



# Science Center History FAQ

## ***How long have science centers been around?***

Science museums have roots in the 19th century and before, but the science center field is largely a product of the 1960s and early 1970s, a time of social ferment in the United States and Europe. Against a backdrop of the Cold War and its “space race,” student uprisings, anti-war protests, and voter registration campaigns, curriculum reform projects engaged scientists like physicist Frank Oppenheimer. The hands-on approach to education they were pioneering, and the populist spirit of the times, soon gave rise to visions of a new-style museum.

## ***Who were the first science centers?***

The Pacific Science Center, one of the first to use the term, opened in a Seattle World's Fair building in 1962. The Smithsonian Institution invited visitors into a new Discovery Room where they could touch and handle formerly off-limits specimens. In 1969, Oppenheimer's Exploratorium opened in San Francisco, and the Ontario Science Centre opened outside of Toronto. By the early 1970s, COSI, the Center of Science and Industry in Columbus, Ohio, had run its first camp-in.

## ***When did ASTC start?***

It didn't take long for these new-style museums to band together for mutual support. In 1971, 16 museum directors gathered to discuss the possibility of starting a new association—one more specifically tailored to their needs than the existing American Association of Museums. ASTC held its first Board of Directors meeting on March 29, 1973, and was officially incorporated that year.

## ***Who founded ASTC?***

ASTC had 20 founding members, including a number of older natural history and technology museums that were beginning to adopt the hands-on exhibit approaches of newer centers—places like Philadelphia's Franklin Institute, Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, Boston's Museum of Science, Pittsburgh's Buhl Planetarium, and the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry in Portland. ASTC's founding members were:

- American Museum of Atomic Energy, Oak Ridge, Tennessee
- Buhl Planetarium and Institute of Popular Science, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- California Museum of Science and Industry, Los Angeles, California
- Center of Science and Industry, Columbus, Ohio
- Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
- Dallas Health and Science Museum, Dallas, Texas
- Des Moines Center of Science and Industry, Des Moines, Iowa
- The Exploratorium, San Francisco, California
- Fort Worth Museum of Science and Industry, Fort Worth, Texas
- Franklin Institute Science Museum and Planetarium, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Hall of Science of the City of New York, New York
- Lawrence Hall of Science, Berkeley, California
- Milwaukee Public Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Museum of Science, Boston, Massachusetts
- Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, Illinois
- Ontario Science Centre, Toronto, Ontario
- Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, Portland, Oregon
- Pacific Science Center, Seattle, Washington
- Rochester Museum and Science Center, Rochester, New York
- Science Museum of Minnesota, Saint Paul, Minnesota

***How has ASTC's membership grown since then?***

ASTC had 27 members in 1974, 170 members in 1984, 438 members in 1994, and has nearly 600 today.

***Did the U.S. government provide ASTC with any early financial assistance?***

Yes. Federal support was crucial in getting the fledgling science center organization up and running. The American Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge, operated by the federal government, had hosted the first organizing meeting in 1971. In 1974, the National Science Foundation provided \$75,000 in general operating support, and ASTC was able to open its Washington, DC, office, publish its first newsletter, and launch its first traveling exhibition. In the same year, ASTC also received funding from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum Act. Additional grants from NSF, in 1975 and 1977, provided crucial support for workshops, publications, and traveling exhibitions.

***Are there other science center networks around the world?***

Yes. Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the science center idea took hold around the world. Although ASTC remains the largest and most global of the science center networks, others have emerged to serve the needs of science centers in Europe (ECSITE), Latin America (Red-POP), the Asia-Pacific region (ASPAC), and other areas. Every three years, beginning in 1996, these networks have organized a Science Centre World Congress, an opportunity for lively discussion and commitment to the mission common to all. Within this strong global network, ASTC's focus has been on serving science centers' needs for information, advocacy, and professional development.