

The HISTORIC Guest House/Alexander Inn – why save it? – part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 3, 2012)

Continuing with Bill Wilcox, Oak Ridge City Historian, as he tells us why it is important to save the HISTORIC Guest House/Alexander Inn. Bill says, “The first guest registered Aug. 5, 1943, as the Townsite (Jackson Square area) was just taking shape and it’s safe to say it started filling up in September, October, and December [of 1943] as first X-10 and then Y-12 began to go into production.”

“We know from X-10 history (courtesy of Carolyn Krause) that as the Graphite Reactor approached criticality in the wee hours of November 4, 1943 that a driver (Louis Slotin) was sent up to the Guest House to wake up and bring to X-10 the University of Chicago’s Metallurgical (‘Met’) Laboratory Director Nobel Laureate Arthur Holly Compton and the Manhattan Project’s lead scientist Enrico Fermi to oversee its approach to criticality at 5 AM.

“We have no wartime Guest Registers from the Hotel, but they would not be of any help in telling the names of the famous nuclear physicists who registered. Throughout the war, when physicists whose names might be recognized as nuclear experts from the papers they had published in physics journals or Nobel Prizes they had won, they were all given code names to use to keep from giving away Oak Ridge’s wartime missions.

“For instance, Arthur Holly Compton was Mr. Holly, Enrico Fermi was Mr. Farmer. Later when Niels Bohr, the world famous Danish physicist came to see Oak Ridge he was introduced as Professor Baker. Nobel Prize winner Ernest O. Lawrence whose group created the Calutrons for the Y-12 process was Mr. Lawson.

“The Nobel Laureates and Laureates-to-be who came to help with the Clinton Engineer Works Project include: Niels Bohr, Arthur Compton, Enrico Fermi, Ernest Lawrence, Eugene Wigner, Glenn Seaborg, and Harold Urey. Some came many times. Lawrence finally was given an apartment he came so often, and the Compton’s rented a ‘D’ house right across Olney Lane from Colonel K. D. Nichols.

“But in addition to these noted scientists, many other first-rank scientists came to consult at the plants like J. Robert Oppenheimer, Director of Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, whose portrait by Ed Westcott loftily holding his cigarette is much admired and often reproduced - taken in our own Guest House Lobby just to the right of the fireplace.

“Many of Lawrence’s Berkeley team came to help get Y-12 underway, as did those from Compton’s Met Lab in Chicago helping get the Graphite Reactor at X-10 built and into production. Similarly, top engineers and corporate chiefs of Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Company came, helping K-25 get built.

“These included John Dunning’s Columbia University team and the Kellex team under Dobie Keith and Al Baker as well as the Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Company team under George Felbeck. Philip Abelson, the ‘father’ of the liquid thermal diffusion plant at S-50 that utilized technology he had developed for the U. S. Navy, came often to help get that desperate last-minute enriching effort moving.

“And, in addition to the noted scientists we all like to brag about hosting, many top corporate officials of Y-12’s Tennessee Eastman Company, K-25’s Carbide and Carbon Chemicals Company, and X-10’s DuPont came to visit and inspect their operations and help make key operational and contractual decisions.

“President Roosevelt never planned to come, but his Secretary of War Henry Stimson, the man directly responsible for the Manhattan Project all through the war did come on April 11, 1945.

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“Our Oak Ridge top Army boss, Col. Kenneth D. Nichols in his memoir tells that the aging (to me a 77 year old youngster), Henry Stimson arrived with his military aide and General Groves in time ‘for lunch at the Guest House where they were to spend the night.’

“Stimson was awed, Nichols says, by the scientific and technical achievements he saw here and very eager to report to the President when he got back to Washington on the April 12th, only to learn that Roosevelt had died that very day. It was two weeks later that Stimson first briefed our new President Truman on the Manhattan Project.

“An even more numerous category of guests each week were the scores of Army Engineer Colonels, Majors, and Captains, and Lieutenants who came periodically to report at the ‘Castle on the Hill’ from the dozens of far-flung Manhattan Project offices all over the United States and even one in Canada.

“Whether the guests were in Who’s Who or not, all guests had to pay the same stiff wartime rates for rooms: The rate for a single room was \$2/night with a connecting bath, \$1.50 for a single with the community bath down the hall.

“The Guest House’s notables were off limits for Ed Westcott’s camera throughout the War for obvious reasons. There were no photo-ops! But one month after Peace was won, September 1945, the Army & Navy brass descended in force on our Town to bestow awards of Excellence (flags and pins) on our contractors, and Ed then has his fill of photo-ops.

“My favorite is his photo in the Guest House of two Secretaries of War! Henry Stimson on the left had just resigned the week before having served Presidents Roosevelt and Truman so long and so well, and the new Secretary Robert Patterson had just been in office a week.

“At the start of the year 1947, the Army turned everything over to the civilian Atomic Energy Commission. In a year or two after the war, the AEC brought in an experienced hotel manager, McKie Alexander from New Jersey to operate their Guest House as a commercial hotel.

