



Episode 12, Manhattan Project Letter, New York City

Wes Cowan: Our last story investigates a curious connection between a secretary and the world's first atomic bomb. August, 1945, the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are annihilated by a horrific new weapon, the atomic bomb. It's the final chapter in the U.S. Army's top secret Manhattan Project. The blast almost certainly avert an even more deadly U.S. invasion of the Japanese mainland. But for the scientists who had built the weapon, joy over their success is muted by estimates of 100,000 deaths, many of them civilians. Although this new technology has tremendous potential for good, it also has nearly unlimited potential to destroy. More than half a century after the dawn of the nuclear age, two researchers in Manhattan have a curious collection of documents that they believe are somehow tied to this pivotal moment in history. I'm heading to the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History to meet Krista Rupe and Sandra Trenholm and see what they've found. The institute collects documents related to the story of freedom in the United States, primarily from colonization through reconstruction. This archive is one of their few holdings from the 20th century. Okay. What do we have here?

Krista Rupe: We have a collection of documents relating to the Manhattan Project. They were compiled by Miss Mildred Goldberg, who was a secretary on the project, and they include her personal recollections of what it was like to work there.

Wes: So, this is a group of documents that relate to the atomic bomb.

Krista: Yes, it is.

Wes: Wow. The documents include several copy-edited pages which appear to be a public statement and press release by scientists who'd worked on the project. "Preliminary statement of the Association of Manhattan District Scientists, New York City area. We, the members of the association feel a very special responsibility to the people of America because of the role we have had in developing the atomic bomb. And because our special awareness of the possibilities of atomic energy for the advance of our civilization or its utter destruction." Wow! I mean, this looks like some sort of a manifesto or...I mean, is that your interpretation?

Sandra Trenholm: That's what we believe. That's what we believe.

Wes: Wow. Cool. How did you guys get this stuff?

Sandra: We actually acquired it through auction in 1993, so we've had it for quite a while. We just haven't been able to figure out all the clues yet.

Wes: What is it that you want me to find out about this stuff?



Sandra: I think there's two main questions. The first about the preliminary statement that they issued. Why did they make it? Did they release it to the public? Was it for government only? We also want to know more about Mildred Goldberg herself.

Wes: This is a great topic. Now this is written apparently right at the cusp of the beginning of the Cold War and completely relevant today. I'm going to need to get copies of these. The press release and manifesto are attributed to a Dr. Francis Bonner and a Dr. Irving Kaplan. The manifesto was a plea by atomic scientists for reduced secrecy surrounding nuclear technology following the war. There are a whole number of underlined headings, like "There is no secret of the atomic bomb. Secrecy will act as a deterrent to scientific research and development in the United States," and so on. They argue that secrecy risks provoking an international arms race hampering the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. And on the last page is signed, "Cordially yours, Francis H. Bonner, Secretary of the Executive Committee." He even drew a cute little caricature of himself wearing a nice bowtie. The archive includes a memoir by Mildred Goldberg, the secretary who apparently collected the documents. And these handwritten notes look like a newsletter. Listen to this, "We must not be fooled by minor modifications in the May-Johnson Bill, which do not modify the totalitarian tenor of the bill in any way." Whatever it was, this May-Johnson Bill appears to have gotten scientists pretty riled up. It's very interesting. They're talking about it in this newsletter here that "scientists have taken Washington by storm," and "the need for a united scientific front." The question is, what does this all mean? I'm heading to the New York Public Library of Science, Industry and Business. From its very inception in August of 1942, secrecy had been the guiding principle of the Manhattan Project. Here's a letter from Einstein written to Roosevelt in 1939. In the last part of this letter he writes Roosevelt, "I understand that Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from the Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over." And if you read between the lines, what he's saying to Roosevelt is hey, the Nazis are probably making a nuclear weapon. We'd better get on it. Spearheaded by Army Corp of Engineers General Leslie Groves and physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, it employed some of the world's finest scientific minds at covert facilities in New York and Chicago, and at Los Alamos, New Mexico, Hanford, Washington and Oak Ridge, Tennessee. You know, once the Manhattan Project really got off the ground, it was almost mind boggling how huge it was. More than 100,000 people were employed in this, in cities all over the United States. And, in fact, places like Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which really didn't exist before the Manhattan Project sort of grew up overnight. The Manhattan Project was so secret that not even Vice President Truman knew about it until after President Roosevelt's death in 1945. And this is interesting. After the Japanese surrender, the May-Johnson Bill was a congressional effort to preserve secrecy and keep nuclear affairs under the control of the military. It was endorsed by President Truman. This is all starting to make sense. These documents refer to this group of scientists who had organized in response to the May-Johnson Bill. And they hold a press conference where they're saying, this can't happen. These documents are more than 60 years old. But it's possible that the people involved are still alive. In her memoir, Mildred Goldberg describes herself as a starry-eyed newlywed. So she was probably quite young. Unfortunately, there are dozens of Mildred Goldbergs listed in the phone directory. Let's see if I can find



