

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge - Los Alamos Laboratory & Dr. Oppenheimer

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 28, 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 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 sixteenth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his involvement with the selection of Dr. Oppenheimer for the Los Alamos bomb laboratory and signing Oppenheimer's security clearance.

Colonel Kenneth D. Nichols first met Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer in July 1942 at Dr. A.H. Compton's Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago ("Met Lab"). During and after the Manhattan Project they had close working relations and friendship. Nichols described Oppenheimer as a "genius," and said, "I've always admired his technical ability." "I had always been friendly with Oppenheimer and respected him highly."

Calling the bomb work the "near-miracle wrought by the scientists at Los Alamos," Nichols said of Oppenheimer, "Although he lacked experience in administration, Oppenheimer did a masterful job of organizing the laboratory. He borrowed research equipment and moved it to Los Alamos. Top personnel were recruited from leading universities and other war projects. Probably never before had there been the assembly of such brilliant minds dealing with physics, chemistry, cryogenics, metallurgy, mathematics, explosives, engineering, and practically every other aspect of science.

"By means of his outstanding scientific leadership, Oppenheimer welded Rabi, who served part time as his consultant; Hans Bethe; Robert Bacher; John von Neuman; Enrico Fermi; Edward Teller; Captain William S. Parsons, U.S. Navy; George F. Kistiakowsky; Joseph W. Kennedy; Cyril Smith; Emilio Segre; John H. Manley; David K Froman, Robert Serber; and many others into the most effective scientific team."

When Oppenheimer visited Oak Ridge, he would dine at the Nichols' home on Olney Lane. Jackie Nichols recalls, "From the first moment I shook hands with Robert Oppenheimer I was fascinated by his rosy, boyish face, his arresting blue eyes, and his extremely narrow frame. I saw a private, sensitive man. It was well-known that he had studied at Harvard and finished his bachelor's degree in three years, summa cum laude.

"As we three shared a French meal which I'd squeezed from the ration coupons, the lively chatter gradually dismantled the emotional wall which seemed to surround Oppie. When I learned that he had studied French literature and philosophy and had written short stories and poetry I really felt at ease with this world-famous physicist. Oppie and Nick had an affinity for each other resulting in a completely professional rapport."

Compton selected Oppenheimer to head the theoretical group for the bomb project. Nichols recalled, "Another major decision during the autumn of 1942 was the selection of J. Robert Oppenheimer to head

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the scientific effort to develop and fabricate the bombs. Prior to the time we came into the project, Compton had selected Oppenheimer, the leading light of theoretical physics at Berkeley, to head the theoretical group for weapons design. As a result, he was as well informed as anyone about the project and the theoretical possibilities of an atomic explosion.”

Brig General Groves was impressed with Oppenheimer and discussed with him the priority to establish a laboratory to design and develop the bomb. Groves immediately recognized that choosing Oppie to lead the bomb laboratory would be problematic. Nichols recalls, “Groves recognized that he would encounter opposition both in the scientific community and in Army security if he were to select Oppenheimer to direct the bomb lab.

“Before the war, Oppenheimer had become involved with left-wing or Communist-leaning groups and had enjoyed friendships with known or suspected Communists, including his brother, Frank; his girlfriend; and his wife. While he had broken contacts with the questionable organizations once he began work on the bomb project, he retained many of his friendships.

“Even though the USSR was on our side, these contacts were considered to be security risks. In addition, Oppenheimer had not won a Nobel Prize, which contributed to the scientific prestige of the other project scientific leaders – Lawrence, Fermi, Urey and Compton.”

Groves' search to find a better or equally qualified scientist was not successful. On October 15, 1942, Compton, Colonel James C. Marshall, Groves and Nichols were joined by Oppenheimer on the *20th Century Limited* traveling from Chicago to New York.

Nichols recalls their cramped meeting in his roomette, “After dinner on the train, the conversation continued in my small roomette, with Groves, Marshall, Oppenheimer, and myself crowded into the small space with no elbow room. I cannot remember how we all found a place to sit (a roomette designed for one person was about 40x80”).

“Despite the close quarters and the late hour, the discussion proved most fascinating. It covered all aspects of setting up an organization, building the needed facilities for laboratories and housing, procuring scientific equipment, and dealing with such expected issues as recruiting scientists and confining them in a laboratory in a remote area, and whether the scientists should be commissioned as officers in the Corps of Engineers.

“When Oppenheimer left the train in Buffalo, there remained no doubts in my mind that he should direct the new lab despite the difficulties we would have in clearing him.”

