

Why Oak Ridge?

The city of Oak Ridge was not officially on any map until 1949 when the gates were opened and citizens were allowed to come and go as they pleased. It was only then that Oak Ridge received its name. During the war years, it was referred to as Clinton Engineering Works (C.E.W.) because of its location near the town of Clinton.

In 1942, the 59,000-acre region was actually very rural and consisted of several smaller towns and a population of about 3,000.

The relatively low population of the area made acquisition of the land affordable for the federal government. The area was also accessible by highway and rail. Electricity and water were readily available thanks to the Clinch River and TVA's Norris Dam.

The topography of the area was also of major importance in the selection site. The valley Oak Ridge sits in is 17 miles long and is partitioned by several ridges which would have provided natural protection from any unforeseen disasters that might have occurred at the four major industrial plants. In addition, the distance from seacoasts and the proximity to Knoxville's labor source also contributed to the selection of 59,000 acres in East Tennessee.

However, there is a possibility that politics may have entered into the decision. Senator McKellar from Tennessee just may have influenced the choice. The story goes like this:

In August 1943, President Roosevelt decided to create the Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb. He needed a way to set aside a large sum of money without it becoming obvious what was being done. Roosevelt asked Senate Budget Committee Chairman McKellar if this could be done. McKellar is said to have replied, "Yes, Mr. President, I can do that for you ... now just where in Tennessee are you going to put that thang?"

A second McKellar story is related by Lester Fox, local automobile dealer. In 1942, Lester was attending the Oliver Springs High School. Lester and a friend were skipping school one day when as they walked by the telephone office, the operator leaned out the door and said, "Lester, go get the principal, he has an important



phone call!" Now, Lester is skipping school, but he and his friend go tell the principal what they were instructed to tell him. The principal went to the telephone office and took the call. When he returned to the school, he called all the students into an assembly and told them, "I just got a phone call from Senator McKellar who said for me to tell you to go home and tell your parents that the government is going to need to take your land for the war effort so you need to find other places to live." Lester swears this is the way many folks in the area that was to become the Manhattan Project first learned they were going to have to move off their land. In a matter of days, letters started showing up on the front doors of homes giving people only a few weeks to move and find another place to live.

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