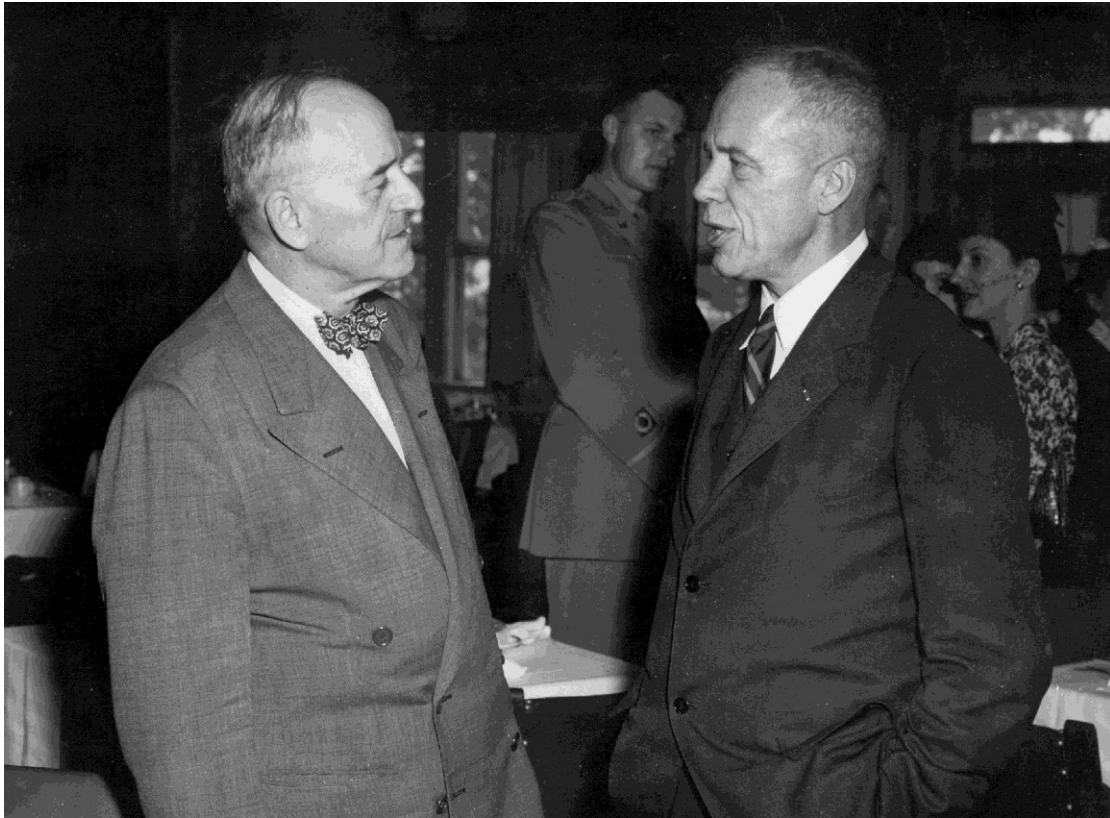
“The old place really hummed on the weekend of March 18/19/20, 1949 when the gates of the Secret City were opened to the public. Hollywood celebrities and notable elected officials from Nashville and Washington came to town and helped celebrate with speeches and parade.

“Rod Cameron, Hollywood Cowboy Star, rode his horse up the front steps of the Guest House, and U. S. Vice President Alben Barkley and Governors from Tennessee and the surrounding states as well as other notables sat down to a fine luncheon before an afternoon of speech making at our High School football field before thousands of Ridgers and visitors from the surrounding area.

Bill concludes his reasons to save the Guest House/Alexander Inn next week.

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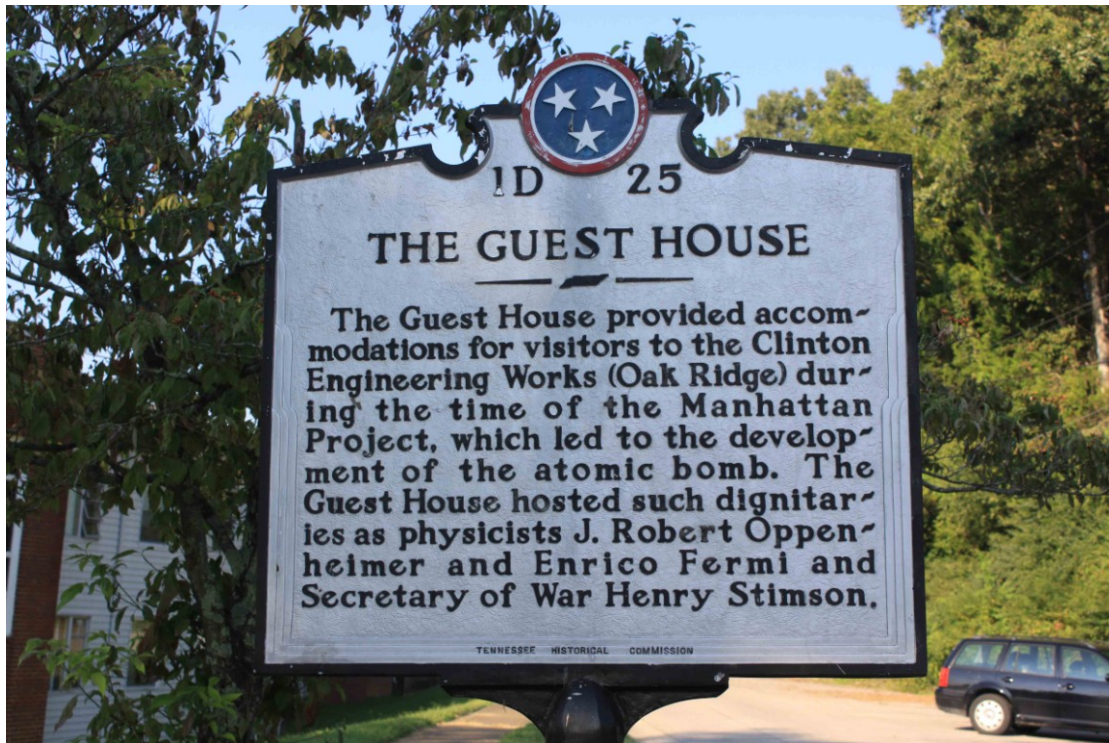
United States Secretaries of War: Henry Stimson on left and Robert Patterson on right



The Guest House/Alexander Inn as it actually exists today – photo made last week

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Historical Marker for the Guest House