

February Meeting Summary: The Soul of the Manhattan Project with Katatra Vasquez

2-25-2026 at the Oak Ridge Civic Center

Katatra recently retired from working for the DOE and safeguarding the history of its historic places. With some of her newly self-directed time, one day she took her family on an outing to some of those historic places. From the mouths of babes came the inspiration for her next life-chapter: “Mom, why aren’t there any people in these pictures that look like us?” But Katatra knew there were many people in reality!

She found many African American people made a significant contribution to the Manhattan Project. Of the approximately 75,000 people working in Oak Ridge on the project, approximately 7,000 were African American. Those 7,000 filled the full gamut of roles, from mechanics, to machinists, to office workers, to scientists. On the project, everyone involved was pulling together toward a shared hope that they would change the trajectory of the war. However, there was still a tremendous amount of racism in the Manhattan Project. One example is the scientist, Carolyn Parker. Parker completed a master’s degree in physics at the University of Michigan -- the first African American woman known to receive that distinction. She was recruited to work as a research physicist with the Dayton Project, a division of the Manhattan Project. Then, in 1943, her team was tasked with separating and purifying polonium (used as the initiator for the atomic bombs).

Katatra found that the African American history with the Manhattan Project is one of place-based belonging and shared connections. She found that oral histories were a valuable resource, and there are many available through the Oak Ridge Library and online. The oral histories were especially valuable as they relayed a more full and balanced recounting of the actual experiences. There are also many books about that time which include bits of the history of the African American contribution. She noted that when she was working with the DOE most of the historians were white; and just did not have the cultural awareness and personal connections that let them see the full history.



There is a photo collection at the Scarboro Community Center, managed by the Scarboro Community Alumni Association, that goes back to at least 1947 and is well worth viewing. There are other permanent collections in the area with photos and memorabilia. The new Tri-County African American Cultural Museum in Oliver Springs is a good choice for a visit. And celebrating the 100th anniversary of Black History Month, there is a wonderful display at the Oak Ridge Library. Black history is American history.



Speaker bio: Award-winning author and environmental scientist Katatra Vasquez is passionate about revealing the contributions of the historically unknown in our shared American history to connect and inspire. A Dayton, Ohio, native and Tuskegee University graduate, Katatra now lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, where she spent over 20 years safeguarding America's historic spaces. Her career has earned her multiple honors, including recognition by the State of Tennessee Historical Commission and the Secretary of the Department of Energy.

Through her engaging children's books, *Atomic Hope: Our Words and Our Spaces: A STEAM Travel Guide*, *Josie's Hope: A Secret City Revealed*, and her new release, *Making A Little Red Wagon*, Katatra connects history, STEM, and storytelling to spark wonder and imagination. What began as a mother's effort to help her children see themselves in local American history has developed into a dynamic heritage education, consulting, and tourism business. She is the President of Atomic Hope LLC, where her company is dedicated to bridging historic stewardship with modern solutions. She is also the owner of Prolific by Design, a boutique publishing house dedicated to amplifying diverse voices. Most importantly, she's a proud mom on a mission to inspire people, especially kids everywhere, to see their own potential and learn from the pages of our shared American story.