“Silicon Prairie” and the World’s First Computers

Today, many people associate the history and production of computers with Silicon Valley. California was important in the development of the personal computer, but Minnesota had a hand in the design of the very first digital computers.

A computer by its definition is a programmable machine; it can be changed to undertake different tasks. In the 1940s these machines were only first being developed. Until this point, there were calculating machines: built to undertake one task.

There are several claims to the title “first computer” including ATLAS, built by ERA in St. Paul. Completed in 1950 for the predecessor of the National Security Agency (NSA), ATLAS was a top secret project designed to break Soviet codes. The Federal Government later allowed the production of a commercial version of the computer named the ERA 1101.

For the next several years ERA continued to be in the forefront of the computing industry. In the mid-1950s, Remington Rand bought the company and combined it with the Eckert-Mauchly Computer Company to form its UNIVAC division. Picking up right where ERA left off, UNIVAC would prove to be plenty successful itself.