

Heritage Tourism, Historic Preservation & Economic Growth

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 12, 2012)

As we continue to look at the potential for Heritage Tourism in Oak Ridge, the 2007 Heritage Tourism Plan remains the key strategic document guiding our implementation.

I asked Katy Brown, Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau (ORCVB) president, to provide an update on the status of implementation of the 2007 Heritage Tourism Plan. She cited several things that have been accomplished, including informative wayfinding signs and the upgrade of the Oak Ridge room of the American Museum of Science and Energy; the Preserve America Grant that supported the touch-screen informational kiosks that guide visitors looking for more information while in our city, along with the concrete markers outside of the Municipal Building that tell the story of the community as our city transitioned from a government town to a thriving municipality. The city also used a portion of the Preserve America grant to archive an important piece of our history, our earliest records.

Katy mentioned the decision some years ago to feature the brand “Unlock the Secrets of America’s Secret City.” As an entire campaign, from business cards to advertising, to packaging and events, to brochures, this has been a popular brand. With the popularity of the Secret City Festival, and since this branding came into use, other community organizations and businesses have been seen to embrace the “Secret City” name as well.

In consultation with Katy and editing by me, I believe the following provides as accurate an update as can easily be made to the Eight Key Strategies of *Creating the Living story of “The Secret City.”*

1. **Upgrade Signage and Wayfinding** – The City of Oak Ridge, the Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce, the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau and Akins Crisp Public Strategies partnered with the Tennessee Department of Transportation to produce new wayfinding signage on major interstates, exits and access roads directing visitors to the federal facilities. The ORCVB and the ORHPA have also explored using interpretive signage for an historic walking trail around Jackson Square and also designating specific signage for historic homes and buildings. Some of these signs have been posted on historic buildings recently.
2. **Focus on the American Museum of Science & Energy and Historic Jackson Square**- It was noted in the plan that both the American Museum of Science and Energy and Jackson Square were in need of renovation and upgrading. Several years ago, AMSE updated their entire history room that tells the story of Oak Ridge to our visitors from across the country. Jackson Square has been the topic of much discussion over the years. From Masters Degree students at the University of Tennessee, to the Oak Ridge Revitalization Efforts, much emphasis has been put on the importance of revitalizing this area.

With the recent grant given to the City of Oak Ridge, and a boom in new businesses, the bustle of Jackson Square is growing. The Department of Energy grant of \$500,000 to stabilize The Guest House/Alexander Inn will add to the authentic historic structures preserved in the historic Jackson Square area.

Along with the Chapel on the Hill, this historic structure and the Jackson Square commercial district with its exceptionally well supported restaurants, the Oak Ridge Playhouse and the unique shops and recent addition of the CapitalMark Bank in the historic first bank building in Oak Ridge makes this area a prime heritage tourism location as well as a key center for

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commerce in Oak Ridge.

3. **Showcase the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge Heritage Assets** – The Manhattan Project is one of several focuses that the Oak Ridge Convention and Visitors Bureau use to promote our city to visitors. Much of our branding and marketing efforts relate to our history and heritage. The ORCVB has also supported and partnered with organizations whose efforts focus on revitalization and preservation.
4. **Develop “Secret City” branding and marketing** – Several years ago, the ORCVB began using the brand “Unlock the Secrets of America’s Secret City.” As an entire campaign, from our business cards to our advertising, to packaging and events, to our brochures, this has been a popular brand. With the popularity of the Secret City Festival, and since this branding came into use, we’ve seen other community organizations and businesses embrace the “Secret City” name as well.
5. **Create a more robust ORCVB** – while it would be nice to report that the ORCVB has received 100% of the Hotel/Motel taxes that have been generated in the last five years, the staff is very aware of the reality of the city’s financial situation. What we have done, is focused on better ways to promote our history by carving out more niche advertising opportunities, educating the public on our history, and staying on top of the latest trends like social media and online promotion.
6. **Determine the most appropriate NPS designation for Oak Ridge** – the CVB supports the designation of a Manhattan Project National Historic Park. The National Park Service is a tried and true organization that tells the complete story within the park system. We have an opportunity to work hand in hand with the “Nation’s Storyteller,” interpreting and communicating our story with the world. We are poised to benefit, if nothing more than being a gateway to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the number one visited National Park in the United States with approximately 9 Million visitors in 2010. According to the NPS website, nps.gov, the GSMNP generated \$718 million in economic impact for surrounding communities that year. Imagine if we Oak Ridge could capture only 1 percent of either of those numbers.
7. **Highlight the Signature Facilities** – Our signature facilities are key to telling the complete story of Oak Ridge. If we can provide tours, interactions with those who worked at there, or retell stories via recorded accounts of what it was like to work there, our visitors can experience these Signature Facilities first hand.
8. **Undertake a strategic Outreach Campaign** – The tourism industry has seen a shift in focus to more generating editorial and public relations opportunities rather than mostly paid advertising, and for a place like Oak Ridge, telling the story goes a lot farther than just looking at a third page ad that stands alone. Working diligently to introduce travel writers to our history, we’ve been able to put them in a room with those who tell our story best. People like Bill Wilcox, Margene Lyon, Colleen Black, and others have joined us for interviews for major publications and networks from across the world.

One project of note is the Preserve America Grant that was awarded to the city of Oak Ridge several years ago. Partnerships through this grant with the city, ORCVB and the ORHPA have produced touch-screen informational kiosks that guide visitors looking for more information while in our city, along with the concrete markers outside of the Municipal Building were also part of this grant, and tell the story of

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the community as our city transitioned from a government town to a thriving municipality. The city also used a portion of this grant to archive an important piece of our history, our earliest records.

Our community can continue to stay ahead of the Heritage Tourism game by keeping our experience authentic. Visitors want to feel as if they are living the experience. Several years ago, a small group proposed that a village of sorts, complete with various style housing and living quarters equipped with furnishings and style of the Manhattan Project era Oak Ridge, be built for visitors to tour while here.

There would be a "Williamsburg-style" staff available, who could present the story of Oak Ridge as if they were there. Imagine someone dressed in a 1940s' Army uniform and playing the role of Gen. Leslie Groves picking your brain on the best location for this East Tennessee portion of the project, or someone playing the role of military police stopping you at the gate upon arrival. Those would surely be memorable experiences to add to the authenticity of Oak Ridge's heritage.

When the Manhattan Project National Historic Park becomes a reality, there will be doors that will open to us. However, we cannot sit back and expect the people to just flow into the city. There will still be much to do in partnership with the NPS and the Department of Energy to promote our community and attract more visitors.

As a closing thought on the Creating the Living Story of "The Secret City" Heritage Tourism Plan he helped create, I asked Darrell Akins for his observation at this time. Here is what he said, "I am glad there is continuing interest in the suggestions we made a few years ago about taking fuller advantage of our community's heritage tourism potential. As we think about 'telling the Oak Ridge story' today, we should also think about how we can unify marketing ourselves for economic and community development, as well as to tourists. We have maintained local control of marketing to tourists, which is good, but we've 'out-sourced' the rest to regional groups. If we pull it all together and take responsibility here, Oak Ridge will be much better off. And that will be particularly true for our heritage tourism program."



The concrete markers outside of the Municipal Building are unveiled as part of the Preserve America grant and tell the story of how the city transitioned from a government town to a thriving municipality – a key element of our history that is a part of our potential for using Heritage Tourism as an economic development driver