

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge - Job Well Done, Part 3

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 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 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 twenty-third installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of the greatest supporters of the Manhattan Project and Nichols' reflections on their work.

Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson decided to visit the Clinton Engineer Works (CEW) arriving April 11, 1945. After lunching at the Guest House in Oak Ridge, Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols was charged with giving him a complete tour of CEW with Maj General Groves and Colonel William H. Kyle, Stimson's military aide, also present. Nichols recalls, "Considering Stimson's advanced age and failing strength, we made every effort to eliminate the need for him to walk or stand. We built ramps for cars into the gaseous diffusion plant. This led to the rumor that Franklin D. Roosevelt himself was coming for an inspection."

After the inspection while Stimson was resting, Nichols and Kyle discussed how key Oak Ridge people would meet Stimson that evening at the Nichols' home. There were 20-25 people from Tennessee Eastman, Carbide & Carbon and scientists in attendance. The Secretary enjoyed Nichols' "hard-to-get" whiskey (Anderson County TN was a "dry" county) and liked an Old Fashioned.

Stimson's visit was a success! Nichols remembered, "Kyle insisted on relocating the living room sofa to facilitate [Stimson] in the limited space of our small quarters. ... I found it amusing that Stimson had other ideas. When he arrived and after I had introduced him to my wife, I led him to the sofa. However, he refused to sit down, telling me, 'I want to meet everyone present. Introduce each individual, give me time to converse with each one, and only after I have met everyone shall I sit down.' He seemed to be exhilarated by the opportunity to meet the individuals responsible for building and operating the plants. Kyle tried to intervene, but Stimson waved him away.

"Everyone was impressed with the interest the secretary showed about each part of the project. Finally I said, 'Mr. Secretary, I believe you've met them all.' Only then did he agree to sit down, in the rocking chair on the porch, and he continued to talk with those who were around him. Overall, this visit by the Secretary of War proved a pleasant, informal, and for Jackie and me, a memorable occasion. Despite Stimson's advanced age, he was alert, cheerful, and friendly. He was keenly interested in our project and stressed the importance of our work to the war effort. Consequently, to me, this proved to be the happiest 'working' day I spent at Oak Ridge."

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American and British leadership like that of Secretary Stimson's at this time was critical for the overall success of the Manhattan Project. Nichols identified and described other key leaders supporting the program:

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"From the very beginning of the atomic bomb development, the president of the United States made or approved all major policy decisions. President Roosevelt as well as Churchill, throughout the project, showed unusual personal interest in the secrecy, the urgency, and the priority that the atomic bomb project should have. Without this personal interest and the backing for top priority, the military never would have given the project the priority necessary to achieve success in time to help end the war."

"I have always felt that the biggest thing we got from England was not the scientists, but the support of Churchill, Lord Cherwell and Sir James Chadwick. ... They constantly kept Churchill telling FDR, 'We must keep this top priority.' You have to hand it to Churchill, to FDR, and in particular, to Mr. Stimson that they kept their faith in a few individuals that this could be done."

"I believe that Stimson realized that after the death of President Roosevelt, greater responsibility for making the recommendations or decisions concerning the use of the weapon as well as the postwar policy for domestic and international control of atomic energy fell on him. In my opinion, Stimson was the best-qualified individual in the United States to undertake this responsibility. He had the experience of having been Secretary of State as well as the wartime experience of being Secretary of War. He held the respect of the nation. Perhaps most important, he had direct knowledge of the atomic bomb project from the very beginning and so was completely familiar with the unique aspects of atomic weapons. He believed their use should require a presidential decision."

Vannevar Bush:

"Bush had the nerve to make [very good decisions]. ... He was sitting -- of course, Groves would never admit this -- above Groves on the [Military] Policy Committee and could have vetoed any move Groves wanted to make on a technical line. ... He had the ear of the President. So, if Bush at any time had lost his nerve, that would have ended the project. If Bush at any time had said, like on the gaseous diffusion plant [K-25], 'Well, Urey's right ---' Groves would probably have been overruled. ... Bush still retained his contact, to have the overall say as far as reaching the President was concerned, tying in with Britain and that kind of thing."

Nichols' role in the production process and the bomb development could have ended in failure. But Nichols remained positive, saying, "I always had the gut feeling that we would succeed. If I had not, I would have found ways to be transferred overseas." Thanks to great leadership at the highest levels of our government, Nichols and the host of others working on the project did succeed.

Nichols also credited the success of the project with those he worked with day-to-day. No person was more invaluable to Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols' successful leadership and administration than his secretary at Oak Ridge, Virginia Olsson. Beginning in 1942, they formed a close, lifelong working relationship and friendship.

Ms. Olsson worked as a secretary with Colonel J.C. Marshall then Colonel Leslie Groves then Nichols during World War II. Marshall being the first, she was the second person tapped to serve in what would

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be known as the Manhattan Project. Apparently, she never underwent a security clearance procedure because she was completely trusted.

