

Cultural Resources

of the Oak Ridge Reservation

Ongoing efforts continue to preserve the rich prehistoric and historic cultural resources of the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE's) Oak Ridge Reservation (ORR). The reservation contains more than 45 known prehistoric sites (primarily burial mounds and archeological evidence of former structures), more than 250 historic pre-World War II structures, 31 cemeteries, and several historically significant Manhattan Project-era structures. Six historic ORR properties are individually listed in the **National Register of Historic Places**:

- Freels Bend Cabin,
- New Bethel Baptist Church and Cemetery,
- George Jones Memorial Baptist Church and Cemetery,
- Graphite Reactor,
- Oak Ridge Turnpike Checking Station, and
- Scarboro Road Checking Station.

Although not yet listed in the National Register, an area known as the Wheat Community African Burial Grounds was dedicated in June 2000 and a memorial monument erected.

The ORR area was first occupied by Native Americans more than 10,000 years ago, and members of the Overhill Cherokee tribe still lived in the East Tennessee region when European settlers arrived in the late 1700s. These settlers lived on farms or in four small communities called Elza, Robertsville, Scarboro, and Wheat. All but Elza were founded shortly after the Revolutionary War. In the early 1940s approximately 1,000 families—with names like Elkins, Freels, Grubb, Magill, Montgomery, Phillips, Reed, Roberts, Seiber, Taylor, Turpin, and Webb—inhabited the area.



*Freels Bend Cabin is a 19th-century double-pen house.
(Photo © R. K. McConathy)*



The interpretive center at the New Bethel Baptist Church and Cemetery contains historical displays and artifacts. (Photo © R. K. McConathy)

Freels Bend Cabin, located within the Three Bend Scenic and Wildlife Refuge, is an excellent example of early 19th-century log architecture. It is currently used as a science education center by Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL). Two churches represent the pre-World War II era on the ORR. **New Bethel Baptist Church and Cemetery**, founded in 1851, was officially closed by former church members as a house of worship in 1949. The **George Jones Memorial Baptist Church** is located in the former Wheat community. Members still use both churches for special events and homecoming celebrations.

World War II introduced a new era to the region. When the U.S. government acquired the land for the ORR in 1942, many existing buildings had to be bulldozed to



A monument honors the unknown people buried in a grove of trees at the Wheat Community African Burial Grounds. (Photo © R. K. McConathy)

make way for the top-secret World War II Manhattan Project. One of the new buildings, constructed in 1943, was the **Graphite Reactor** at ORNL. It was the world's first full-scale nuclear reactor to produce measurable quantities of plutonium. In 1946 it became the first reactor to produce radioactive isotopes for use in medical applications. The reactor was officially shut down in 1963.



The Graphite Reactor, above, is the only National Historic Landmark on the ORR.

A fuel slug from the reactor is pictured with a commemorative landmark medallion (upper left).

A scientist and workers remove radioactive material from a tray in the Graphite Reactor (lower left).



In addition to its listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the Graphite Reactor also was designated as a **National Historic Landmark** in 1966. Landmark designation is an official recognition of an historic property's national significance and is given to places where important historical events occurred. Fewer than 2,500 historic places bear this distinction. The Graphite Reactor received this special designation because of the national and international significance of its contributions to science and technology. The building now contains exhibits about the beginnings of the atomic age, reactor design, and current science and technology. When security considerations allow, seasonal tours of the ORR include a stop at the Graphite Reactor.

Both the **Oak Ridge Turnpike Checking Station** and the **Scarboro Road Checking Station** have been rehabilitated. These gatehouses are used for meetings and for DOE-sponsored educational, cultural, and civic activities.

The American Museum of Science and Energy, located at 300 South Tulane Avenue in Oak Ridge, is a repository and interpretive center for objects and artifacts associated with the ORR. The museum provides a thorough overview of the region before the establishment of the city in 1942, during World War II, and in the postwar era.



The Oak Ridge Turnpike Checking Station contains World War II-era furnishings.

(Photo © R. K. McConathy)

For more information about the reservation's cultural resources, please contact Pat Parr, ORNL Area Manager, 865-576-8123 or parrpd@ornl.gov, or Gary Hartman, DOE Cultural Resources Coordinator, 865-576-0273 or hartmangs@oro.doe.gov.