

Honoring WWII Codebreakers and the Founding of Engineering Research Associates

DAVE BEAL, LOWELL BENSON, DON HALL, JAY PFAENDER,
AND CHAD ROBERTS

In a salute to a remarkably powerful era of entrepreneurship, the Ramsey County Historical Society (RCHS) celebrated the enduring economic and technological activity unleashed in the Twin Cities by Engineering Research Associates (ERA) more than seventy-five years ago. Before a crowd of 200 computer and technology industry leaders, historians, business people, and curious neighbors, a commemorative plaque was installed at the company's original site, 1902 Minnehaha Avenue West, on Thursday, June 15, 2023.

ERA was formed in 1946 by a group of US Navy codebreakers who had been brought together to help the country and its allies win World War II. They were mathematicians, physicists, engineers, and other specialists who interpreted German and Japanese electronic communications at a top-secret location near Washington, DC. When the war ended, the Secretary of the Navy hoped to keep them together because he saw the group as an important national resource. Securing funding proved difficult until John Parker, a US Naval Academy graduate working in corporate finance, raised \$220,000.

Although a Washington resident, Parker also owned a St. Paul-based glider business at 1902 Minnehaha that was deactivated after the war. He moved key employees from DC to his empty factory. In doing so, he established the Twin Cities as one of the cradles of the computer industry, eventually making it the home for many thousands of jobs in more than 100 technology companies.

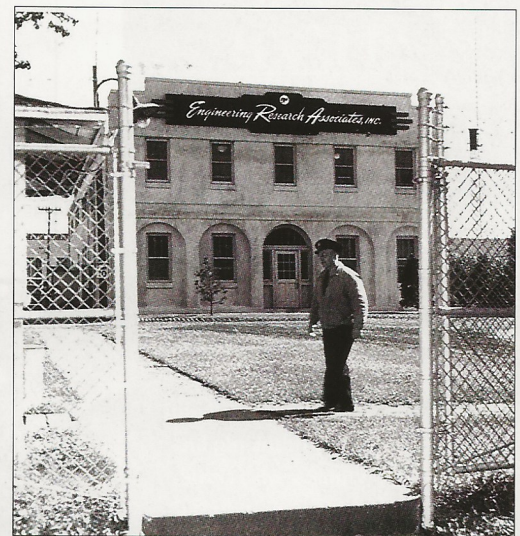
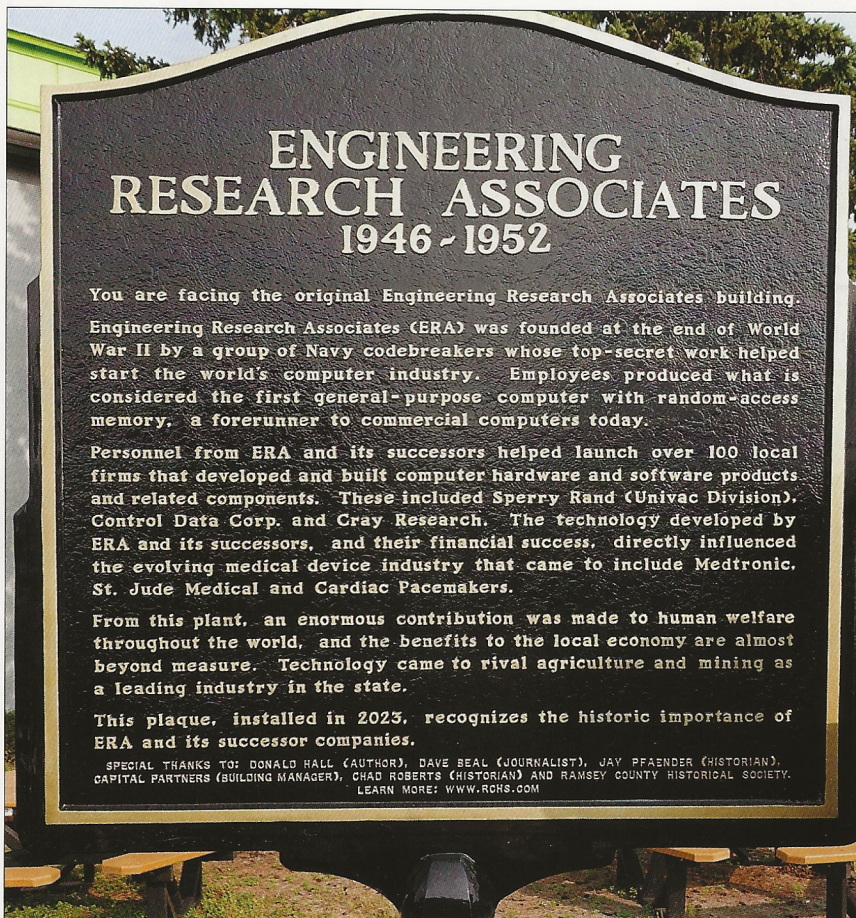
A lineage of corporate growth emerged in 1952, when Remington Rand bought and combined ERA and Eckert-Mauchly Computer Cor-