Marshall recalled, "As soon as I got back from [meeting with General Styer and being appointed District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District], I asked first Virginia Olsson, my secretary, whom I knew I could trust, then Nichols to be my deputy. ... [they] were willing to come with me ...sight unseen. They didn't know where they were going or what they were up to. . . .

"She sat in the same office I did [at CEW]. . . .

"I started keeping a secret journal, of which there was one copy made. Blair was to keep one, Nichols was to keep one, all using Ms. Olsson as the secretary ...

"I felt [Ms. Olsson was completely reliable], although we had no clearance in those days as we had later on. I would dictate my notes for the journal and certain letters, and whenever it came to mentioning atomic fission or ... uranium or U-235 or 20,000 tons of TNT, I would dictate a blank and later fill it in with pen and ink until I was reasonably sure that she wouldn't be frightened of the thing, or she wouldn't think that I had completely gone crazy. It didn't take many days until I realized that she knew the score, that she could be trusted."

Born and raised in Calais ME, Virginia was an orphan by age 14. Family and friends apparently helped raise her and her brother. After graduation from the Calais Academy and Beal College in Bangor ME, Virginia taught commercial studies (shorthand, typing, commercial arithmetic and English) at the Calais Academy. Evidently, she met Colonel Marshall when she moved to New York City and worked in the Civil Service in 1936.

Ms. Olsson worked in the Oak Ridge office ("The Castle") while Nichols' other secretary, Anne Phillips, worked in his New York City office. (Today they would be designated Administrative Assistants.) She lived at Apartment A2 above Jackson Square in Oak Ridge, just a short walk from her office in "The Castle on the Hill."

Nichols recalled, "When Marshall left, he said he had only one request to make. Would I transfer Virginia Olsson to Tennessee when we moved the district office there and make her my secretary and keep Anne Phillips as my secretary in the New York office? This concern for personnel was typical of Marshall. Complying with this request proved to be far more rewarding than I anticipated. The two young ladies cooperated extremely well. They maintained close communication and anticipated many problems. They made all arrangements for my appointments, travel, and hotels as well as accounting for the classified documents needed on trips. Most important, they provided superior secretarial and office management service at the two offices. All through the war, they devoted long hours to the task with never a complaint."

Virginia did not marry and had no children. After the war, she continued work with Nichols at the Atomic Energy Commission and privately in his consulting practice until her retirement. All her life was devoted to service to her country and the people she worked for. She is an unsung hero of World War II.

K. David Nichols, Jr. (General Nichols' son) recalls Ms. Olsson as not just a trusted and loyal worker, but also like a loving big sister to him as well as his sister Jan. She would always be at family events,

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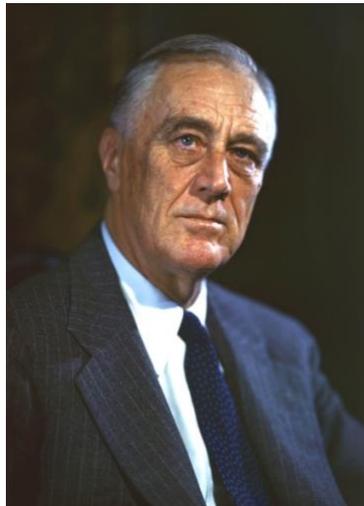
birthdays, holidays, and weddings with a loving smile and a willingness to please. There were many tears in the family when she passed in 1999.

Well known or known only to a few, all deserve our recognition and gratitude for their war-time service in the Manhattan Project.

Next up: Oak Ridge's Transition to Peace, Part 1

Grateful acknowledgements to K. David Nichols, Jr.; Ray Smith; Sandy Fye; Dr. Bianka J. Adams, Alisa Whitley, Douglas J. Wilson and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Office of History; Michael Stallo and the staff at the Oak Ridge Public Library; The St. Croix Historical Society; Diane Gulley; Gerald A. Potts; and Bruce W. Scollin for their assistance with this article.

Thanks for this Historically Speaking column and series goes to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt Photo by Leon Perskie (Courtesy of Wikipedia)

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President Harry S. Truman (Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Presidential Library)



Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill Photo by Yousuf Karsh (Courtesy of Wikipedia)

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Posters, With Stimson Message, To Be Displayed Throughout Area
"Project of Vital Importance To War Efforts Against Japan," Secretary of War States

Posters will be displayed throughout the area next week carrying a special message to the people of Clinton Engineer Works from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, according to an announcement by the Public Relations Office.

Hailing the project as being of "great magnitude and of vital importance to our war efforts against Japan," Secretary Stimson's letter also contains high praise for the work that has been done so far, it was said.

