

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Cal-Linn Building (MITS and Microsoft Headquarters)

Other names/site number: N/A

Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 6320 Linn Avenue NE

City or town: Albuquerque State: NM County: Bernalillo

Not For Publication: Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

___ national X statewide ___ local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A ___ B ___ C ___ D

Signature of certifying official/Title:	Date
Michelle Ensey, New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer	
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.	
Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title:	
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government	

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Commerce/Trade: office building

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Commerce/Trade: office building

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Modern Movement

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Brick; Concrete; Glass

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

The Cal-Linn Building formerly housed the offices and assembly facilities of early computer development company Micro Instrumentation & Telemetry Systems (MITS) and the first office of Microsoft. It is located at the corner of Linn Avenue NE and California Street NE, one block north of Central Avenue, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Erected in 1959, the long, low commercial building is oriented along an east–west axis and is characterized by projecting volumes along its north and south elevations. It is constructed of concrete-and buff-colored brick and terminates at each end in canted brick walls. As originally designed, the north elevation contains six large aluminum-framed storefront systems enclosing individual tenant bays, while smaller storefront units are located on the east and west elevations. The south elevation, facing a service alley, incorporates overhead doors that express the building’s light industrial function. The exterior retains a high degree of historic integrity. The interior preserves its overall spatial organization, including wall locations and general dimensions, though finishes have been altered over time to accommodate evolving uses within the framework of the original design.

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Narrative Description

Location and Setting

The Cal-Linn Building is located in central Albuquerque in what is now recognized as the International District, encompassing the area surrounding the State Fairgrounds (Expo New Mexico) and extending along Central Avenue between San Mateo and Louisiana Boulevards. Immediately east of the property is the boundary of the Expo New Mexico campus, marked by a large asphalt-surfaced parking area enclosed by a steel fence. The west side of the property is bounded by a one-story self-storage building. To the south is Central Avenue, the former alignment of U.S. Highway 66 through Albuquerque. In this vicinity, the corridor retains a mixture of mid-twentieth-century highway-oriented commercial buildings, including former motels, small office structures, and service-related properties, many of which have been altered or adapted to new uses.

The building's immediate setting is characterized by a mix of low-rise commercial and light industrial buildings, several of which predate or are contemporaneous with the construction of the Cal-Linn Building. Among these is a former post office located across Linn Avenue. It was erected in 1960 and shares a similar modernist vocabulary. Along Linn Avenue are a small number of modest residential dwellings that reflect earlier phases of development prior to the area's more intensive commercial buildout. Together, these residential and commercial resources provide a visual context for the building's period of significance.

Lot

The Cal-Linn Building occupies an east-west-oriented parcel assembled from multiple smaller lots within Block 17 of the Fairgrounds Addition, a subdivision platted in 1936 following the announcement of the planned development of the New Mexico State Fairgrounds. The structure covers most of the combined lots and is surrounded by diagonal parking along its north elevation facing Linn Avenue, with additional parking areas to the west and east (Photo 1). The largest open parking area is located at the west end of the parcel. Along the south, the building is set at the edge of a platted service alley that extends the full length of the original block. A small commemorative plaque affixed to an upright boulder adjacent to Suite 115 marks the location of Microsoft's earliest office. Installed in 2006 and funded by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, the plaque reflects the building's recognized historical association.

Building

The approximately 25,000-square-foot, one-story commercial building is arranged as an elongated east-west rectangle, with its long elevations facing Linn Avenue to the north and a service alley to the south. Its massing is articulated by a series of regularly spaced projecting

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bays along the north and south elevations, creating a rhythmic pattern of shallow offsets corresponding to individual tenant spaces (Photo 2). These offsets, each measuring approximately 5 feet 8 inches in depth, establish a consistent structural and spatial module across the length of the building. The east and west ends each contain a smaller storefront bay sheltered by a continuous overhang and terminating in canted brick end walls. The building contains fourteen storefront units, identified as suites.

Erected in 1959¹ by Albuquerque real estate developers Clarence Dyer, a cattle broker, and Joseph C. Thomas, a draftsman, the Cal-Linn Building is constructed of concrete and concrete masonry units, with exterior walls faced in buff-colored, elongated brick laid in running bond, exhibiting a textured surface and subtle color variation. The walls terminate at the roofline in a shallow brick cornice formed by a rowlock course.

Linn Avenue Elevation

The north (Linn Avenue) elevation contains six storefront bays, each exhibiting slight variation in configuration. Each bay is defined by shallow brick pilasters that articulate the façade into individual units. The storefronts consist of large plate-glass display windows set within aluminum frames and divided by vertical mullions. The glazing rests on low bulkheads finished with brick sills. Entrances are typically located to one side of each bay and consist of aluminum stile-and-rail doors topped by operable transoms.

The unit at 6328 Linn Avenue, which historically housed the offices and assembly space of MITS, is the largest of the storefront units (Photo 3). Encompassing approximately 4,764 square feet, its storefront spans approximately 36 feet and is divided into multiple vertical panels. This space, where the Altair 8800 computer was fabricated and assembled, is entered through aluminum stile-and-rail doors integrated into the storefront system (Photo 4). MITS also occupied the adjacent 6332 storefront, which retains a similar exterior configuration.