anything on the scientists, Irving Kaplan and Francis Bonner. Looks like Kaplan died in 1997. Let's see what I can find out about Bonner. Let's see what it says for Bonner. Oh, okay. Here's a Francis T. Bonner, who's listed as a professor emeritus at SUNY Stony Brook. Probably the same guy. I'm headed out to Long Island, New York, to meet Dr. Bonner and find out what prompted him to speak out against the May-Johnson Bill more than 60 years ago. Nice to meet you.

Dr. Francis Bonner: Very nice to meet you.

Wes: Dr. Bonner tells me he was part of a team of scientists at Columbia University working in extreme secrecy. They designed one of the crucial systems for making an atomic bomb, the gaseous diffusion process. It was one of the methods the wartime project used to separate the rare isotope U-235 from the more common uranium isotopes. U-235 is key to an atomic chain reaction. You guys at Columbia were basically working in isolation then, more or less.

Dr. Bonner: More or less. But the principle was you just know what you need to know.

Wes: Though he knew he was working on the atomic bomb, Dr. Bonner had no idea that we had successfully built and tested one until August 6th, 1945, when the United States bombed Hiroshima.

Dr. Bonner: There was a feeling of triumph. Thank God it's going to end the war. But then at the same time you began to think about what this means for the future for us and the rest of the world.

Wes: The scientists believed that military secrecy was necessary in a time of war. But that it would be a disaster to continue such a policy in peacetime.

Dr. Bonner: There had been some preliminary meetings of people in the lab concerned about the future of atomic energy, recognition that this is controlled by the military. Important that that not continue. And so the organization was formed. I was elected to be secretary.

Wes: I have some papers here that I'd like for you to look at. Do you recognize that handwriting?

Dr. Bonner: I sure do. So these are minutes of the meeting which I had handwritten and I must have taken it to a secretary to be typed. And somehow or other they still exist. One the last page I see that I even made myself a little self-portrait.

Wes: I was kind of hoping you would be wearing a nice bowtie today.

Dr. Bonner: [Laughs] And a crew cut.



Wes: The organization was known as the Association of Manhattan Project Scientists, and it quickly became active in public debate. In the minutes you discuss this May-Johnson Bill.

Dr. Bonner: Yes. We went to battle against the May-Johnson Bill. We became lobbyists. We went down to Washington and met with representatives and senators and held press conferences. It was a heady time, I must say.

Wes: Their effective lobbying led directly to the defeat of the May-Johnson legislation.

Dr. Bonner: Well, it was very sweet when the May-Johnson Bill was defeated.

Wes: I explain how Krista and Sandra wanted to get in touch with the secretary who had saved these notes. Dr. Bonner doesn't remember Mildred, but he does recall one of the people mentioned in her memoir. Mildred had a friend named Dr Homer Jacobson.

Dr. Bonner: Yeah. I know him. In fact, I had a telephone conversation with him today.

Wes: So he's still alive?

Dr. Bonner: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

Wes: Dr. Jacobson tells me Mildred Goldberg is alive and well in a retirement community in Arizona. She agrees to fly to New York and meet me. I'm meeting her at the old Nash Building in Harlem. During the war this former car dealership was requisitioned by the Army and secretly housed Manhattan Project scientists from Columbia University.

Wes: Hi, Mildred?

Mildred Goldberg: Hi.

Wes: Mildred tells me she spent three years of her life in this building. But it's noisy here, so we head to a more quiet spot. I want to learn more about this woman who helped keep the biggest secret of World War II.

