

headlines

Johnson Space Center Celebrates 50th anniversary

Exploring the unknown is engrained in American culture. In the early days of America, Lewis and Clark discovered new truths about the Louisiana and Oregon territories, and Matthew Henson explored the North Pole. In the last half-century, astronauts have become the nation's premier explorers of new frontiers. The people and activities at Johnson Space Center are central to NASA's -- and our nation's -- revolutionary discoveries. JSC will celebrate 50 years of milestones on Sept. 19.

JSC's Roots

Since 1961, JSC has lead NASA's manned space exploration efforts by training and selecting astronauts, serving as home to mission control and the communications nerve center for all spaceflight missions and managing the Mercury, Apollo and Space Shuttle programs. JSC's history is rich, and the center's accomplishments are vast.

After the Soviet Union sent a dog to the moon aboard Sputnik 2, the race against the Russians to fly the first man to the moon was in full swing. President John F. Kennedy was committed to the challenge. To achieve this ambitious effort, NASA formed the Space Task Group (STG) and Project Mercury was born. After housing at several NASA locations such as the Langley Research Center and the Goddard Space Flight Center, NASA headquarters decided to construct a new facility specifically for STG, Project Mercury, and all manned spaceflight efforts.

On Sept. 19, 1961, NASA announced that the new facility would be located in Houston, named the Manned Spacecraft Center, and built on land donated by Rice University. NASA selected Houston because of its proximity to Ellington Air Force Base, its association with Rice University and then Vice President, Lyndon B. Johnson's influence and support of NASA's space exploration programs and because Texas was his home state.

During construction of the Manned Spacecraft Center, STG employees worked in off-site buildings throughout Houston such as the Gulfgate Shopping Center. Although the STG employees were scattered throughout the city, the milestones were met on Project Mercury, which were to orbit a manned spacecraft around Earth, investigate man's ability to function in space and to recover both man and spacecraft safely. Although short, Mercury was successful. On Feb. 20,



A ground level view of the Manned Spacecraft Center site prior to ground breaking and the beginning of construction. Cows once grazed the land where MSC now stands.

1962, John Glenn became the first American man to orbit the Earth and return home safely. After Project Mercury ended in 1963, the Manned Spacecraft Center was ready to open for business in June 1964. A year later, the Space Environment Simulation Laboratory, the Mission Control Center, the Flight Acceleration Facility and the Vibration and Acoustic Test Facility were ready for operation.

Changes

Between 1962 and 1966, NASA managed Project Gemini. Its objective was to develop techniques to advance space flight technology and equipment and to prepare humans to travel to the moon. During Gemini, the first American space walks were conducted and new rendezvous and docking procedures were performed.

Between 1963 and 1972, The Apollo Project landed humans on the moon. The first landing was in 1969 during Apollo 11. Astronauts Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin and Neil Armstrong made history on June 20, 1969, when they became the first humans ever to walk on the moon. The three-hour moon walk solidified America as the front runners in space exploration. In addition to walking on the moon, the astronauts of Apollo collected a wealth of scientific data. Almost 850 pounds of lunar rocks were obtained and returned to Earth during the Apollo era.



President Lyndon B. Johnson holds a Gemini-4 souvenir photo album. L to R: James E. Webb; James A. McDivitt; Dr. Robert C. Seamans Jr.; and Edward H. White II. McDivitt holds a framed picture of White's "spacewalk" that was also given to the president.

Following the death of former President, Lyndon B. Johnson in Jan., 1973, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution to name the Manned Spacecraft Center after the former president. MSC became the Johnson Space Center on Feb. 17, 1973.

The Future

Throughout the seventies and eighties, space exploration quickly advanced for JSC. In 1973, Skylab was the NASA's first space station where astronauts conducted research and experiments. In 1975, Apollo-Soyuz was the first human spacecraft mission conducted jointly by America and Russia.

In 1981, The Space Shuttle Program allowed astronaut crews and payloads of 65,000 pounds to orbit Earth. Space shuttle was special because it was NASA's first ever reusable spacecraft. Through the shuttle program, astronauts repaired satellites, conducted cutting-edge research and developed innovative technology later used for spin-off technologies such as cool suits for children suffering from severe sun-sensitive illnesses.

Louis Parker, Public Affairs specialist and one of JSC's first co-ops, reflects on the achievements of JSC and the space shuttle.

"I am extremely proud of the successes of JSC," Parker said. "For humankind to exist, we must continue to explore and expand our imaginations. Our intellect grows and the human race is stronger when discoveries are made."

The space shuttle was NASA's longest program, spanning from 1981 to 2011.

Although the space shuttle is now a part of JSC's history, the work of the

center continues with the International Space Station, which is the most complex and innovative space exploration endeavor yet. The space station is a 24/7 working science laboratory, located in Earth's low orbit and involves collaboration between 16 nations. Station allows astronauts to test new technologies and conduct experiments in human biology, astrology, meteorology and the possibility of future travel to Mars.

To celebrate the historical accomplishments of JSC, there are festivities planned around the center. Stay tuned for announcements in JSC Today.

Fun fact: Hollywood and NASA

NASA is the home for space exploration. When Hollywood has movies in the works related to space, they often shoot on the grounds of a NASA sight. In the mid-seventies, the movie Futureworld was shot and filmed at JSC. The movie starred Blythe Danner, Peter Fonda and Yul Brenner. Blythe Danner is an award-winning actress and mother of actress Gwyneth Paltrow. While filming Futureworld, Danner brought baby Gwyneth to the set every day. Louis Parker, Public Affairs specialist, had the opportunity to help the film crew of the movie and visit with Danner.

"She was so nice and friendly," Parker said. "One day we even sat and talked for a good while over tea. When people ask me about one of my most memorable moments at NASA, I always tell them that I held Gwyneth Paltrow, future Academy Award winning actress, when she was seven months old."

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Updated: 09/06/2011

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