California Street and West Elevations

The shorter east and west elevations each contain four storefront bays arranged in a linear sequence and separated by shallow brick pilasters (Photo 5). A continuous, deep roof overhang extends across these façades, sheltering the storefronts. As on the Linn Avenue elevation, the façades are composed of plate-glass display windows set above low, brick-faced bulkheads, with glazing divided by aluminum mullions. Exterior steel security bars have been added to many of the openings. Entrances are located at the ends of the elevations and consist of aluminum stile-and-rail doors topped with operable transoms. The California Street elevation includes Suite 115, the location of the first Microsoft office (Photo 6).

¹ "\$100,000 Building is Planned Here," *Albuquerque Tribune*, May 6, 1959, 32.

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Alley (South) Elevation

The south elevation, facing the service alley, presents the utilitarian side of the building. Like the Linn Avenue elevation, it is articulated by a series of projecting bays along its central portion. These bays contain ground-level openings fitted with overhead doors, providing access to the interior tenant spaces. It was through these openings that assembled products, including those produced by MITS, were loaded for distribution (Photo 7).

The current overhead doors are replacement units; however, adjacent flush steel pedestrian doors appear to be original (Photo 8). The elevation is finished in the same buff-colored brick as the primary façades, maintaining material continuity. Utility infrastructure, including exposed electrical conduits and meters, is mounted along this elevation, reinforcing its service function. A paved alley runs along the base of the wall, providing vehicular access to the loading bays.

Interior

Linn Avenue Suites

Although now arranged in a variety of configurations, the Linn Avenue suites share a common underlying spatial organization. Each consists of a large, regular volume, typically divided into a front reception area and a larger rear workspace oriented toward loading, with smaller partitioned rooms accommodating offices and restrooms. Walls are generally plastered, with areas above suspended ceilings revealing underlying brick construction. Open-web steel trusses span the units and are visible in the rear portions of the suites.

The original interior configuration is not fully documented but was likely simple and open in plan to accommodate a range of commercial tenants. Early occupants included financial services and bookkeeping offices, as well as personal service businesses such as barber and beauty shops. Over time, the suites were adapted to support a broader range of uses, including light assembly.

Suite 6328, which formerly housed the MITS office and assembly area, retains key aspects of this arrangement. The front reception area has been altered and no longer retains its original configuration (Photo 9). The rear workspace remains a large open volume with a poured concrete floor and exposed open-web steel trusses spanning the ceiling (Photo 10).

California Street Suites

The California Street suites are smaller in scale and follow a more uniform plan type, generally comprising a front room approximately 34 feet in depth, with restrooms and

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ancillary spaces aligned along the rear wall. Floors are poured concrete, and the rooms are spanned by wood joists above the ceiling.

Suite 115, which housed the first Microsoft office, retains its original footprint and general spatial organization, although most interior finishes have been altered or obscured. Period descriptions reference a rear room used as a software laboratory, along with restroom facilities. The front portion of the suite remains a single open space defined by its relationship to the storefront windows and entry (Photo 11). While finishes have been updated, this area continues to convey the scale and orientation of the original front room. The location of the restroom and portions of the partitioned rear spaces appear consistent with the historic layout, though these areas have been modified.

Integrity

The Cal-Linn Building retains a high degree of historic integrity in its location, setting, feeling, and association. Aerial photographs indicate that the immediate setting along the Linn Avenue and California Street frontages has experienced little change since early 1976, when MITS and Microsoft last occupied the building. The exterior similarly retains a high degree of integrity, with original design, materials, and storefront configurations from the period of significance still evident.

The interiors have been modified through the addition of partitions, dropped ceilings, and updated finishes. However, they retain sufficient integrity in their overall spatial relationships and functional organization to convey how the building was occupied and used during the period of significance.

Contributing and Noncontributing Resources

The Cal-Linn is counted as one contributing building.

The plaque erected by Paul Allen in 2006 is counted as one noncontributing object.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Industry

Period of Significance

1973-1975

Significant Dates

1973; 1974; 1975

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Unknown
Higgins, Robert E., builder

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Cal-Linn Building, which included Micro Instrumentation & Telemetry Systems (MITS) headquarters, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places at the state level under Criterion A for its association with the emergence of the personal computer industry. Between 1973 and 1975, MITS operated within this building during the development and release of the Altair 8800, widely recognized as the first commercially successful microcomputer kit. In 1975, the Cal-Linn Building also housed the earliest operations of Microsoft, as Paul Allen and later Bill Gates worked in dedicated space within the complex to develop and adapt the BASIC programming language for the Altair while establishing their own software partnership. This work resulted in one of the earliest commercially licensed microcomputer software platforms and marked an important step in the emergence of software as a distinct product within the industry. The Cal-Linn Building conveys its association with the formative events in the development of personal computing. Dag Spicer, curator at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California states that the Cal-Linn is “one of the most significant sites in the history of 20th century technology.”²

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

“That office, in an aging strip mall surrounded by a check-cashing place, a laundromat, and a massage parlor, was ground zero for what would come to be called the personal computer revolution.”³ –Bill Gates

The Cal-Linn Building is significant at the under National Register Criteria A at the state level in the area of industry because Cal-Linn Building is where early commercial microcomputer software was developed and first deployed as a transferable, licensable product independent of any single hardware platform. In association with the development of the MITS Altair 8800—widely recognized as the first commercially successful personal computer—work undertaken at this location by Microsoft established software as a discrete commodity within the emerging microcomputer industry. As computer historian Martin Campbell-Kelly has observed, “[d]espite its many shortcomings, the Altair 8800 was the grit around which the pearl of the personal computer grew during the next two years.”⁴

² Dag Spicer, correspondence with John Murphey, “Attn: The National Register of Historic Places,” Computer History Museum, Mountain View, CA, 2026.

