

# An Unlikely Birthplace: The Founding of Engineering Research Associates

Shortly after World War II, in a building that had once housed a radiator factory in St. Paul, a group of individuals began what would eventually become one of the world's most important computer companies. Founded by Navy code breakers, the company sought to work under contract to produce calculating machines for the U.S. Government.

The man who provided half the capital and the production facilities was John Parker, an investment banker who had run a glider factory in St. Paul during the war. It was called Northwest Aeronautical Corporation. Closed after the war, Parker turned the old building, located at 1902 W. Minnehaha Ave, into the new ERA production facilities. By 1946, Engineering Research Associates (ERA) was born.



Above: John Parker at his office desk. Parker was able to secure numerous commercial contracts for the company in addition to their military ones.

Right: ERA's first plant, had a reputation for being uncomfortable; broken windows, a leaky roof and bird droppings made working conditions less than desirable for ERA employees.



ERA's first contract called for a survey of the technologies available for storing data. With this information they began producing magnetic drum memory; storing data on rotating cylinders, these were the world's first hard drives.

For a top-secret project, they designed a calculating machine codenamed Demon; built for breaking code from the Soviet Union. It was delivered to the U.S. Government in 1948. However, once the Soviets changed their code, the machine became completely useless. They needed a new machine, one that could adapt itself to new problems.

Below: The ERA machine shop sometime in the late 1940s - early 1950s.



*Your first  
impression  
(of the building)  
was of a big,  
drafty old  
barn, full  
of dust.*

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