

Oak Ridge: Where History Meets the Future

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 12, 2026)

There are times when history seems to come full circle. For me, October 15 and 16 will be one of those times.

As a member of the Tennessee Historical Commission, I will have the opportunity to join fellow commissioners in Oak Ridge for a meeting that I believe will be unlike any other in the Commission's history.

The Tennessee Historical Commission is again coming to Oak Ridge. They visited here in 2019. But this visit is more than what happened in 2019. It will be a journey through history, science, technology and the future of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the nation and even the world.

On October 15, the commissioners will tour some of the places that have made Oak Ridge famous around the world and those that will make Oak Ridge famous again in the future. The day will include visits to Y-12 National Security Complex, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Kairos Power, Radiant Nuclear, Orano and TRISO-X, as well as the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell.

Think about that itinerary for a moment. It begins with the Manhattan Project and the facilities that helped change the course of world history. And it ends with companies working on technologies that could help shape the future of nuclear energy. That is Oak Ridge.

I have spent many years writing about the history of this remarkable community through my Historically Speaking columns. Week after week, I have had the privilege of telling stories about the people, places and events that transformed a remote part of East Tennessee into the Secret City and, eventually, into one of the world's premier scientific communities.

But what has always fascinated me about Oak Ridge is that its history never seems to stop. The story that began during World War II is still unfolding.

At Y-12 National Security Complex, we will be reminded of the enormous industrial undertaking that took place here during the Manhattan Project. The commissioners will encounter the roots of the Manhattan Project and the extraordinary industrial effort that helped make the atomic bomb possible. They will tour the first building completed at Y-12, Building 9731. It contains the world's only Alpha Calutron magnets! At Oak Ridge National Laboratory, they will see how the scientific enterprise born during World War II evolved into one of the world's great research laboratories. They will tour the Graphite Reactor and, time permitting, the Frontier supercomputer.

Then comes the remarkable part. The Commission's tour moves from the history of nuclear science into the future of nuclear energy. Kairos Power, Radiant Nuclear, Orano and TRISO-X represent a new generation of nuclear technology, fuel development and nuclear manufacturing.

These are not simply historical exhibits. They are businesses and laboratories working on technologies that could influence America's energy future. And they are doing it here in Oak Ridge. That is why I believe this visit is so important.

Kairos, for example, is developing advanced reactor technology in Oak Ridge, and its Hermes 2 project has received construction permits from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. In September, Kairos announced completion of the first phase of a major engineering test unit demonstration at its Oak Ridge campus.

TRISO-X represents another important part of the emerging nuclear story. The company is pursuing a fuel fabrication facility in Oak Ridge, with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission identifying the project as a uranium fuel fabrication facility now in the licensing process.

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In other words, the commissioners won't simply be hearing about Oak Ridge's nuclear history. They will be seeing its next chapter.

When historians look at Oak Ridge, we naturally look backward. We remember the thousands of people who came here during World War II. We remember the secret city behind the gates. We remember the uranium enrichment work at Y-12 that resulted in the uranium 235 for Little Boy, the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare, and later for all the uranium 235 used in all the nation's nuclear weapons, and the reactor work that ultimately proved that plutonium could be produced in a nuclear reactor resulting in the production of plutonium in Hanford, Washington, for the Manhattan Project and all the nation's nuclear weapons.

We remember the scientists, engineers, construction workers, military personnel and ordinary families who came together to accomplish something the world had never seen before. But standing in Oak Ridge today, it is becoming increasingly apparent that we may someday look back on this period with the same historical interest.

We may well be watching the beginning of another transformation. The renewed national interest in nuclear energy, advanced reactors and new nuclear fuels has brought Oak Ridge back into a role that seems almost familiar. Once again, the world is looking to Oak Ridge for answers.

The stop at the Oak Ridge International Friendship Bell provides an entirely different perspective. The bell is a symbol of peace and international friendship. It is a reminder that the legacy of Oak Ridge cannot be measured only in scientific accomplishments. The story is also about what we do with the knowledge we acquire. It includes our sister city, Naka, Japan, which I was privileged to visit recently as a representative of our city in the Sister City Exchange program.

The day will conclude with dinner at the Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, a particularly appropriate place to end a day spent looking at the past and the future. Children, after all, are the future. The young people who visit that museum today may someday become the scientists, engineers, historians, teachers and community leaders who write the next chapters of Oak Ridge's story.