Attn: The National Register of Historic Places:

³ Bill Gates, *Source Code: My Beginnings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2025).

⁴ Martin Campbell-Kelly, et al., *Computer*, 241.

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As historians, including Martin Campbell-Kelly and Paul E. Ceruzzi, have observed, the late 1970s marked a transition in which software evolved from a bundled component of hardware systems into an independently produced and widely licensed product. The BASIC interpreter developed and refined in association with the Altair 8800 exemplified this shift, enabling a single software system to be adapted for use across multiple machines and manufacturers. This approach was later extended through Microsoft BASIC, which was ported to numerous microcomputer platforms and remained in widespread use into the 1990s.

Activities conducted at the Cal-Linn Building thus represent a critical juncture in the emergence of the commercial software industry, directly linking the property to the broader transformation of computing from institutional mainframe systems to widely accessible personal computers and to the establishment of software as an independent commercial sector within the modern technology economy.

“American inventiveness has created a computer that is so inexpensive it is now being used in many homes. This computer is designed, manufactured and marketed by a relatively small electronics firm in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 1975, this firm sold more single model computers than any company in the world. Today, this firm is the fastest growing computer company in the world. The American Dream is alive and well. It is alive and well in Albuquerque.”⁵

Historians of personal computing, Paul Freiberger and Michael Swaine, stated, that “It would be hard to overestimate the importance of MITS and the Altair to the world of the microcomputer. The company did more than create an industry. It introduced the first affordable personal computer, and also pioneered the concept of computer shows, retailing, and many hardware and software products.”⁶ Dag Spicer observed that the Cal-Linn Building was the site where “Ed Roberts and his team developed the Altair 8800 microcomputer kit. When the Altair appeared on the cover of Popular Electronics in January 1975, it acted as a “big bang” for the personal computer industry. It was one of the first times an affordable computer was made available to the public, effectively democratizing a technology that had previously been the exclusive domain of large corporations and academic institutions.”⁷

⁵ MITS advertisement for World Altair Computer Convention, February 1975.

⁶ Paul Freiberger and Michael Swaine. *Fire in the Valley: The Making of the Personal Computer*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000.

⁷ Spicer, personal correspondence, 2026.

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Developmental history/additional historic context information

Model Rockets

What would become one of the foundational companies of the personal computer era began modestly in the world of model rocketry, as an effort to develop add-on products for hobbyists that could be produced and sold at a profit.

In 1969, four men associated with the Effects Branch of the Laser Division at the Air Force Weapons Laboratory, Kirtland Air Force Base, came together over a shared interest in model rocketry.⁸ Chief among them was Ed Roberts, who would emerge as the central organizing figure behind the ventures that became Micro Instrumentation & Telemetry Systems. Roberts, along with officers Robert (“Bob”) Zaller and Forrest Mims, worked in a technical environment focused on analyzing the non-blast effects of nuclear weapons. Trained as electrical engineers, Roberts and Zaller brought formal technical expertise, while Mims, though not an engineer, had developed a strong working knowledge of electronics, physics, and computing. The fourth partner, Stan Cagle, was an Air Force contractor.

Roberts was a self-acknowledged gambler and has been characterized in retrospect as a serial entrepreneur (Fig. 1). Born in 1941 as Henry Edward Roberts, he grew up in Miami, where his father worked as a refrigerator repairman.⁹ Roberts initially intended to pursue medicine but had a stronger interest in emerging technologies and electronic devices.¹⁰ He later earned a degree in electrical engineering with the assistance of federal education funding. To help finance his education, Roberts enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, receiving technical training at the Equipment Maintenance School at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. He relocated to Albuquerque in 1968 to work at the Kirtland Weapons Laboratory, six months after Forrest Mims arrived. He was tall, over six feet in height, and was described by contemporaries as both charming and at times domineering, with a booming voice and a commanding presence.

Mims, who had founded the Albuquerque Model Rocket Club that same year, recognized that their combined technical expertise could be translated into a marketable product.¹¹ Model rocketry had reached a peak of popularity in the wake of the Apollo 11 moon landing, attracting both young modelers and technically trained adults. The field ranged from simple kits sold in hobby shops to more sophisticated custom designs developed by individuals with engineering backgrounds.

⁸ “Want to Fly a Rocket? Alb Academy is the Pad,” *Albuquerque Tribune*, January 30, 1970, B-10.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Seventeenth Census of the United States, 1950; Year: 1950; Census Place: Miami, Dade, Florida; Roll: 1384; Page: 14; Enumeration District: 69-273.

¹⁰ Forrest M. Mims, *Siliconconnections: Coming of Age in the Electronic Era* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1986), 24.

¹¹ “Want to Fly a Rocket?”

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The group first developed a small light flasher for recovering night-launched model rockets (Fig. 2), a device described in a do-it-yourself article by Mims published in September 1969 in *Model Rocket* magazine. In October 1969, they met at Ed Roberts's home and formalized a partnership to produce light flashers and related telemetry systems. At a subsequent meeting—held in the bedroom of one of Roberts's sons—Mims proposed the name “MITS,” after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which maintained one of the country's most advanced model rocketry programs.¹² The partners then settled on its meaning, combining Mims's “Micro Instrumentation” with Stan Cagle's “Telemetry System.”¹³

The company later incorporated as Micro Instrumentation & Telemetry Systems, Inc., with Roberts serving as statutory agent and emerging as the dominant figure in its direction. Each partner contributed \$400 in startup capital, and Roberts supplemented this with a stockpile of electronic components he had accumulated through outside work. The group then began producing more advanced light flashers and micro-telemetry systems. By day, they worked on classified laser weapons projects; by night and on weekends, they developed their products in Roberts's garage.¹⁴

One of their early products, the Opticom, was a light-beam communication system capable of transmitting voice over distances of up to 1,000 feet using a 940-nanometer infrared LED.¹⁵ Representing an early hobbyist application of solid-state optical communication technology, the device was described in a follow-up article accompanying Mims's cover story on LEDs in *Popular Electronics*.¹⁶ This exposure proved critical. *Popular Electronics* and its technical editor, Les Solomon, would later play a central role in promoting MITS products through feature articles and cover stories.

