

Meet Kenneth D. Nichols, the Father of Oak Ridge: Moving Ahead (1955 – 2000)

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 8, 2026)

Barbara Rogers 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). The responsibility of his position during World War II 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.

Following the war, Nichols kept close watch over the MED's production facilities as well as atomic weapon stockpiles until handing over responsibility to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). In New York, assisting the American representative to the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission, Nichols made numerous presentations to UN delegates on certain treaty provisions that were very successful in gaining support for international control of atomic energy.

Ordered back to Washington D.C., Major General Nichols was key in developing doctrine with the Pentagon and the U.S. Congress for the use of atomic and hydrogen weapons to protect our nation and allies. Serving as Chief of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project (AFSWP), Deputy Director of Guided Missiles, and other key positions, General Nichols played a major role in the development of missiles for delivery of nuclear weapons and what is today called anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense.

Serving as General Manager of the Atomic Energy Commission 1953-1955, Nichols remained a fierce advocate of peacetime development of atomic power to meet and exceed our nation's growing energy needs. He assisted with the Atoms for Peace project and helped formulate the Atomic Energy Act of 1954.

In this final, thirtieth installment of several articles covering the life and accomplishments of Kenneth D. Nichols, we learn of his role in the controversial Dixon-Yates Contract, the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, and commercial atomic energy after 1955.

Amid General Manager Nichols' Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) ongoing work (see 27th article), additional time and energy were demanded of him regarding specific events involving the AEC.

The Dixon-Yates Contract was a 1954 proposal by Joseph Dodge and Rowland Hughes of the Bureau of the Budget between the AEC and two outside utility companies to supply 600,000 kilowatts of power to the AEC for their Oak Ridge TN site. President Dwight D. Eisenhower and AEC Chairman Lewis L. Strauss were in favor of the contract and against Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA's) plan to use federal funds to build new generating capacity at the country's taxpayer expense to benefit one local community (Memphis).

However, Nichols, as a public administrator, was opposed to the proposal as it would increase AEC costs by \$4-6M (\$48-72M in 2026) per year for Oak Ridge.

Nichols recalled, "What they were asking us to do was to give up the TVA power that we had under contract and buy it at a higher price from a new source. The view I took and several of the other commissioners took was, you can't justify that as an administrative policy, not unless you consider overall

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national interests.” Nichols unsuccessfully proposed an alternative plan that the TVA procure the additional power needed directly.

Meeting with Strauss, Hughes and AEC deputy general manager Walter J. Williams, Nichols informed Hughes that he “could not justify the AEC spending several millions more per year ... to release TVA power that was already under firm contract with them.” He predicted a political backlash if the proposal were accepted; he outlined specific issues of concern.

And Nichols suggested he personally work with the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE) regarding Eisenhower's goals and contract details. Instead, Hughes firmly told Nichols, “Politics is not your function”; Hughes went before the JCAE with little understanding of contract negotiations or how to work with politicians. As Nichols predicted, Hughes was “ripped to pieces.”

Eisenhower wanted to proceed, and Nichols was tasked with oversight of contract negotiations. Congressional hearings commenced and the predicted political backlash probably led to the Democrats taking back the senate and house in the 1954 mid-term elections. Eisenhower persisted; the proposal barely passed by year end.

When the Democrats took over in January 1955 the JCAE re-opened the Dixon-Yates hearing and Nichols was given the unenviable task of testifying before the members. Eventually, Nichols recalls, “the city of Memphis came up with an alternative solution to its power needs, and the Dixon-Yates contract was cancelled...Thus ended a time-consuming political fiasco.”

One of Nichols' key objectives at the AEC (see 27th article) was the initiation of peacetime commercial development of atomic power. Nichols foresaw as early as December 1942, that the Manhattan Project provided, “all the essentials of research which indicated that eventually you would have atomic electric power plants. ... You had a heat source. All you had to do was the engineering and the economics to develop it.”

The 1946 Atomic Energy Act was amended with considerable effort by the White House, the Defense Department, Congress, and the AEC's Legal Division. Nichols' role was to coordinate activities with the Defense Department and with General Herbert Loper, Chairman of the Military Liaison Committee.

