

THE FIRST DAYS IN **HOUSTON**

By Burton Chapman



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During his visit to Houston in 1962, President John F. Kennedy (center) toured the Rich Building, located on the corner of Telephone Road and Westover, that served as the temporary spacecraft research and development facility. Also pictured is Manned Spacecraft Center Director Bob Gilruth (left) and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.



The East End State Bank building at 4200 Leeland became home to the NASA personnel offices and NASA credit union. Today, it is the City of Houston Utility Customer Service.

It may seem hard to believe today,

but at least a dozen of the sturdy, conventional, old buildings that are scattered throughout southeast Houston have an amazing and momentous history. They were once used as the space age laboratories and offices of some of the most brilliant NASA astronauts and scientists in the race to put a man on the moon. One of these buildings on Telephone Road was even visited by President John F. Kennedy on his tour of the nation's space facilities. In September 1961, the federal government named Houston as the location for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Manned Spacecraft Center, previously housed at Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia. While permanent NASA facilities were being constructed in the Clear Lake City area, a variety of buildings were leased throughout southeast Houston. These buildings became the first home to NASA in Houston.

Time was of the essence when President Kennedy and space program officials set their sights on being the first nation to land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was an urgency to bring the United States space program up to the level of the Soviet Union. The Soviets launched the first satellite into orbit in 1957. The Soviets were the first to put a man into orbit in April 1961. There was a concern among the American government and citizens that the Soviets may have been gaining an edge in technology and military capability. This concern led to many government meetings over the following month to consider what should be the next step in the U.S. space program. In a speech on May 25, 1961, President Kennedy announced that "this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to Earth."¹ Once Houston was named as the Manned Spacecraft Center (MSC), there was no time to waste. Work had to begin in Houston immediately while the Center was being

constructed. At least a dozen buildings throughout southeast Houston and Ellington Air Force Base were leased by NASA. Surprisingly, most of the buildings are still around and in use today, over forty-five years after NASA moved to its permanent home near Clear Lake on a road now known as NASA Parkway.

One of these interim NASA buildings with an especially fascinating history is the Phil Rich Fan Company Building, constructed at the corner of Telephone Road and Westover for the company's own use in 1961. The Rich Fan Company was beginning to move into the new building when the company was contacted by members of the Houston Chamber of Commerce and the federal government regarding use of the building. Government officials said that President Kennedy was planning to put a man on the moon and they needed the building for use in the manned space program. The government and the Rich Fan Company agreed to a price for leasing the building for two years with two one-year options. The company put in several hundred thousand dollars of improvements requested by NASA. Work then began in the building as the Space Flight Office.²

Keeping a travel schedule typical of presidents today, President Kennedy made a whirlwind two-day tour, in September 1962, of four of the nation's space facilities located in four different states. The day before coming to Houston, Kennedy toured NASA facilities in Huntsville, Alabama, and Cape Canaveral, Florida. After touring Houston facilities in the morning of the second day of the tour, he flew to St. Louis to visit a McDonnell Aircraft Corporation plant responsible for spacecraft manufacturing.³ It is of historical significance that Kennedy made such an effort to champion the space program in nearly the peak of Cold War tensions. At the time of Kennedy's Houston visit, the Cuban Missile Crisis was about a month away. The success of the space program went hand in hand with the idea of beating the Soviets and winning the Cold War.

NASA S62-03939



The interim headquarters for the Manned Spacecraft Center was in the Farnsworth-Chambers Building, at the intersection of South Wayside and Wheeler.

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Roberts Carpet location at 4750 Gulf Freeway at Canada Dry Street housed the machine shop for the Technical Services Division.

NASA S62-00518



The Life Sciences Division was housed in the Lane-Wells Building, 2002 Wayside.

PHOTO COURTESY KUHT CHANNEL 8-PBS.



A television studio building at 4513 Cullen became NASA's Computer and Data Receiving Division. After NASA moved out, KUHT Channel 8 moved in.

“the exploration of space ...



NASA S62-04739

Before operations were completely housed at its newly constructed location, some 1,500 personnel worked at Ellington Air Force Base in renovated World War II barrack structures.