Despite the surge of initial orders generated by this publicity, and a brief move into a commercial storefront called the Enchanting Sandwich Shop,¹⁷ the Opticom proved to be, in Roberts's words, a “financial fiasco.”¹⁸ The experience exposed weaknesses in pricing, production, and business planning. Mims and Cagle subsequently sold their shares to

¹² Mims, *Siliconconnections*, 29.

¹³ Mims, email to communication to John Murphey, March 31, 2026. MITS founder and technology writer, Forrest Mims reviewed portions of the early MITS chapters and provided clarifications on dates, terminology, and operational details. Also assisting was Robert Zaller, an engineer who helped develop the hardware for the Altair 8800 and MITS computers.

¹⁴ Marcus Walton, “The Birth of an Industry,” *Albuquerque Journal*, August 14, 1984, *Impact*, 4. This article centers around an interview with Ed Roberts.

¹⁵ Mims, email to communication to John Murphey, March 22, 2026.

¹⁶ Forrest M. Mims III and Henry E. Roberts, “Assemble an LED Communicator—The Opticom,” *Popular Electronics* (November 1970): 45–50.

¹⁷ The name of this business has frequently been given in error as the “Enchanted Sandwich Shop” and is often cited as the site of MITS's early development of the Altair 8800, sometimes placing it in the Cal-Linn Building. Contemporary city directories and newspaper accounts do not support either this name or this location.

¹⁸ “Ed Roberts Talks About Starting an Industry,” *Personal Computing*, November/December 1977, 57. This article centers around an interview with Ed Roberts.

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Roberts, who reorganized the company and redirected its efforts toward new product lines. Zaller would stay with MITS through the next phase.

Calculating on Calculator Kits

Roberts, who had a knack for identifying emerging technological trends, reconstituted MITS and turned to the design of a desktop calculator that could be sold as a kit. Although electronic calculators are now ubiquitous—embedded as a convenience in smartphones—in the early 1970s, they were relatively large and costly devices. Commercially manufactured units were marketed primarily to engineers, businesses, and scientific users, leaving an opening for lower-cost kit versions aimed at technically inclined hobbyists.

To develop the calculator, Ed Roberts recruited Bill Yates, a controls engineer associated with the laser weapons programs, along with Major Edward Laughlin, a Kirtland officer who provided critical financial backing.¹⁹ Operations returned to Roberts's garage, where the group began research and design on a new product. As with the earlier MITS ventures, Forrest Mims remained involved as a close associate, contributing to the preparation of instructional and explanatory material that supported the kit's development and marketing.

Released in 1971, the Model 816 was a desk calculator kit priced at \$180. Early versions featured multi-digit displays that evolved as the product line developed, reflecting rapid iterations during initial production. The calculator employed a six-chip large-scale integration (LSI) system—an emerging technology that condensed complex electronic circuits onto a small number of semiconductor chips, significantly reducing cost and size—and was designed with the capacity for expanded, programmable functions.²⁰

Popular Electronics collaborated with MITS to feature the calculator as the cover article in its November 1971 issue, characterizing it in a headline as the “pinnacle of digital products.”²¹ The article positioned MITS as the first company to offer an affordable kit calculator, in contrast to competing assembled units then priced between \$400 and \$600.

As with the earlier Opticom article, this publicity generated a surge of orders, though now in the hundreds rather than the handfuls that followed the model rocket device. MITS soon outgrew Roberts's garage, and he moved the company to a rental house on San Mateo Avenue and then into a series of small storefront locations north of Kirtland Air Force Base. As demand increased, even these quarters proved insufficient, with orders at their height reaching several thousand per month.²²

¹⁹ W. Wilson Cliff, “Little Firm in City Making Big Name with Calculator,” *Albuquerque Journal*, October 31, 1971, G-2.

²⁰ Ed Roberts, “An Electronic Desk Calculator You Can Build,” *Popular Electronics*, November 1971), 27-32.

²¹ *Ibid*, 27.

²² Cliff, “Little Firm in City Making Big Name with Calculator.”

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The scale of production required additional staff and space to assemble and ship kits, and Roberts, now retired from the Air Force, turned his full attention to the enterprise. After several relocations to larger commercial quarters, MITS moved in April 1973²³ into the Cal-Linn Building, a brick modernist office structure erected in 1959 and located near the New Mexico State Fairgrounds at 6328 Linn Avenue.

The company expanded rapidly while building assembled calculators, nearly tripling its workforce to approximately 160 employees, many of them women recruited from local technical training programs (Fig. 3).²⁴ For a brief period, MITS prospered from what Roberts later described as the “golden goose,”²⁵ refining its calculator line with improved models such as the 7440, a scientific calculator (Fig. 4), as well as smaller student-oriented machines and related electronic products.

