

60 Years Ago in AFLCMC History: NASA Eyes Hanscom for New Electronic Research Center (31 Jan 1964)

On January 31, 1964, NASA Administrator James E. Webb (for whom NASA's latest space telescope is named; *pictured below, at left*) wrote a letter to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, John W. McCormack, notifying him that NASA intended to build an Electronic Research Center in the Boston, Massachusetts area.



That same day, partly because New York was sore over its *not* being chosen for the site of the new Center, three New York members of Congress (Senators Kenneth B. Keating and Jacob K. Javits, and Representative Alexander Pirnie) suggested to Secretary of the Air Force Eugene M. Zuckert that, in light of NASA's decision, NASA's new center should be placed at Hanscom Field to save money on the construction of a new facility—and Hanscom's Electronic Systems Division (ESD) in turn should be moved to Griffiss AFB in Rome, New York, which was already home to the Rome Air Development Center (now AFRL/RI) that specialized in ground-based electronics and radar systems R&D. The Air Force replied that it would study the suggestion, and discuss it with NASA officials. Indeed, a few days later, on February 3rd, James Webb visited Hanscom Field himself, accompanied by Maj Gen Don Ostrander (commander of the Office of Aerospace Research) and Massachusetts governor Endicott Peabody.

Hanscom for NASA
Keating Shows Plenty of Gall

Hanscom Shift Called 'Absurd' By Rep. Morse

Although it does not appear that the Air Force was considering the proposal too seriously, locals nonetheless fought back hard against the suggestion that Hanscom's ESD depart the region, with the managing editor of the *Boston Globe*, Ian Menzies, even pointing out that the NASA facility would bring at most 2,000 jobs,

while Hanscom's ESD supported a workforce of 6,000 and had an FY 1964 operating budget of \$850 million (with on average \$100 million of that budget being contracted out to local industries).



NASA eventually constructed its research center in Cambridge—in Kendall Square (*the building being constructed above, and circled at left*), within walking distance of MIT—

in September 1964, and ESD remained at Hanscom.

Both the center and its location made sense for NASA at the time. Its moon landing program was pushing the state-of-the-art in miniaturized electronics and its most complex computer system, the Apollo Guidance Computer, was designed and built at MIT's Charles Stark Draper Labs. However, NASA's center operated for barely five years, before President Richard Nixon announced its closure in December 1969. Just as the Air Force found out after being early sponsors of integrated circuit research, NASA concluded that the commercial electronics industry advanced the relevant technology without the intervention of its specialized center.

NASA transferred the building to the new Department of Transportation (for one dollar). As the John A. Volpe Building, named in honor of the Secretary of Transportation, it became the Transportation Systems Center—a role that continues today, though the original building was just replaced in September 2023 by the new John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center (*right*). (Photos: NASA; *The Boston Globe*, 12 Feb 1964; U.S. Department of Transportation)

