

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge - Building Oak Ridge “from scratch,” Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger’s Historically Speaking column the week of January 27, 2025)

Barbara Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols continues her series on his life.

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 eleventh installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we see his role in establishing governance, schools, medical facilities and other amenities as Oak Ridge is built “from scratch” to become the fifth largest city in Tennessee in a matter of months.

In addition to the critical infrastructure and housing needs for Oak Ridge (see 10th article), Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols ensured competent administration of the town was set into motion. He placed Captain Tim (Paul E.) O’Meara, from Nick’s Rome Air Depot days (see 5th article), in charge of administration. Colonel James C. Marshall and Nichols contracted Turner Construction Company to handle town management and operations. (George Horr, a vice president for Turner was also from the Rome Air Depot project.) Turner organized a new, special company called Roane-Anderson (see 10th article) to handle day to day needs of the town.

Schools were critical for the town of Oak Ridge filled with families. Nichols recalls, “The school system posed a special problem. The school population increased every day. Additional teachers and school buildings had to be made available as needed for children arriving at Oak Ridge from all parts of the United States and all having different backgrounds and educational needs. Dr. Alden M. Blankenship headed the school system and throughout the war he did a masterful job of recruiting personnel, supervising the teachers, maintaining discipline, and rendering a most satisfactory service.”

With expenditures for the Manhattan Project exceeding \$2B in the 1940s, you would think busing of Oak Ridge schoolchildren would not warrant scrutiny by the U.S. Comptroller. But Nichols tells the story,

“The Comptroller ... was objecting to the idea that I did not have the authority to give free transportation to the schoolchildren. ... I said, ‘You’re not questioning the ten-cent fare for the workmen.’

‘Oh, no, because you are allowed to subsidize bus transportation for a war project.’

I said, ‘I can build a schoolhouse?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I can hire a teacher?’ I said, ‘Could I charge a penny for these school kids?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘That would be more reasonable.’

I said, ‘Then you’re questioning not the legality, but the reasonableness of it. That’s my job, not yours.’

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He said, ‘But it’s wasting money.’

I said, ‘It isn’t wasting money.’ I said, ‘We have to keep these people here working. We have to keep the families content. If they have to worry about shelling out a penny, we wouldn’t get enough pennies to warrant collecting it. I’m doing it in the interest of morale and getting the kids to school. All you’re questioning is my judgment now, not the legality of it.’

He said, ‘I guess you’re right.’ But he said, ‘I wish you would charge a penny’.

I said, ‘No that’s my decision.’”

Health care was a chief concern at Oak Ridge and was addressed on multiple fronts by Nichols. He stated, “The medical care at Oak Ridge was one component in the overall health program of the Manhattan Project. To provide essential medical services to the permanent populations of Oak Ridge, Richland ... and Los Alamos as well as to the construction workers and operations personnel, we built hospitals and manned them with Army medical officers, most of whom we recruited directly from civilian positions. We were well aware of the dangers of radiation, and consequently we initially recruited many doctors who were involved in radiation research as civilians so as to have expertise readily available in case of emergencies.”

On August 1, 1943, Nichols created the Medical Section of the MED with [Dr.] Major Hymer L. Friedell as the executive officer, later deputy chief. Friedell’s background in radiation research was important as he would be responsible for the health care of the workers, conduct research on the hazards radiation posed, deal with safety considerations within the plants and prepare for the effects of the weapons when tested and used.

Next, Nichols met with the U.S. Army Surgeon General Maj General James Kirk. Kirk did not calmly receive Nichols’ letter of introduction signed by Generals Somervell and Groves. After Nichols diplomatically talked through the issues, Kirk agreed to Dr. Stafford L. Warren’s commissioning as a colonel. Warren was designated chief of the Medical Section of the MED.

Civilian Dr. Charles E. Rea was given charge of the Clinton Engineer Works (CEW) hospital, including the busy obstetrics ward (over 2900 babies were born in Oak Ridge during the war). Jackie Nichols remembered Dr. Rea “As a charismatic, compassionate surgeon, with faith for our future and support for the understanding [of] our immediate roles. He and his superb staff were responsible for the health and well-being of everyone at Oak Ridge: executives, scientist, military, civilians, contractors, and laborers... Charlie’s infectious laughter wiped away all cares of the day. We became fast friends, and shared vacations after the war.”

Nichols received periodic safety and accident reports and ensured that regular, ongoing safety training, procedures and signage were administered properly during the war. Based on biomedical research programs at university laboratories, safety programs were part of production as well as overall protection to the populations at Oak Ridge, Richland, and Los Alamos. Inspection programs took place to ensure safety and accident & fire prevention measures were followed.

During the period 1943 through June 1945, approximately 550,000,000 hours were worked for the Manhattan Project. (See [Manhattan District History](#), Book 1, Volume 11, Part 1, General Safety Program, Appendix B-3.). During this period 62 deaths occurred at Oak Ridge and Hanford, 54 of which were construction employees, 7 operation employees and 1 government employee.