This success proved short-lived. Roberts emphasized that MITS calculators were built from American-made components, positioning them against a growing influx of lower-cost foreign products. However, as firms such as Texas Instruments and National Semiconductor entered the market, their manufacturing scale allowed them to sell fully assembled calculators at prices comparable to, or below, the cost of MITS kits and assembled calculators.²⁶

The resulting price competition rapidly eroded MITS’s market position, leaving Roberts with approximately \$350,000 in debt.²⁷ This financial collapse forced Roberts to seek an entirely new product direction, setting the stage for MITS’s entry into microcomputing.

A Metal Box with Blinking Lights

Roberts had briefly considered entering the emerging digital watch market, but, wary of rapidly shifting consumer trends and aware of MITS’s inability to compete at high production volumes, returned to an earlier idea: the development of a personal computer.

Still operating from the Cal-Linn Building, the company had contracted to a staff of approximately 25. Freed from the constant demands of assembling calculator kits, Roberts and a small group of engineers began experimenting with newly available microprocessor chips. As Roberts later recalled, the idea grew out of his frustration at Kirtland, where access to computing required the submission of batch jobs and long delays before results were returned. From this experience came his conviction that “everybody ought to own their own computer,” and that such a machine might be built around a single microprocessor.²⁸

²³ Urith Lucas, “Albq Calculator Firm to Expand Plant, Triple Number of Employees,” *Albuquerque Tribune*, April 20, 1973, C-14.

²⁴ Cliff, “Little Firm in City Making Big Name with Calculator.”

²⁵ “Ed Roberts Talks About Starting an Industry,” 58.

²⁶ Walton, “The Birth of an Industry,” 5.

²⁷ Mims, *Siliconconnections*, 41.

²⁸ Roberts quoted in Paul Allen, *Paul Allen: Idea Man* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2011), 84.

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These devices would become what one observer later described as the “enabling technology for the personal computer.”²⁹ Developed in the late 1960s, microprocessors condensed the functions of a computer’s central processing unit onto a single integrated circuit. Intel emerged as a leading manufacturer, introducing the Intel 4004 in 1971—widely regarded as the first commercially available single-chip microprocessor. Originally developed for Busicom, the chip was released for broader commercial use after the collapse of the calculator market forced a restructuring of the agreement between the two companies.

Intel followed the limited 4-bit Intel 4004 with the more capable Intel 8008 in 1972, an 8-bit chip often cited as the first practical general-purpose microprocessor. By 1974, several firms were advancing the technology. In March of that year, Motorola introduced its Motorola 6800 as a lower-cost alternative, while the following month Intel announced the more powerful Intel 8080, offering roughly an order-of-magnitude improvement in performance along with a more efficient system architecture.

Roberts and his small development team evaluated the available chips, ultimately selecting the 8080 for its performance and flexibility. He then negotiated directly with Intel to purchase 1,000 processors at \$75 per unit, a significant reduction from the standard price—an advantage that would prove critical in making the resulting computer commercially viable.³⁰

Working with Bill Yates and Jim Bybee, an electronics engineer and former Air Force officer, Roberts began designing a prototype built around the 8080 in the spring of 1974.³¹ The goal was to create a general-purpose machine capable of being programmed for a wide range of applications. Work proceeded in a back room of MITS’s suite at the Cal-Linn Building through the summer, and by August a demonstration prototype had been completed.

As Roberts later recalled, the goal was to design a “general-purpose machine that was expandable forever.”³² By this he meant a device that could be programmed for a wide range of uses and expanded through the addition of memory and peripheral components. As with the Opticom and the calculators of the preceding years, MITS planned to market the as-yet unnamed computer as a kit, aimed primarily at hobbyists. The decision reflected both the company’s existing production model and Roberts’s limited interest in developing a mass-produced consumer product.

The MITS computer, called the Altair, came in a metal case measuring approximately 7 inches high, 17 inches wide, and 18 inches deep, and weighed roughly 65 pounds, designed

²⁹ Martin Campbell-Kelly, et al., *Computer: A History of the Information Machine*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023), 237.

³⁰ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 85.

³¹ Walton, “The Birth of an Industry,” 5.

³² “Ed Roberts Talks About Starting an Industry,” 59.

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by Robert Zaller.³³ Inside was a relatively simple motherboard built around what would later be known as the S-100 bus, an expansion system that allowed users to add memory and, eventually, third-party CPU and peripheral cards. The base configuration included just 256 bytes of memory—an amount roughly comparable to the size of a short email subject line today—but the system provided multiple expansion slots that allowed users to increase memory capacity to several kilobytes.

MITS did not treat the bus architecture as proprietary, allowing other manufacturers to develop compatible expansion cards. This openness contributed significantly to the Altair's early success by fostering a growing ecosystem of third-party hardware.³⁴ At the same time, it enabled competing firms to produce improved components and, ultimately, fully compatible systems, some of which claimed the bus as their own invention.³⁵ This dynamic soon outpaced MITS's own manufacturing and design capabilities.

The front of the computer featured a black panel with 25 toggle switches and 36 indicator lights. Input was performed manually, with each switch representing a single bit of data. Programs were entered by setting binary values across the switches, while the machine communicated its operations through patterns of blinking red lights—an exercise in direct machine-level programming.³⁶

As introduced, the computer had no operating system, no keyboard, no display, no external input devices, and no name. It was a computer in the most fundamental sense—programmable, expandable, and general-purpose—but one that required users to engage directly with its underlying logic.

After securing a bank loan to underwrite development, Roberts committed MITS to the production of an initial run of 800 kits.³⁷ He could not have anticipated that this 8080-powered machine would soon be marketed as the first personal computer.