Commissioning of the scientists as Nichols noted above was a serious issue raised by Groves. Colonel James C. Marshall recalls, “At that time, ... Groves wanted him [Oppenheimer] commissioned a lieutenant colonel in the Corps of Engineers, and I objected for various reasons. ... We had Oppenheimer's complete file from the FBI and all, of course, his acquaintances back in there. He was a physical wreck, he had only one lung and TB, and Groves insisted on getting him commissioned. I said with that file, I just wouldn't stand for it. So we argued a while, and finally Groves had him [Oppenheimer] examined physically and thought the guy was going to die almost any minute, so that's why he was not commissioned.”

Nichols recalled that Oppenheimer tried to recruit Robert F. Bacher and Isidor I. Rabi but both refused to accept commissions. After Dr. James B. Conant, Dr. Van Bush, Groves, Marshall and Nichols met with the two physicists for almost a day but were unsuccessful at convincing them of the need for a military laboratory, Groves and the others realized commissioning of the scientists was not going to work.

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Groves obtained approval from the Military Policy Committee to appoint Oppenheimer as the Los Alamos Director. However, security clearances by the US Army continued to create delays. Oppenheimer worked on the bomb project for over a year before finally receiving security clearance. Nichols recalled in various interviews and in his book how security clearance was achieved: "He was the best in his field. Now, there are better mathematicians than Oppenheimer, better chemists than Oppenheimer, but as far as the theoretical physics required for atomic weapons and so forth, he was picked out, I know, at one S-1 meeting in March or April of 1943.

"Groves eliminated that obstacle [his questionable record involving association with known or suspected Communists] by assuming responsibility for all security and intelligence pertaining to the Manhattan Project. However, he did not act immediately on the clearance, choosing to obtain one more confirmation of Oppenheimer from the project's scientific leadership.

"It finally took a meeting with the S-1 Committee where we [James C. Marshall, Groves & Nichols] queried each scientist in the S-1 Committee. We had a long discussion. ... The question was, 'Is there anyone else who can do the job as well as Oppenheimer can?' And the answer, each and everyone on the S-1 Committee, was 'NO. He's the man, the only one we can recommend that we feel capable of doing it, that has a chance of doing it.' So, Groves just arbitrarily said to Marshall – my boss at that time – 'Clear him.'

"Most of the [S-1 Committee] scientists felt that although he had a terrible record, and they were aware of part of it, that he was loyal.

"[Groves] formalized the decision on July 20, 1943, in a memo to the District Engineer: 'In accordance with my verbal direction of July 15, it is desired that clearance be issued for the employment of Julius Robert Oppenheimer without delay irrespective of the information which you have concerning Dr. Oppenheimer. He is absolutely essential to the project.'"

District Engineer James C. Marshall's directive said something like, "For purposes of security J. Robert Oppenheimer is cleared." Marshall was not available to sign. Nichols, as Deputy District Engineer, signed in Marshall's stead as was customary (see 7th article), but the directive was returned by the Los Alamos security office two weeks later. Nichols recalled, "This letter came back with an endorsement from the security people at Los Alamos. Obviously they were on the ball. They said, 'Due to this man's record, we have scrutinized this signature very carefully and it's obviously a forgery.' ...It just indicates what the security people felt about his record at that time."

By the time the letter returned, Nichols was in full command as District Engineer of the MED and signed Oppenheimer's re-issued security clearance. Nichols recalls, "I had the letter retyped for my signature, signed it ... When I next saw Oppenheimer I told him that we finally had cleared him. Aware of the situation, he commented, 'That must have been difficult.' I added, 'In the future, please avoid seeing your questionable friends, and remember, whenever you leave Los Alamos, we will be tailing you.' Unfortunately, his clearance did not end the security problems concerning him."

Nichols never "despised", "resented" or "loathed" Dr. Oppenheimer. Further, there was never any rivalry, "irritation," "hostility," "changing relationship," or "shift of attitude" between Nichols and Oppenheimer. The use of these words, phrases, descriptions and portrayals in books, articles and film are unsubstantiated.

Nichols' working and personal relationship with Oppenheimer during and after the war was of utmost respect and friendship; however, serious security issues during and after the Manhattan Project were ongoing and came to a climax with President Eisenhower in 1954. Nichols never questioned or doubted Oppenheimer's loyalty to America.

Next up: Delivery to Los Alamos

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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; 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 General Kenneth D. Nichols.



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. Public Domain (Courtesy of Peter Kirby)

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20th Century Limited departing Chicago's LaSalle Station, 1935. Wikipedia/Public Domain (Courtesy of Barbara Scollin)