During the Houston visit, President Kennedy delivered a speech to forty thousand people in Rice University Stadium. He was very instrumental in promoting the importance of the nation's manned space program. He reiterated his support in his speech with statements like, “the exploration of space ... is one of the great adventures of all time, and no nation which expects to be the leader of other nations can expect to stay behind in this race for space.”⁴ After delivering the speech at Rice Stadium, his motorcade went to Telephone Road. Approximately forty thousand people lined the streets between Rice Stadium and the NASA facility to see Kennedy. Upon arrival, Kennedy had a one-hour classified briefing by NASA officials. He then toured the model of the Apollo lunar landing vehicle at the site. The vehicle was nicknamed the “Lunar Bug” because of its massive body supported by fifteen-foot legs. Kennedy had his questions answered by astronaut Alan Shepard and other NASA officials. The president was presented with a small desk model of the Apollo Command Module. In a short speech before the “Lunar Bug,” he said that attempts to place the manned vehicle on the moon may come “within the next five or six years.” This was the most definite date announced publicly so far by American officials. Kennedy departed from the Rich Building for Houston International Airport (now William P. Hobby Airport) by way

of Telephone Road. He flew to St. Louis to tour the McDonnell plant and then back to the White House that evening.⁵

Permanent facilities in Clear Lake were eventually opened and the final move from leased facilities like the Rich Building began on June 24, 1964.⁶ The Rich Fan Company never occupied the building after NASA moved out. They had since built a plant in another location in west Houston. The Rich Fan Company operated for many more years before being sold to Sunbeam in 1981. Phil Rich's son Hershel was president of the company through these years. According to Hershel Rich, the leasing of the building to NASA was not the great windfall that some may have expected. He states that the company basically broke even financially from the leasing of the building for twenty-seven months to NASA. Taxes had to be paid on the improvements that NASA requested. Rich states that NASA left in the middle of the lease, leaving the building vacant for about one year before the Ambox Corporation bought it. However, Rich reasons that the excitement of seeing the space landing mock-ups and getting to talk with some of the first people to work for NASA made the experience worth it.⁷ The building is in use today by the Ambox Corporation in the metal works services industry.

Another interim NASA facility that has had an intriguing history is the Farnsworth-Chambers building at the intersection of Wheeler and South Wayside. The building was designed by an admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural style. It includes lots of long horizontal lines and a broad, rambling layout. The building was used for the MSC headquarters in the early 1960s. After NASA moved out, it was leased by various companies from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. Since 1976, the building has been owned by the City of Houston. It is still a “headquarters,” but this time for the Houston Parks and Recreation Department. The City of Houston is currently renovating the building while retaining the structure's unique charm.⁸



NASA S62-03172

The Canada Dry Bottling Plant at 4750 Gulf Freeway would become the NASA Technical Services Division.



PHOTO BY BURTON CHAPMAN

Ambox Corporation owns what was formerly the Rich Building at 6040 Telephone Road.



NASA S62-00800

The Minneapolis-Honeywell Building at 5440 Gulf Freeway was once home to the Public Affairs Office.



NASA S62-06240

NASA occupied fifteen different temporary locations, including the former Veteran's Administration Building, 2320 La Branch.

is one of the great adventures of all time ...”

The Lane-Wells building on the east side of the Gulf Freeway on South Wayside was home to Dr. Stan White’s Life Sciences Division. The two-story, red-bricked building is in excellent condition today and is known as the St. Austin Center. It is a community center that is used for a variety of purposes such as a meeting place for the Idylwood Civic Club, a home of the Christus Community Health Ministry, and offices for some of the nuns from the neighboring Villa de Matel Convent.

An old Canada Dry Bottling Plant at 4750 Gulf Freeway was turned into NASA’s Technical Services Division. The building was then used by Simmons Carpet for several decades after NASA moved out. Today, the building is a warehouse for Roberts Carpet. Most of the original building’s walls and foundation are intact, but newly constructed walls are built around them. Three of the original walls are visible only from the inside of the warehouse. The fourth original wall that faced the freeway had to be demolished to widen the Gulf Freeway and its service roads.⁹

A television studio building at 4513 Cullen on the University of Houston (UH) campus became the NASA Computer and Data Receiving Division. It had been used by KNUZ-Channel 39 and KTRK-Channel 13 through 1960. After NASA moved out, KUHT-Channel 8-PBS moved into the building.¹⁰ The Quonset hut-shaped building is still on the UH campus. It is surrounded by satellites at the south end of the large parking lot across Wheeler from Oberholtzer Hall.

Once you know which buildings to look for, you will encounter former interim NASA buildings virtually everywhere you turn in southeast Houston. It is obvious what a presence NASA had on the southeast side in the early 1960s. These buildings were vital in providing space on short notice for the men and women who were working under pressure to reach the goal of landing a man on the moon. Be mindful of the unique history and importance of these buildings the next time you drive through southeast Houston. ★



NASA S62-03842



NASA S63-00893

The Stahl and Myers Building provided temporary offices for Project Mercury, Gemini, Apollo, and Flight Operations Division.

NASA used four of the six apartment buildings for office space in the Franklin Development Complex on Beatty Street.



Testing of the Gemini spacesuit was conducted in the Lane-Wells building until facilities were built on the permanent site of the Manned Spacecraft Center.

NASA S62-08573