

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: Oak Ridge's Transition to Peace, Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 1, 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 for the production of 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 wartime atomic energy activities. He was also responsible for internal security operations in the production facilities that helped keep the development of the atomic bomb secret.

In this twenty-fourth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his efforts to safely maintain production and security of the Manhattan Project sites during the transition to peacetime.

For the first time in over four and a half years, early January 1946 found Nick and Jackie Nichols planning a vacation. But those plans were interrupted by General Groves. The Nichols were diverted to an urgent mission at the Berkeley lab. After resolving the lab problem with Dr. Ernest Lawrence, they were given a short memorable West Coast tour by Ernest and Molly. Upon returning to Oak Ridge, Nichols was promoted to Brigadier General and assigned to Washington, D.C. Nick's West Point classmate Colonel E.E. Kirkpatrick replaced Nick at Oak Ridge as his Deputy District Engineer.

General Nichols continued as District Engineer for the Manhattan Engineer District and was given a new post-war assignment: Deputy to General Groves. In these capacities, he and General Groves had complete control, without adequate authority to make long-range decisions, over all the nation's atomic weapons and stockpiles from August 1945 until the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) agreed to take control in January 1947.

For the seventeen-month interim, Nichols was extremely busy. He focused on production facilities and storage of weapons. His briefings of Army Chief of Staff General Dwight D. Eisenhower on atomic weapons in process, potential new weapons, and production rates for all plants kept Washington, specifically Secretary of War Patterson, informed of what Groves, Nichols and the MED were doing until the AEC took charge.

Nichols handled various transitions from wartime industry to postwar government and industry operations. Nichols negotiated several contracts up to final details before they were transferred to the AEC for completion and signing, including DuPont transferring Hanford Engineer Works (HEW) operations to General Electric (with a national laboratory at Schenectady, NY as part of the deal) and the Clinton Laboratories transferring from the University of Chicago to Monsanto.

Union Carbide and Tennessee Eastman continued operations of K-25, K-27, and Y-12. He oversaw the creation of a new underground assembly facility at Mound Laboratories in Miamisburg, OH, to produce initiators. He recommended Sandia Air Base be transferred to the MED for training military assembly teams and designing and producing weapons. And, Jackie Nichols recalled, "Nick made long, frequent trips to select permanent officers to replace the reserves."

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Many scientists wanted to leave the various wartime laboratories and return to their universities; this was a critical period when experienced scientists needed to be encouraged to continue to work in atomic research.

An unexpected 5-hour airport layover prompted a return trip to Oak Ridge to the Nichols' residence, where Nichols, Dr. Arthur Holly Compton, and chemist Charles A. Thomas had ample time to brainstorm on the idea of regional (now known as national) laboratories. They discussed "how should we organize, whether it should be universities or whether we should have universities and industry together, or separate laboratories for industry, and under what type of contract they should operate. We had quite a discussion in a very relaxed atmosphere," recalled Nichols.

Various sites throughout the United States were discussed. At the urging of Dr. Compton and Thomas (after Col A.V. Peterson had convinced Compton of the need to first "sell" Nichols on the idea), Nichols proposed an Advisory Committee on Research and Development; Groves agreed. Nichols assigned Colonels Beeler and Peterson to explore sites in the Northeast, with Brookhaven in Upton, Long Island NY selected.

The Advisory Committee's work led to the firm recommendation of national laboratories: the Argonne Metallurgical Laboratory near Chicago, IL; the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, Long Island, NY; the Clinton National Laboratory in Oak Ridge, TN; and the Los Alamos National Laboratory in Los Alamos NM. In addition, the Committee secured funding for the upcoming year for nuclear research and endorsed the distribution of radioisotopes at cost.

Nichols said, "there was no question that the development of power was one of the big objectives of these laboratories, but also one many of the scientists emphasized . . . you had to explore the whole field, you had to be the leader in the world." It was envisioned that each laboratory would concentrate on certain areas and would serve as educational locations for research students working in the nuclear energy field.