The Act was signed into law by President Eisenhower on August 30, 1954. Nichols recalled, “the time had arrived for developing commercial atomic power and the main changes in the Act permitted private industry and private enterprise to own atomic power plants.”

Nichols formally submitted his AEC resignation effective May 1, 1955, to Chairman Strauss. They remained lifelong friends. Nichols was pleased to receive the AEC's Distinguished Service Award on April 29, 1955.

The citation read in part: “General Nichols has brought to the Commission those qualities of leadership, competence and imagination which have made him an outstanding administrator of the program. His wisdom and energy have in considerable part been responsible for the Commission's successful support of legislation ultimately enacted as the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, for the development of sound Commission programs to meet our responsibility in Power Reactor Development and Industrial Licensing, and for the current negotiations of international agreements to carry out the President's Atoms for Peace Program. Under his able direction and guidance, these vital gains have been made while the Commission continued to meet its responsibilities...”

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Beginning his career in private practice, Nichols, as a registered professional engineer in the District of Columbia and state of Maryland, worked as a consulting engineer in the fields of research and development and commercial atomic power for thirty years. He enjoyed the independence and freedom of action. His clients included private industry, utility companies, the United States military, the AEC, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Nichols said, "Most of my work involved advising top management on major policy decisions. I used their staff to develop the basis for any recommendations and the course of action to pursue."

Nichols also served on the Army Scientific Advisory Panel and Department of Defense committees as well as Director of the Atomic Industrial Forum. He worked with Westinghouse in building nuclear reactors or advising on nuclear energy in Taiwan, South Korea, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Scotland, Japan, India, the Vatican, and Argentina necessitating extensive international travel. He also served on the committee to investigate the accident at Three Mile Island and made recommendations to the Electric Power Research Institute. He served on several Boards of Directors.

In June 1982 General and Mrs. Nichols were delighted with an invitation to join in celebrations of the 40th anniversary of Oak Ridge. Nichols recalled a memorable interview by a local Oak Ridge reporter during the parade, "She said her father always told her that she wouldn't have ever been born if it hadn't been for the atomic bomb. He was scheduled for part of the attack. He doubted he would have lived through it. He had been through Okinawa and when you consider the cost of Okinawa, why, Japan [mainland invasion] would have been much worse."

Following the parade, Nichols gave one of the key-note speeches recalling that he had been just 34 when he first came to what is now known as Oak Ridge on a "hot 2nd of July." Typical of Nichols, he focused his remarks on the work of others to achieve the Manhattan Project's success in ending the war. He also credited clear and concise directives. He recalled, "For example, on June 19th [1942] the Presidential approval of Dr. [Vannevar] Bush's recommendation to start construction of plants was endorsed to the new District Engineer by the simple words, 'For your information and appropriate action.'" Nichols certainly acted!

In all manner except title, Nichols acted as a Chief of Engineers while District Engineer of the Manhattan Engineer District. Responsible for over 125,000 military and civilian personnel, he was directly responsible for the R&D, design, construction and operation of the A-bomb production plants with a budget exceeding \$2B (over \$36B in 2026). In recognition of his miraculous achievement, he was awarded the Chiefs of Engineering Award for Outstanding Public Service in 1984. One of only five engineers to then receive the award, he acknowledged and expressed gratitude for the training and education received early in his military career and the US Army Corps of Engineers.

After extensive hours of interviews and writing, in 1987 General Nichols' book was published, *The Road to Trinity: A Personal Account of How America's Nuclear Policies Were Made*. *The New York Times* review stated it was, "the best possible book on the subject." Dr. Lawrence Suid of the US Army Corps of Engineers assisted with the project for over three years and his oral interviews with General Nichols contain a wealth of information.

In 1996 General Nichols was presented the United States Military Academy Association of Graduates' Distinguished Graduate Award. His citation read in part, "Throughout a lifetime of service to his country, General Nichols made lasting and invaluable contributions to the national security of the United States during periods of great international tension; his brilliant leadership in the development of atomic weapons

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and later in President Eisenhower's Atoms-For-Peace program exemplified outstanding devotion to the principles expressed in the West Point motto: 'DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY.'"

