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## “Rocket City” Expands

*H*untsville celebrated the launch of Explorer I with fireworks in the streets. National attention focused on the city, once devoted almost entirely to growing cotton. Huntsville got a place on the map and became known as the “Rocket City.” Von Braun’s picture appeared on the cover of *Time*.

The celebration in Huntsville in 1958 marked the eighth year since the rocket team had moved to Huntsville. Much had changed even before the launch of Explorer I. Cotton traders and mule-drawn wagons that had been so much in evidence in the first half of the century were gone. When the German team arrived in 1950, Huntsville’s population was 16,000. By 1956, it had grown to 48,000, expanding with rocket engineers and scientists from across the United States.

There were other changes too. The Germans heightened the community’s cultural climate by promoting and participating in musical and artistic endeavors. Von Braun led the drive to build an astronomical observatory and telescope on nearby Monte Sano Mountain.

By the mid-1950’s, the word “rocket” was plastered on everything from cafés to upholstery shops. The character of the population changed as well. The city “draws top talented physicists from New England,

machine workers from the East Coast, electrical engineers from the Midwest and promising young chemists from Georgia Tech and California,” said *U.S. News and World Report*.

Residents searched for ways to accommodate the city’s rapid growth. Hannes Luehrsen, who had been trained in architecture and city planning in Germany, drew plans for a major detour around the city’s original business district. With the school population growing by 1,200 students a year, the spouses of scientists and engineers at Redstone Arsenal helped fill the need for teachers, and in January 1950, the University of Alabama opened a branch in Huntsville. Later, von Braun lobbied for a research institute and a permanent full undergraduate program.

By 1967, Huntsville’s population was over 100,000 and still growing. Federal dollars streamed into Huntsville. Legend has it that von Braun sent government photographers outside the gates of the Marshall Center to take pictures of dilapidated houses. He then presented the pictures to city leaders to demonstrate how the city looked when visitors came to town. At the end of World War II, Huntsville had about 12 industries and 3,500 homes. By 1964, the city had more than 40 industries and 30,000 homes.

As work on the Saturn rockets progressed in the 1960's, von Braun sought ways to preserve public enthusiasm for space exploration. By the mid-1960's, he and others had joined forces in establishing a permanent site to publicly display hundreds of space and missile-related exhibits provided by the Marshall Center and the Army. That facility opened in 1970 and is known today as the U.S. Space and Rocket Center.



The Huntsville Times announces the successful launching of America's first satellite, Explorer I, by a Huntsville-built Jupiter-C on January 31, 1958.