On October 16, the Commission will meet at the American Museum of Science and Energy. That, too, seems fitting. AMSE is a place where Oak Ridge tells its story. And the Tennessee Historical Commission will be gathering there to discuss the preservation and interpretation of Tennessee's history while sitting in the middle of a community whose history is still being written. I find something especially meaningful about that. Finally, the Commission will be given the opportunity to tour several of our other museums in the afternoon as they leave Oak Ridge.

For more than two decades, I have had the privilege of writing Historically Speaking, trying to capture the stories that might otherwise be forgotten. Some of those stories are about famous people. Others are about people whose names never appeared in history books, but who nevertheless helped build Oak Ridge. Some stories concern buildings that have disappeared and places that few people remember.

But the October 15 and 16 meeting reminds me of something I have learned from all those years of writing history: History is not simply about the past. It is about understanding how the past shaped the present and recognizing the moments when the present begins creating the future. Oak Ridge is one of those places.

The Secret City was created in extraordinary circumstances more than 80 years ago. It helped change the world. It became a center for scientific discovery. And now, once again, Oak Ridge finds itself at the intersection of national importance, scientific innovation and a rapidly changing energy landscape.

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As a member of the Tennessee Historical Commission, I am proud that the Commission will be here. As someone who has spent years telling Oak Ridge's story, I am especially pleased that the commissioners will have the opportunity to see this story firsthand. And as someone who believes that history matters, I hope they leave Oak Ridge understanding something that those of us who live with this history every day already know: Oak Ridge is not merely a place where history happened. Oak Ridge is a place where history continues to happen.

And perhaps someday, historians will look back on October 15 and 16, 2026, and recognize that the Tennessee Historical Commission came to Oak Ridge at another important moment in the city's remarkable history. The Nuclear Renaissance is making history as we speak. I am pleased that because of the Department of Energy's Office of Nuclear Restoration and Revitalization (Erik Olds), we have been able to reestablish the Oral History program. See it here:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLHM4QBOdMWHjXDyfH8HLL4E_j8_n6HDqh

There is something almost poetic about that meeting location. AMSE preserves and interprets the story of Oak Ridge, from the creation of the Secret City during World War II through the scientific and technological achievements that followed. And now the state's principal historical commission will meet there while Oak Ridge is once again undergoing a transformation.

For a city that was born in secrecy, Oak Ridge has accumulated a remarkable history in just a little more than eight decades. Oak Ridge was created almost overnight during World War II. Scientists working here helped change the course of history. Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Y-12 National Security Complex, and K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant helped launch the modern era of nuclear science.

Oak Ridge's people became part of the story of civil rights, scientific research, international cooperation and technological innovation. Note the Scarboro 85 monument that broke ground for construction on September 3, 2026!

And now Oak Ridge is finding itself at the center of America's renewed interest in nuclear energy and advanced nuclear technology. That makes this meeting of the Tennessee Historical Commission more than another meeting on a calendar.

It is an opportunity for Tennessee's historians and historic-preservation leaders to see firsthand why Oak Ridge occupies such a special place in the history of Tennessee and why its story remains unfinished. The Nuclear Renaissance is The Oak Ridge Corridor as noted by Gerald Boyd recently in his article published here in The Oak Ridger.

History is often thought of as something that happened a long time ago. Oak Ridge reminds us that history can happen very quickly. Sometimes it happens behind security gates. Sometimes it happens in a laboratory. Sometimes it happens in a classroom or museum. And sometimes, as the members of the Tennessee Historical Commission will discover on October 15 and 16, history is happening right before our eyes.

That may be the most important lesson of all. Oak Ridge isn't just a place where Tennessee history is preserved. It is a place where Tennessee history continues to be made. As our mayor, Warren Gooch says often, "Great things happen in Oak Ridge every day!"

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Building 9731, first building completed at Y-12 and used as a pilot facility (Courtesy of Y-12 National Security Complex)

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World's only Alpha Calutron magnets (Courtesy of Y-12 National Security Complex)

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World's first industrial size nuclear reactor which is the ONLY National Register's National Historic Landmark in Oak Ridge (Courtesy of Department of Energy)

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Miranda Montgomery, Tennessee State Historical Preservation Officer and myself at the Graphite Reactor when I gave her a tour of the location where the Tennessee Historical Commission would meet in October 2026 (Courtesy of Ray Smith)