General Nichols' hope for the peaceful use of nuclear energy has proven to be the "environmentalists' dream" of a virtually inexhaustible source of carbon-free energy. His last published writing in June 1995 closed with, "My life spans almost 90 years of the 20th century; my story is still one of optimism. I believe that man was given the inherent ability to explore and discover the wonders of our universe and to use the beneficial aspects of each discovery and to control any harmful aspects."

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Thanks for this Historically Speaking column and series goes to Barbara Rogers Scollin, grandniece of General Kenneth D. Nichols. She has done an exceptional research initiative and has compiled the content of a book intended to be published soon.

This is the final Historically Speaking column of the 30 columns produced in this series. I have had tremendous positive response to the publication of this series. It will undoubtedly become a future researcher's dream come true regarding the life of Major General Kenneth D. Nichols.

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The Signing of the Atomic Energy Act by President Eisenhower
Seated (L>R): Senate Majority Leader William Knowland, (R), CA; President Dwight Eisenhower; Rep W. Sterling Cole, (R), NY; AEC Chairman Lewis Strauss.

Standing (L>R) AEC Gen Manager Kenneth D. Nichols; AEC Commissioner Henry DeWolf Smyth; Assistant Defense Secretary Donald Quarles; Chairman Military Liaison on Atomic Energy Gen Herbert Loper; Rep Carl Hinshaw, (R), CA; Sen Edwin Johnson, (D), CO; Rep James Van Zandt, (R), PA; Rep Frank K Melvin Price, (D), IL; and two unidentified individuals.

The White House, August 30, 1954.

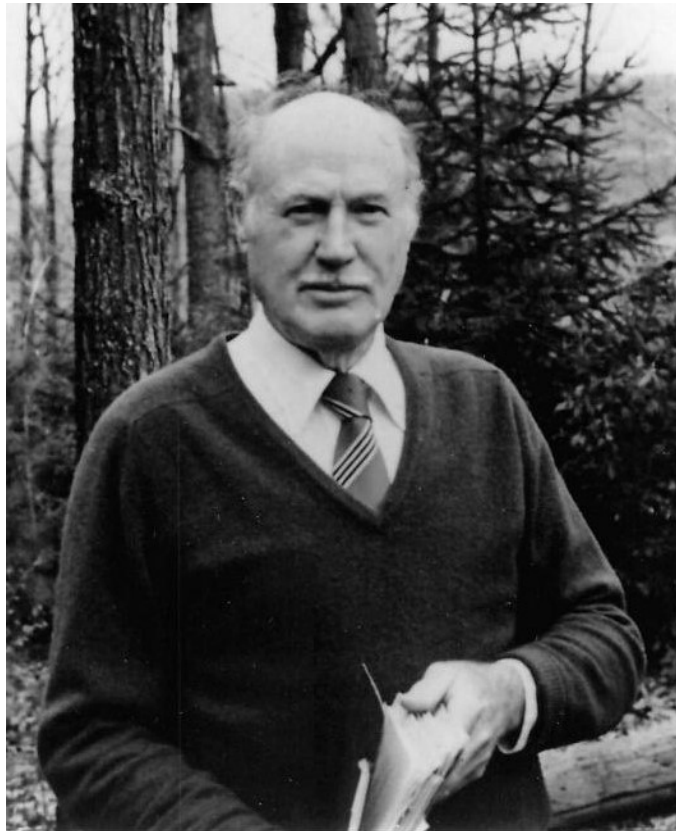
(Courtesy of <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/media/2999> White House Albums, National Park Service (Abbie Rowe): Photographs. Provided by Barbara Rogers Scollin)

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General Kenneth and Jacqueline Nichols attend the Oak Ridge 40th Anniversary, June 14, 1982. Photo by Ruth Carey. (Courtesy of the Oak Ridge Public Library)



Kenneth D. Nichols holds the manuscript of his book at Val d'Or, Nichols' residence, Dickerson, MD, 1980s. (Photo and Courtesy by K. David Nichols, Jr.)

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Major General Kenneth D. Nichols, Class of 1929; General William Westmoreland, Class of 1936; General Alexander Haig, Class of 1947; and Colonel Frank Borman II, Class of 1950, receive the 1996 Distinguished Graduate Award from Edward C. Meyer, President, Association of Graduates United States Military Academy, West Point, May 28, 1996. (Photo by West Point. Courtesy K. David Nichols, Jr.)