Arthur Salsberg, then editorial director of *Popular Electronics*, had been searching since early 1974 for a computer that could be assembled by hobbyists.³⁸ A competing publication, *Radio-Electronics*, had moved first, publishing in its July 1974 issue an article announcing the Mark-8 “minicomputer,” a do-it-yourself project designed by Jonathan Titus, a Virginia Tech graduate student, based on the Intel 8008 microprocessor.³⁹

³³ Robert Zaller, “MITS,” draft chapter from unpublished memoir, shared with the author, April 2026.

³⁴ Paul E. Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 229.

³⁵ Paul Freiberger and Michael Swaine, *Fire in the Valley: The Making of the Personal Computer*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 44.

³⁶ Walter Isaacson, *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 308.

³⁷ “Ed Roberts Talks About Starting an Industry,” 60.

³⁸ Freiberger and Swaine, *Fire in the Valley*, 43.

³⁹ Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 225.

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Aware of this development, Salsberg pressed his technical editor, Les Solomon, to identify a more capable system built around the newer 8080 chip. Maintaining contact with MITS, Salsberg learned of Roberts's prototype and inquired whether it could be prepared for the magazine's January 1975 cover. Forrest Mims, who had been brought back by Roberts to prepare an assembly manual, later recalled that *Popular Electronics* insisted the machine "had to have an attractive cabinet" to be suitable for the cover.⁴⁰

With this invitation—and recalling how the *Popular Electronics* feature had transformed the 816 calculator into an initially profitable product—Roberts turned the back room of 6328 Linn Avenue into a hive of activity to meet the magazine's December deadline. Roberts, who later admitted he had little interest in "cosmetics," initially referred to the computer intended for the cover as the "PE-8."⁴¹ David Bunnell, hired by MITS in 1972 as a publicist and technical writer and later founder of several computer magazines, proposed the name "Little Brother," though Roberts rejected it as too Orwellian. According to Roberts, the name "Altair" ultimately came from Les Solomon's twelve-year-old daughter, who had heard it in an episode of *Star Trek*. Roberts approved the name.⁴²

The completed Altair 8800 was shipped to *Popular Electronics* by Railway Express Agency but was lost in transit. Desperate to meet the publication schedule, Roberts flew to New York with a second unit—a nonfunctional mock-up lacking a microprocessor.⁴³ This machine was photographed for the January 1975 cover of *Popular Electronics*, which carried the headline: "Project Breakthrough! World's First Minicomputer to Rival Commercial Models."

The January 1975 issue of *Popular Electronics* framed the Altair 8800 in expansive terms, declaring that "the era of the computer in every home—a favorite topic among science-fiction writers—has arrived!" (Fig 5). Such language reflected both the aspirations of the hobbyist electronics community and the promotional tone characteristic of the magazine. In retrospect, Paul Allen described the announcement as a "bombshell." Paul E. Ceruzzi, historian of computing, characterized the introduction of the Altair 8800 as "one of the most significant [events] in the history of computing."⁴⁴

Roberts priced the Altair 8800 at \$397 in kit form—roughly equivalent to the cost of the Intel 8080 microprocessor alone. The strategy proved effective in generating immediate demand, but it amounted to a high-risk, low-margin business model that left MITS poorly positioned to respond to increasing competition and the market's shift toward fully assembled systems.

The Altair's publicity—and the resulting influx of hundreds of orders—rapidly alleviated MITS's immediate financial crisis. At the same time, Roberts's conception of a "first

⁴⁰ Walton, "The Birth of an Industry," 5.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Ed Roberts Talks About Starting an Industry," 60.

⁴³ Isaacson, *The Innovators*, 309.

⁴⁴ Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 26.

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market” of technically proficient hobbyists assembling kit computers soon gave way to what he later described as a “second market” of users who expected a machine that could be readily put into operation.⁴⁵ The second market would need a program to make the Altair usable.

Providing BASIC

As Bill Gates later recalled in his memoir, Paul Allen arrived at his Harvard dorm room, out of breath. He was carrying a copy of *Popular Electronics* featuring the Altair 8800, having rushed from a Harvard Square newsstand. Gates remembered reading the article while “spinning” in his chair, quickly grasping both the machine’s potential and its limitations.⁴⁶ The Altair, though programmable, lacked a keyboard, display, or any means of easy interaction, requiring users to enter instructions manually through toggle switches.

For Gates and Allen, this presented an opportunity. If the machine was to become widely usable, it would require a higher-level programming language. They set out to develop an implementation of BASIC for the Altair—an effort that would lead to one of the first commercially available software products for a microcomputer.

BASIC (Beginner’s All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code), developed at Dartmouth College in 1964, provided a simple and accessible programming language that functioned as an immediate user interface, allowing users to write, run, and modify programs on low-cost, hobbyist machines such as the Altair 8800.⁴⁷ Unlike more complex compiled languages of the time, BASIC was typically implemented as an interpreted language, enabling interactive use without the need for extensive computing resources.

Allen and Gates had met a decade earlier at Lakeside School, a private preparatory school in Seattle. Born in 1953, Allen was two years older than Gates and came from a different socioeconomic background; his father, Kenneth S. Allen, was a librarian at the University of Washington.⁴⁸ Gates, born in 1955 as William Henry Gates III, was raised in a prominent Seattle family. His father, William H. Gates II, was a respected attorney, and his mother, Mary Maxwell Gates, was active in civic and business circles.