"More important than the laboratories of course, was the question of what type of organization should you have in the United States, should there be an international cooperation or should U.S. and England try to monopolize the situation and keep it secret. All these things had to be settled or thought about," remembered Nichols.

Also in 1946, Nichols oversaw the training of naval officers at Oak Ridge, leading to the Navy's development of atomic-powered submarines. This was the first military application of atomic power. Nichols worked closely with Admiral Earle Mills, Chief of the Bureau of Ships, on the training and education details.

Nichols wanted to deal with one officer instead of having direct training responsibility for 30-40 naval officers. Mills proposed Captain Hyman Rickover. Rickover's references were "frank and conflicting," Nichols recalled; "three thought Rickover an outstanding, imaginative, and capable engineer but at times difficult to get along with, whereas the other three admitted he might have some capabilities but claimed it was impossible to deal with the man."

Nichols decided to interview Rickover in person then told Mills, "Rickover will do, so start the ball rolling. It will be interesting to see what happens." Nichols would point out that although "Hyman Rickover may be called the father of the atomic submarine . . . [Dr. Philip H.] Abelson, Mills, and others certainly participated in the conception at an earlier date". (See the 15th article.)

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Without Admiral Mills' choice and Nichols' training of Rickover, the navy's planned development of atomic engineering may have turned out very differently; full details are included in Nichols' book (*The Road to Trinity, A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made*, 148-150 and 232-233).

With their new home in Washington, D.C. completed, the Nichols moved from Oak Ridge. Jackie Nichols recalls Nick's final day at Oak Ridge had been very long, and it was nighttime by the time he called her. He had to meet Groves the next morning in Washington, D.C. so traveling by car together was not an option; with two young children, she was not about to travel to D.C. alone at the wartime speed limit of 35 mph still in effect.

Jackie recalled, "Our personal baggage was put in our private vehicle to be driven to Washington, but our hand baggage was stowed in the official car into which we each carried a sleeping child. We were driven to the Knoxville airport, where Nick's pilot, Pete Young, was waiting to load us into the B-25 Nick used for his extensive travels throughout the District. We were tightly packed in behind the bomb bay. When we took off, Jan and David were more sleepy than anxious, but not their mother!"

About three hours later, they were in their new beds at 44th Street; Jackie did not even check the new wallpaper until the next morning. The many friendships made during their wartime years in Oak Ridge were not forgotten; personal visits, vacation time, Christmas cards, snapshots, and messages through the years kept those friendships alive.

The summer of 1946 saw General Nichols attending the "Operation Crossroads" atomic bomb tests as a representative of the Manhattan Project at the Bikini Atoll. Full details are included in his book on pages 233-244.

Upon returning stateside, he received notice that, effective March 16, 1946, by order of King George VI he was appointed to be an Honorary Commander of the Military Division of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) "In Recognition of Services in Connection with the Atomic Bomb."

Nichols' efforts and concern regarding Oak Ridge and production facilities at Clinton Engineer Works and Hanford Engineer Works were far from over.

Next up: Oak Ridge's Transition to Peace, Part 2

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"For Ed Westcott, With best regards, K.D. Nichols, Brigadier General, C.E." 1946. Photo by Ed Westcott.
(Courtesy D. Ray Smith)

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advisory Committee on Research & Development, January 12, 1946, on the occasion of Maj General Groves awarding Drs. Bacher and Tolman the Presidential Medal for Merit. L>R Seated: Robert F. Bacher & Richard C. Tolman. Standing: Maj Gen Leslie R Groves, Charles A. Thomas, Lt Col (Dr.) John R. Ruhoff, Warren K. Lewis, John A. Wheeler, Brig Gen Kenneth D. Nichols. (Not present A.H. Compton.)

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.30991123> (Courtesy: CalTech Archives)

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Brig General Kenneth D. Nichols' CBE Award (Courtesy K. David Nichols, Jr.)