatedly send his US State

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Department letter of introduction to General Nichols.) The meeting was memorable and the beginning of a key working relationship as well as a warm, lifelong friendship.

Initially Sengier was skeptical Nichols was authorized by the U.S. government. Nichols recalls, [Sengier said,] “‘You say you are from the military. Yet you are wearing civilian clothes.’ After reading my ID card [see photo], he motioned me to a seat and inquired what I wanted. I told him I understood he had some uranium for sale. In turn, he asked, ‘Are you a contracting officer? Too many people have been around here about this uranium, and they just want to talk. Do you have any authority to buy?’ Perhaps too flippantly, I answered, ‘Yes. I have more authority, I’m sure, than you have uranium to sell.’

“After thinking about it for a moment, he demanded to know, ‘Will the uranium ore be used for military purposes?’ I hesitated. I didn’t know what I should say to a foreigner about the country’s most secret war project. Sengier rescued me: ‘You don’t need to tell me how you’ll use it. I think I know. All I want is your assurance as an Army officer that this uranium ore is definitely going to be used for war purposes.’ I could, of course, give him that assurance. He replied, ‘Good. Then let’s make a deal, Colonel...’ We reached a general agreement in about half an hour.”

By the time of the meeting, Nichols had arranged a test of the ore. It proved to be the highest-grade uranium in the world, specifically 65 percent U-308. To put this in perspective, Nichols explains: “To illustrate the uniqueness of Sengier’s stockpile, after the war the MED and the AEC [Atomic Energy Commission] considered ore containing three tenths of 1 percent as a good find. Without Sengier’s foresight in stockpiling ore in the United States and aboveground in Africa, we simply would not have had the amounts of uranium needed to justify building the large separation plants and the plutonium reactors.”

The historic meeting was described in detail by Maj General Nichols in his book [The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America’s Nuclear Policies Were Made](#)<sup>1</sup>. Before his book was published, however, Lt General Groves and Admiral Strauss requested Nichols send them details of the meeting for their books [Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project](#)<sup>2</sup> and [Men and Decisions](#)<sup>3</sup>.

Sengier drew up a short contract in longhand on a yellow legal pad; Nichols and Sengier immediately signed. Nichols had just negotiated the lowest price, with an option, ever paid or to be paid for U-308 by the United States. Nichols recalls, “We agreed on a price of \$1.60/pound of U-308, \$1.00 of which went to his company and 60 cents to Eldorado for processing the ore.”

Recently in 2023 the yellow paper contract was discovered by NHK’s production staff when producing a documentary on the uranium used for the bombs dropped on Japan in August 1945<sup>4</sup>. Both Nichols and Sengier had searched for this contract decades after the war was over with no success, so it was quite a feat by NHK to unearth this document.

Colonel Marshall explained Nichols’ authority for signing such a contract as this: “Nichols could give orders in my name anytime he wanted to.” “Nichols was my deputy officially and in writing and he could sign anything I could sign... over War Department objection, I got him made Deputy District Engineer, so he signed a lot of things.”

Nichols also initiated important meetings with C. D. Howe, Canada’s Minister of Munitions and Supply to iron out contract delays for heavy-water and uranium refining for the Manhattan Project. Mr. Howe confirmed that the Canadian government had purchased the Eldorado uranium mine and turned it into a Crown Corporation. (Canada’s 28 Crown Corporations handled secret projects and manufacturing during the war.) Thanks to Nichols’ personal meetings with Mr. Howe, the Eldorado contracts proceeded without problems.

After the war, Nichols and Sengier met again to discuss America’s critical need for uranium. Nichols recalls, “I remember one other time when we expanded, or got the Department of Defense to ask for the

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first expansion of the [Atomic Energy] Commission, they said they could not get enough ore. I said, 'What's wrong with Sengier? He's got enough ore.'

"Oh, no, he claims he hasn't."

"They finally arranged to where I went to a party for Sengier and the Commission... I got him off in a corner after dinner and told him we needed more ore. He said, 'Will you assure me it's not going to commercial [uses]? This is [for] military?'

"I said, 'That's the only reason I'm interested. It's for the military use.'

"He said, 'How much do you need?' So I told him. He said, 'Well, tell the Commission I'll be more amenable tomorrow.' He trusted me, as he knew I had never gone back on my word at any time, and I felt the same way.

"[I had] developed a personal relationship with him... If he told them that he was selling this to where we would have a corner on uranium for ultimate commercial market, why he would have a political problem. If he said he was only meeting our military needs, why, he could get by."

During World War II, Nichols and Groves were conscious of the fact that the Russians would be a big problem after the war. Nichols recalls a specific concern regarding uranium: "We had a hell of a time... keeping Harry Hopkins from sending [uranium] over to Russia. That happened to fall in my bailiwick and in the early days of the [Manhattan] Project when I was trying to corner the uranium market. We would find Lend-Lease wanted to ship some to Russia. ...So as soon as they tell us where they could buy it, we would go buy it [instead of them]."

The concern continues.

*Next up:* The Manhattan Project Underway, Part 2

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Thanks to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols, for her continuing insights into aspects of the Manhattan Project that have not been noted before and that sheds light on the role her uncle had in many of the decisions that contributed to the success of the Manhattan Project.

Citations:

<sup>1</sup> Major General K.D. Nichols, U.S.A. (Ret.), *The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1987). ISBN 0-688-06910-X. [OCLC 15223648](https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/15223648), pp. 43-47.

<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant General Leslie R. Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962). ISBN-10 9780306801891 .

<sup>3</sup> Admiral Lewis L. Strauss, *Men and Decisions* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1962). ISBN-10 1299121713.

<sup>4</sup> *Mystery Man of the A Bomb*, produced by NHK World-Japan, 2-2-1 Jinnan, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 150-8001, Japan, Broadcast 12/09/2023, Video, 48:59, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/shows/4001436/> (available until August 5, 2025).

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<sup>5</sup>National Archives of Belgium, 2 - Joseph Cuvelier repository, Archives of Union Minière, 2<sup>nd</sup> transfer, number 354.



Lt Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols Clinton Engineer Works Identification Card  
(Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Office of History)



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Lt Col Nichols, Maj T.T. Crenshaw, Jr. and Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer meet with the S-1 Executive Committee at the Bohemian Grove, September 13, 1942.

L>R: Major Thomas T. Crenshaw, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Harold C. Urey, Ernest O. Lawrence, James B. Conant, Lyman J. Briggs, E.V. Murphee, Arthur H. Compton, Robert L. Thornton, Lt Colonel K.D. Nichols  
(Courtesy of Peter Kirby and is in the public domain)

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Stock of Uranium rich ore in U.S.:  
(about 1200 tons)

U.S. got will purchase entire  
stock from Africa metals - a permit  
retaining ownership of radium  
for use in U.S. or England.

U.S. got<sup>+</sup> undertaking the refining  
contract, direct with Colorado  
Africa metals making necessary  
arrangement for radium

fact of stock (say 300 tons) to go to  
Canada under U.S. control - the disposal  
of the remaining stock to be decided  
later -

Stocks in Africa:  
an arrangement to be made to  
ship to U.S. and store in U.S. -  
available rich ores now in Belgian  
Congo -  
U.S. to have prior rights to purchase,  
U.S. paying freight and storage  
and insurance -

K.D. Nichols  
Edgar Sengier  
Union Miniere S.A.  
Congo

Contract to purchase 'Uranium rich ore' by the United States from Union Miniere. Signed by Colonel K.D. Nichols and Edgar Sengier, September 18, 1942.<sup>5</sup> (Courtesy National Archives of Belgium)