At Lakeside, the two spent long hours in the school’s computer club, the Lakeside Programming Group, which provided access to a remote time-sharing terminal connected to a General Electric mainframe—a large, centralized system that allowed multiple users to access computing resources interactively, and in this case, programmed with BASIC. The

⁴⁵ “Ed Roberts Talks About Starting an Industry,” 60.

⁴⁶ Bill Gates, *Source Code: My Beginnings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2025), 217.

⁴⁷ Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, “Personal Computing,” in *American Enterprise* online exhibition, accessed April 7, 2026, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/american-enterprise/online/consumer-era/personal-computing>.

⁴⁸ Isaacson, *The Innovators*, 314-315.

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school's connection to such a system was unusual for the time, as many universities did not yet offer shared access to a mainframe.⁴⁹ It was there that Gates and Allen began programming and formed their first business venture, Traf-O-Data, which processed traffic data for local agencies in King County.⁵⁰

Although Gates went on to attend Harvard University, initially intending to study law, and Allen enrolled at Washington State University before leaving to work as a programmer in the Boston area, the two remained in close contact. Both were influenced by the emerging technology firms clustered along Massachusetts's Route 128 corridor, where advances in computing were beginning to move from institutional settings toward smaller, more accessible systems. Gates and Allen moved quickly to contact Ed Roberts. Allen first drafted a letter on Traf-O-Data letterhead, stating that they had developed a version of the BASIC programming language for the Altair and proposing to sell it for \$50 per copy.⁵¹ The claim was premature, as no such program yet existed in completed form.

When they received no response, Gates followed with a telephone call to Roberts, identifying himself as Allen and reiterating that they had nearly finished developing BASIC for the machine. As Gates later recalled, he lowered his voice during the exchange, attempting to sound older to convey authority and persuade Roberts of their capability.⁵² Roberts replied that the first group to deliver a working version of BASIC for the Altair would secure a contract with MITS.

Gates and Allen knew they would need an Altair 8800 on which to develop the program, yet production of the computer kit had not even begun. Instead, they obtained the Intel 8080 instruction manual, which Allen used to construct an emulator that allowed Harvard's mainframe computer to mimic the behavior of the Altair.⁵³

Working within this simulated environment, Gates wrote a version of the BASIC interpreter, translating user commands into machine-level instructions the system could execute. The two had prior experience with such work, having earlier developed software tools, including a BASIC interpreter for their Traf-O-Data program.⁵⁴ As Gates later recalled, the central challenge was to "squish BASIC down into the smallest possible amount of memory," allowing it to run within the Altair's limited 4K memory.⁵⁵

Gates and Allen believed they were in an arms race to secure the contract, assuming that competitors at places such as Stanford and MIT were pursuing the same opportunity.⁵⁶ Gates

⁴⁹ Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 235.

⁵⁰ Gates, *Source Code*, 215.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵³ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 73.

⁵⁴ Freiburger and Swaine, *Fire in the Valley*, 31-32.

⁵⁵ Gates, *Source Code*, 222.

⁵⁶ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 75.

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begin skipping classes and working late into the night, drafting code on yellow legal pads. During one such session, another Harvard student, Monte Davidoff, joined the effort, contributing the floating-point routines that allowed the program to handle decimal-based calculations. Davidoff was paid a flat fee by Gates of \$400 for his work.⁵⁷

With the emulator in place and the mathematical routines completed, Gates entered the code into Harvard's PDP-10 system at the Aiken Computation Laboratory, often working through the night and into the early morning. After approximately six weeks of sustained effort, Altair BASIC was complete. On the eve of Paul Allen's flight to Albuquerque, Gates stayed up with the Intel 8080 manual, checking Allen's macros and refining the code.⁵⁸ By morning, he handed Allen a fresh run of punched tape prepared the night before.

During the flight from Logan Airport, Allen—already anxious—realized they had overlooked a critical element: the bootstrap loader, the small but essential program required to read the paper tape into the Altair's memory. Without it, the BASIC interpreter could not even be loaded, much less executed. Lacking any prepared solution, Allen purchased a steno pad upon landing and hastily wrote out a short bootstrap routine in 8080 machine language, which he would later toggle into the machine by hand through the Altair's front panel switches.⁵⁹

In Albuquerque, Ed Roberts picked Allen up and suggested a tour of MITS. Allen later recalled the Cal-Linn Building as a "one-story strip mall" with a "brick façade and big plate-glass windows."⁶⁰ Inside, Roberts led him through the assembly area to a "messy work bench," where two or three of the sky-blue (Fig. 6)⁶¹ Altair computers had been assembled. Roberts suggested they begin the demonstration the following day and drove Allen to a downtown hotel.

The next morning, in a moment of high anticipation, Allen joined Roberts and the small MITS team around a workbench. After keying in the bootstrap loader and feeding in the paper tape, Allen entered a simple test command: "PRINT 2+2." The Altair responded immediately: "4." Roberts, startled, exclaimed, "Oh, my God, it printed 4!"—a modest calculation marking the arrival of a new world of software.⁶²

Assisting MITS While Building Microsoft

⁵⁷ Gates, *Source Code*, 225.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

⁵⁹ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶¹ MITS subsequently refined the Altair's external design from the initial prototype shown on the *Popular Electronics* cover, introducing a sky-blue trimmed cabinet and a stylized, computer-inspired typeface for the product logo.

⁶² Allen, *Paul Allen*, 82.

