

Cape Canaveral: Launchpad to the Stars

Spanish Discovery and Origin of Name

European explorer Ponce de León first discovered Cape Canaveral in 1513. He initially called the area Corrientes, a Spanish word that described the strong currents he experienced off its coast.

At that time, the Ais Indians inhabited the area. De León and another European, Francisco Gordillo, had a confrontation with them. The Ais had developed a method of making cane arrows with razor sharp ends. The cane arrows killed many Europeans. As a result of that battle, the name Canaveral, meaning cane bearer, began appearing on maps of the area.

Missile Testing Station

The United States Air Force acquired the land at Cape Canaveral in the 1940s. In late 1950, it opened a missile testing station there. The location was perfect for testing missiles:

- It was isolated and would not threaten humans.
- The climate was temperate year round and provided a great many launching opportunities.
- It was on the coast and had access to tracking stations in the Caribbean.

Beginning of the Space Program

On July 24, 1950, a small rocket was launched from Cape Canaveral marking the true beginning of the space program. Rockets were launched throughout the next decade in an effort to keep up with the Soviet Union's budding space program.

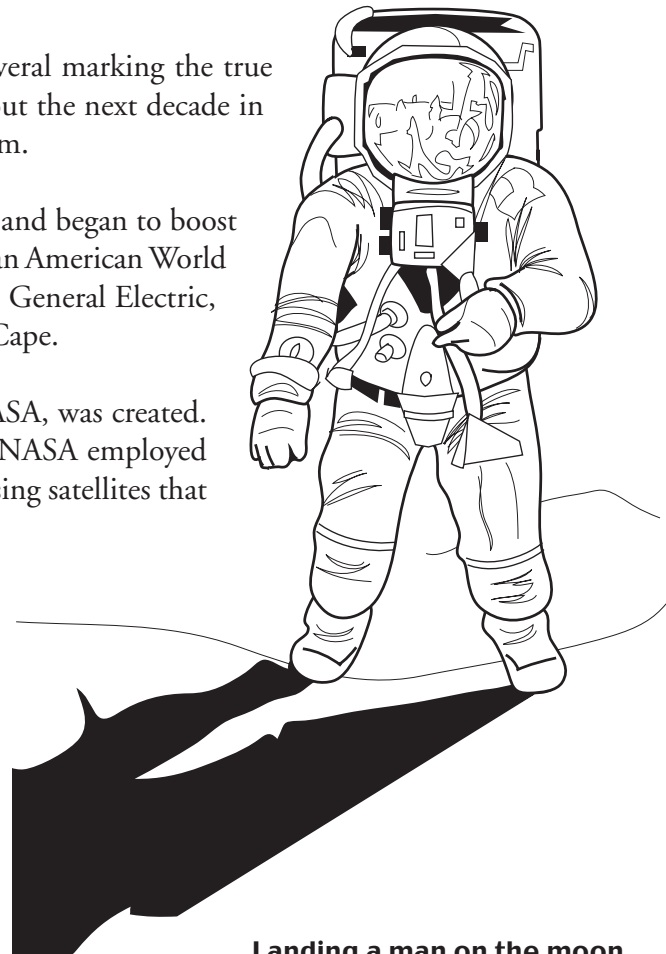
The Cape Canaveral space program brought businesses to Florida and began to boost the economy. Jobs and opportunities became available in the area. Pan American World Airways, the Radio Corporation of America, TransWorld Airlines, General Electric, and the Martin-Marietta Company all opened branches near the Cape.

In 1958, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NASA, was created. NASA is a federal agency chartered to conduct space operations. NASA employed mostly civilians. Originally, NASA oversaw launching and supervising satellites that had scientific, weather, and communication capabilities.

Goal: Man on the Moon

In 1961, when President John F. Kennedy announced that the United States would "put a man on the moon" before the end of the decade, NASA's space program took on an entirely new sense of importance.

Project Mercury was developed to enable man to orbit the earth. The capsules used in this project were only large enough for one man. On February 20, 1962, John Glenn became the first American to go into orbit.



Landing a man on the moon was an important milestone in the exploration of space.

In 1963, NASA acquired almost 90,000 acres on Merritt Island near the Cape. A large complex of buildings was established on the property destined to become the hub of the American space industry. In that complex, the astronauts were trained and the space rockets were built. When President Kennedy was assassinated later in the year, the Cape's name was changed to Cape Kennedy, but it was later changed back to Cape Canaveral. However, the complex was renamed the Kennedy Space Center.

The next step was the development of the Gemini Program. This program involved building larger spacecraft that could hold two astronauts. The Gemini Program initiated docking with other spacecrafts, extended the length of space flights, and made possible space walks to gain more information about the unknown frontier of space. The program was very successful and all of the goals were met within the decade.

The space program continued to expand with the Apollo Program. The Apollo Program finally fulfilled the promise made by Kennedy when, on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong stepped on the surface of the moon and said, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Visits to the moon continued as NASA continued to redesign itself and its mission.

Space Shuttle

The space shuttle program began in the 70s and flourished in the 80s. Florida once again became the center of attention as this new spacecraft concept made space travel less of a dream and more of a reality. Attending launches became an exciting experience for Floridians and other Americans. Throughout the state, people who had never thought about the space program could stand outside their homes and watch the shuttle go into space. The entire state suffered on January 28, 1986 when the Challenger space shuttle exploded and killed all seven members of the crew, including teacher Christa McAuliffe, the first civilian astronaut.

Cape Canaveral Today: Launchpad to the Stars

Despite tragedy and setbacks, Florida remains closely associated with NASA and the space program. Today, young and old tourists can go to Cape Canaveral and visit the Kennedy Space Center, Spaceport USA, and the Astronaut Hall of Fame. They can visit exhibitions that recount the history of manned space flight, take guided tours of launchpads, and find out all about NASA and its plans for the future. The Kennedy Space Center opens a fascinating window to the vastness of space. It has become a launchpad to the stars.