poration in Philadelphia to form Remington Rand UNIVAC (RRU). Four years later, Sperry Corporation acquired Remington Rand and renamed the company Sperry Rand. Its various computer activities were consolidated into the Univac Division. In 1986, Sperry and Burroughs Corporation merged to form Unisys, which then operated at twenty-eight sites around the Twin Cities.

William Norris was an early member of the codebreakers group and of ERA. In 1957, he left RRU to found Control Data Corporation, which became one of the world's leading computer manufacturers and spawned dozens of spinoff companies. Seymour Cray, an employee of ERA and later Control Data, left the latter in 1972 to form Cray Research, a company that dominated the supercomputer market well into the 1980s. The successes of these companies inspired local engineers to apply their technical expertise to medical products and create dozens of medical device companies.

By the 1980s, Control Data and Unisys each had more than 20,000 employees in Minnesota. But, with the invention of the microchip, the country's computer technology center moved, in large part, to Silicon Valley, California. Still, at least four Control Data descendants, all in Bloomington, remain in the region: Ceridian, SkyWater Technology, Polar Semiconductor, and Seagate Technology Holdings. Unisys retains a service center in Eagan.

"The plaque memorializes the ERA story, serving as reminder of Minnesota's place as an early founder of the region's high-tech economy while also underscoring the importance of entrepreneurs to our community," said Chad Roberts, president and CEO of RCHS.



Among the speakers at the event were John Rollwagen, who was CEO at Cray Research, and Manny Villafañá, who left Medtronic to found Cardiac Pacemakers, St. Jude Medical, and other medical technology firms. "It's true that individuals start companies from scratch and build them into big companies," Rollwagen said. "I still believe it can happen." Villafañá has founded and taken public seven medical technology companies and is now on his eighth startup. "We're still the mecca of the med-tech industry," he said.

This is not the first time the Minnehaha Avenue site has earned a commemorative plaque. Lowell Benson has consistently kept the ERA story alive as the historian of the VIP Club, which has represented retirees from ERA and its successor companies since 1980. Benson said Sperry placed a plaque on the site in 1986, but it disappeared in the 1990s.

The Ramsey County Historical Society acknowledges the work of Benson and of the University of Minnesota's Charles Babbage Institute, which has assembled an extensive collection of documents about the computer industry in Minnesota. Erwin Tomash, an engineer at ERA, founded the institute, and Dr. Arthur Norberg, who held the university's ERA Land Grant Chair for the History of Technology, was the institute's first chair.

RCHS appreciates the generosity of Don Hall in making this event possible. Hall is the author of *Generation of Wealth: The rise of Control Data and how it inspired an era of innovation and growth in the Upper Midwest* (2014). RCHS also thanks the project team of Hall, Dave Beal, Lowell Benson, Jay Pfaender, and Chad Roberts, as well as the current owners of the building, Capital Partners, for their assistance with this project.

The original Engineering Research Associates (ERA) building from the 1950s still stands on Minnehaha Avenue in St. Paul's Midway area. In June, guests and visitors witnessed the unveiling of a new historical marker at the site. *Courtesy of Keith Myhre, Lowell Benson, and Jay Pfaender.*