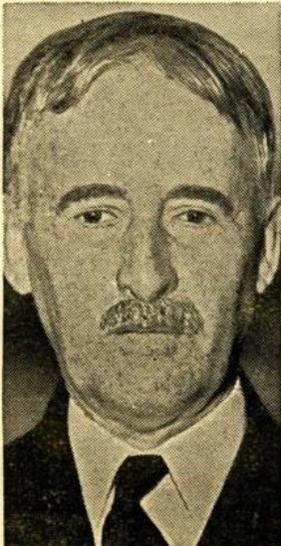
Secretary Stimson's message was sent to the heads of the operating companies on the project with a covering letter from Colonel K. D. Nichols, District Engineer, which said in part:

"I know you will want to take the proper action to transmit to your employees Secretary Stimson's favorable reaction, and that they in turn will want to discuss it with their families and co-workers here.

"It is especially gratifying to convey that Secretary Stimson is not only well pleased with our performance record, but that he also has such high regard for the importance of our work in the war against Japan. To your company and your employes belongs a major share of the credit for his expression of 'outstanding performance,' and I want to take this opportunity to thank you all for your individual efforts, which collectively have brought forth such high praise."

The poster will also carry a special message from the Security Office asking that Secretary Stimson's letter not be reproduced, written about or published, the announcement said.

Readers of the Oak Ridge Journal are also reminded that security of the project should be considered in discussing the Secretary of War's recognition of the project's importance to the country's war effort. Speculation and unauthorized discussion which disseminate bits of project information should continue to be avoided at all times.



Henry L. Stimson

Legion To Handle Cancer Fund Drive

Oak Ridge residents will have an opportunity to help provide funds for the Prevention and Treatment of Cancer, it was announced this week by the American Legion, which will handle a campaign here.

Sixteen counties in the second Congressional district of Tennessee have already begun their campaigns. Legion officials said that donations to the fund here will be audited by the Army, and that service in the campaign will be donated in its entirety.

Fifty per cent of funds collected will be retained by local Cancer agencies to aid in treatment of the disease, and the

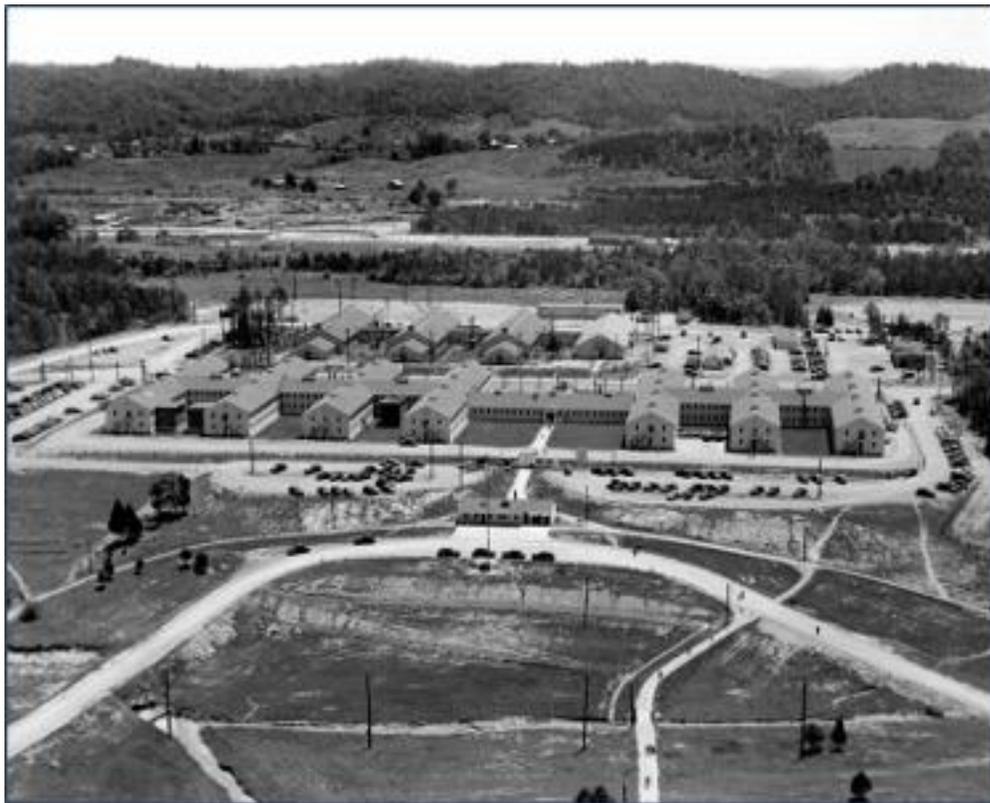
Colonel K. D. Nichols shares Secretary Stimson's words of encouragement and regard for the work done at CEW. The Oak Ridge Journal, May 3, 1945. (Courtesy of the Oak Ridge Public Library)

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General Kenneth D. Nichols and Virginia Olsson
Thanksgiving, 1994, Colonial Williamsburg. (Courtesy of Barbara Scollin)



The Castle on the Hill, the Administration Building, Oak Ridge, TN, 1947. Photo by Ed Westcott.
(Courtesy of the Department of Energy)