This did not include traffic fatalities unrelated to production work. The safety records for these sites were well below those of private industry. (“The 1946 fatality rate for the District based on the National Safety Council base of 100,000 employees is 6.28 or 1 per 26,000,000 man-hours worked. In 1945 the fatality

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rate of 18.5 deaths per 100,000 employees was under the National record of 31 deaths per 100,000 employees.” [Manhattan District History](#), Book I – General, Volume II – Safety Program, Appendix A Charts and Graphs, p. “S”5.2.)

Nichols recalls, “No cases involving radiation were encountered during my years [1943-1946] there [in Oak Ridge].”

June Adamson recalled front-page headline stories in the *Oak Ridge Journal*, “Traffic safety awards made news too, though most Ridgers lived in ignorance of another kind of safety record being made behind the secret fences of the plants they were never allowed near only on official business and where all sorts of potentially dangerous jobs were being carried out as a part of the main goal.”

News was eagerly sought by the Oakridgers living in a secret city remembered Jackie Nichols. Colonel Nichols authorized the *Journal* with its first issue March 2, 1944, as a 9x12” sheet produced by volunteers, including a full-time chemist working at one of the plants. Nick received news that a fellow West Point classmate and career officer had been killed in action. Nichols reached out to his widow Frances Smith Gates, an editor and correspondent in Pennsylvania, persuading her to work as editor for the Oak Ridge newspaper. Frances moved to Olney Lane with her two young sons and shared a home with June Adamson and her family. June recalls, “Mrs. Gates had come to Oak Ridge in a general public relations capacity to ‘whittle’ away the problems of keeping workers content.”

The June 22, 1944, *Oak Ridge Journal* issue announced the change of staff and their purpose: “[to] serve to permit the office of the District Engineer to disseminate news and information through direct, established channels”. With Fran at the helm, a full tabloid sized *Oak Ridge Journal* was issued June 29, 1944.

The Secret City’s newspaper included warnings to the readers: ‘Published for Oak Ridge: Keep it here Please’ or, “Not to be taken from the CEW (Clinton Engineering Works) Area”. June Adamson further recalls, “Army officers were quick to ban anything that might give outsiders the least hint of how many or what kind of persons lived in Oak Ridge.” Jackie Nichols remembered, “It was censored, of course, and part of the local slogan was ‘What you do here, what you see here, let it stay here’”.

The *Oak Ridge Journal* provided numerous examples of Colonel Nichols’ involvement with many day-to-day war-time activities: encouraging donations to the Oak Ridge National War Fund to help the starving in Europe, requesting Anderson County voting accommodation for Oak Ridge residents, conducting military reviews and presenting awards, attending various military and civilian functions in town, dedicating a B-25 bomber, and encouraging full work schedules (no absenteeism).

Spiritual needs were also given serious consideration. Nichols did not agree to a unified church; consequently, at least 22 separate congregations worshiped in the chapel and other available space in town. The Chapel on the Hill, following the typical US Army design, was used on a rotating basis each weekend during the war. The only non-military photo included in General Nichols’ book *The Road to Trinity* is of the Chapel. (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](#), p. 211.)

Nichols considered the working people of Oak Ridge, trying to make life at Oak Ridge as normal as possible. He recalls, “At Oak Ridge, with a population of 75,000, we ran into many situations where we needed money to do things for which it would be improper to spend government funds. To obtain adequate funds, we set up a ‘Recreation Association’ and among other things gave them the beer and other concessions to generate revenue.

“These funds were generally used to support recreational facilities, libraries, civic associations, and some welfare. Groves disliked the system and told me it might be illegal. When I asked him if he could provide a

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better solution, he only commented, ‘No, but I have serious questions about your way. You had better make certain that everyone involved remains completely honest.’”

Building a town - truly a multi-faceted project.

Next up: Production Facilities, Part 1 (1942-1945): Y-12

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Thanks for these columns written by Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols.

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“Facing a double envelopment, Col. Kenneth D. Nichols, District Engineer makes an estimate of the situation and comes to the approved solution, deciding to buy Christmas seals from both solicitors in the selling campaign. The blond embodiments of the pincers movement are Joanne (left) and Dianne (right), four-year-old twin daughters of Pvt. And Mrs. Robert Milford. Pvt. Milford is stationed here with the SED. Mrs. Milford is a teacher in Robertsville School.” Oak Ridge Journal, December 7, 1944, headline page.

Photo by Ed Westcott. (Courtesy of Emily Westcott and Don Hunnicutt)

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Col Stafford Warren briefs the Oak Ridge hospital staff, Oak Ridge, TN, 1945. Public Domain (Courtesy of Barbara Scollin)



Oak Ridge Journal staff, August 8, 1945 L>R Lucia Carter, Margaret Kelly, Frances Smith Gates, Edward Westcott, Dick Gehman (Courtesy of Oak Ridge Public Library, DOE Photograph Collection)