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Preserving the Manhattan Project

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When future generations look back on the 20th century, few events will rival the harnessing of nuclear energy as a turning point in world history, science and society. Yet, the Department of Energy has not always embraced its Manhattan Project origins. The presentation will focus on the progress made over the last 20 years to preserve the properties and first-hand accounts that for decades have been threatened with demolition and indifference. Since the mid-1950s, most remaining Manhattan Project properties at the Los Alamos National Laboratory had been abandoned. Among them was a cluster of wooden buildings called the “V Site.” This is where scientists assembled the “Gadget,” the world’s first atomic device tested on July 16, 1945. Regardless of its significance, the “V Site” buildings like all the rest were slated for demolition. The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) toured the properties in November 1998. Most could not believe that the world’s first atomic bomb was designed in such humble structures. The properties were declared to be “monumental in their lack of monumentality.” A Save America’s Treasures grant for \$700,000 was awarded to restore the properties. To raise the required matching funds, I left the Federal government and soon founded the Atomic Heritage Foundation. The presentation will trace the progress made over the last decade to generate interest and support nationwide to preserve the Manhattan Project heritage. Saving both the physical properties and first-hand accounts of the men and women have been a priority. Perhaps our most significant achievement may be legislation now under consideration by Congress to create a Manhattan Project National Historical Park. Seventy years later, the Manhattan Project is finally getting the recognition it deserves.