Mildred: I had to put the documents into the safe, lock the safe. But I really never had an inkling of what it was that was so secret.

Wes: So you didn't really know that the scientists were working on the atomic bomb? You had to have known.



Mildred: No. I didn't even know what an atomic bomb was.

Wes: Well, I have some documents here that I want to show you to see if you remember these. Now have you ever seen that before?

Mildred: Oh, I surely, surely have. My innermost soul is bared in these pages.

Wes: Mildred can still remember the day she was handed Dr. Bonner's handwritten pages to type. Here was something very different from the scientific formulas to which she'd become accustomed. "We, the members of the association" had the same democratic echoes as another long ago American manifesto – "We the people".

Mildred: I read that startling first sentence and I felt a great sense of history. I felt an overwhelming emotion that I was holding something extremely important.

Wes: The fact that you saved them shows unbelievable foresight. You know, they could have easily ended up in the garbage can in the Nash Building somewhere.

Mildred: That's right. That's what I would have done had I not felt a stirring of something.

Wes: The scientist's victory over the May-Johnson Bill was clearly important to them at the time, but I'm still not clear on its long term significance. And another thing, why had they gone public rather than simply taking their concerns to the president or the military? Dr. Robert Norris is author of "Racing for The Bomb" and an expert on government secrecy and nuclear proliferation. He's familiar with our group, but he says during the war scientists at the University of Chicago had petitioned President Truman to conduct a public demonstration of the weapon in order to persuade the Japanese to surrender without an actual bombing of the city.

Dr. Norris: Show them how massive this is. If you don't surrender, then we might use this militarily on you. So that was one route that the scientists thought might be taken. But the report never made it very high in official circles.

Wes: So Truman never saw the letter?

Dr. Norris: No. There's evidence that they never saw it.

Wes: With their earlier warnings falling on deaf ears the scientists, which included Bonner and Kaplan, went public. Norris says they not only defeated the May-Johnson Bill, but their support of Senator Brian McMahon's replacement legislation left a profound imprint on history.



Dr. Norris: His name is now synonymous with the atomic Energy Act of 1946, which replaces this. And the scientists eventually support that effort. And, that's really the piece of legislation that is mainly dictating the way things are today.

Wes: The civilian controlled Atomic Energy Commission authorized by the new legislation marked a fundamental transfer of power. But not all of the scientists warnings were heeded. With the advent of a new cold war, continuing military secrecy helped fuel the arms race.

Dr. Norris: They foretold a lot of what was to come. On the U.S. side we built 70,000 nuclear weapons. 70,000.

Wes: What Robert says next makes me realize just how important Krista and Sandra's documents truly are.

Wes: Well, hi guys.

Sandra: Hi.

Krista: Hi.

Wes: You know, this was a great project. You wanted to know what the significance of these is. And they're really, in my opinion, really significant. I tell them their documents were instrumental in the creation of the civilian control of the Atomic Energy Commission. But it wasn't until I'd spoken with Robert Norris that I understood the full significance of what the nuclear scientists had accomplished. Robert explained that today groups like the Federation of American Scientists are a key component of public debate, with insight on issues ranging from nuclear energy to climate change. But it had all started with the scientists who listened to their conscience in the uncertain days following World War II.

Dr. Norris: We see the beginnings of something new in American history, really; the birth of the scientist movement, it was called. Prior to World War II, the scientists were figures that didn't really have a public role. But afterwards they did and these documents show the beginnings of that.

Wes: You guys also wanted to know about Mildred Goldberg, that person who collected these papers. Well, I've got a surprise for you. Mildred, come on in.

Sandra: Oh, my gosh.

Wes: What do you think, guys?



Krista: Hi.

Mildred: Hi. It's a pleasure to meet you.

Krista: Good to meet you too.

Sandra: I'm Sandra. It's nice to meet you.

Mildred: How do you do?

Sandra: Oh, my gosh.

Krista: We were very touched by your statements and wanted to know more about you, so...this is a treat.

Sandra: Are these the only documents you ever saved from the project?

Mildred: The only documents that ever meant anything to me. And this page, the very first sentence is what persuaded me to take it home.