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Paul Allen returned to Boston and resumed his position at Honeywell. He and Bill Gates were surprised by their success—and by themselves—“golden,” in Harvard parlance, though the question remained what to do next. In one of their regular calls, Ed Roberts invited Allen to return to Albuquerque to serve as MITS’s director of software development—a largely invented title, but one that offered a salary exceeding his position at Honeywell. Despite some hesitation about relocating to Albuquerque—a city he had only recently learned was not in Arizona—Allen accepted. A few days after Easter 1975, he left Boston and took up residence in a motel along Central Avenue.

On April 4, 1975, he and Gates formalized their partnership. Gates held a 60 percent share to Allen’s 40 percent, reflecting his leading role in the company’s business direction. They briefly considered the name “Allen and Gates,” but dismissed it as sounding too much like a law firm. Allen instead proposed “Micro-Soft,” a contraction of “microcomputers” and “software.”⁶³ The partners soon had stationery printed, on which Gates continued to use his formal name. Even as they debated the name and structure of their new company, MITS was already marketing Altair BASIC, offering it for \$500 as a standalone package or \$75 when purchased with an Altair 8800 equipped with 8K of memory.⁶⁴

Paul Allen’s arrival marked the beginning of a more sustained collaboration with MITS. As the only member of the partnership formally employed by the company, Allen assumed responsibility for its nascent software operations. He was followed soon after by Bill Gates and other Lakeside School associates, initially working in support of MITS, developing and refining software for the Altair 8800.

Within months, however, their efforts extended beyond MITS itself. Operating out of the Cal-Linn Building, Gates and Allen organized their work into a separate enterprise—Micro-Soft—through which they developed and distributed software independently of MITS. From this location, the partnership established the foundation of what would become the first commercially successful personal computer software company.

As Allen later recalled, MITS had established a separate software department next to a vacuum repair shop, about 300 feet east of the main office. This small satellite office occupied the California Street frontage of the building, in a modest storefront addressed 115 California Street. The roughly 1,000-square-foot space consisted of a reception area and a rear room, with terminals along one wall and doorless cubbies along the other.⁶⁵ The software staff was minimal, consisting primarily of Allen and Gary Runyan, who Roberts had hired to develop an internal accounting system.

Allen’s initial responsibilities had little to do with software development and instead centered on customer support. MITS was months behind in fulfilling orders and was now shipping to

⁶³ Gates, *Source Code*, 229.

⁶⁴ “Software Prices,” *Computer Notes*, April 7, 1975, 3.

⁶⁵ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 85-86.

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what Roberts described as the “second market”—novice buyers with little experience assembling electronics, let alone a kit computer, which in the case of the Altair 8800 required approximately 1,000 soldered connections.⁶⁶ Allen spent much of his time explaining near machine-level operations over the telephone to puzzled customers. He also worked with Bill Yates in the Linn Avenue office, testing completed units prior to shipment.

Meanwhile in Cambridge, Gates continued refining the original Altair BASIC code and expanding it into 8K and 12K versions. At the conclusion of the spring semester, he traveled to Albuquerque and began working more directly with MITS, though his efforts remained closely tied to the independent development of Micro-Soft.

Gates, like Allen, was struck by the informality of the MITS operation. The Linn Avenue office was, in his recollection, a “makeshift computer factory of long tables thrown together with two-by-fours and plywood.”⁶⁷ He also observed that MITS remained behind in filling orders, with customers sometimes driving directly to Albuquerque and waiting for delivery—“RVs camped out on the corner of Linn Avenue and California Street,” as Gates recalled, “waiting for their Altair like it was takeout pizza.”⁶⁸

At eighteen, Bill Gates came from a markedly different background than the largely local, often ex-military MITS staff. His manner struck some as abrasive. Ed Roberts, who expected deference—his own children addressed him as “sir”⁶⁹—found Gates particularly arrogant and referred to him as “the kid.”⁷⁰ The two clashed frequently, at times in open argument. Yet each recognized the other’s intensity, even as they held divergent views about the future of the microcomputer. For the most part, Gates worked within Roberts’s immediate vision, even contributing a regular column, “Software Notes,” to the company newsletter, *Computer Notes*.

With Gates now in Albuquerque, Paul Allen returned to full-time development work. Together, they produced new iterations of Altair BASIC from terminals in the California Street office. As before, Gates drafted code on yellow legal pads before entering it into a teletype terminal linked to a PDP-10 computer at a local school district facility.⁷¹ Following a pattern established at Harvard’s Aiken Laboratory, he logged in during off-hours, often working through the night. He sometimes slept on the office floor, a habit that discouraged Roberts from bringing prospective clients to the software office.

During this compressed and highly productive summer, MITS expanded its marketing efforts. For its original audience of dedicated hobbyists, the company continued publishing

⁶⁶ Ibid., 86-87.

⁶⁷ Gates, *Source Code*, 241.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 84.

⁷⁰ Gates, *Source Code*, 245.

⁷¹ Ibid, 248.

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its in-house newsletter, *Computer Notes*, to which Roberts, Allen, and Gates all contributed. That same summer, Roberts launched the “MITS-Mobile,” a blue Dodge camper van that toured 64 cities across the United States, presenting demonstrations of the Altair’s capabilities and helping to seed regional user groups. Allen, and later Gates, joined portions of the tour.

To reach a broader commercial audience, MITS developed more polished promotional materials depicting the Altair in business settings. For this emerging market, Gates and Allen developed Disk BASIC with floppy disks and external storage, extending the machine’s capabilities beyond tape-based operation. They subsequently introduced Extended BASIC, an enhanced version of the language that expanded its functionality and enabled more complex programming. Working with Dick Heiser, a Los Angeles computer retailer, MITS also began marketing the Altair as a more complete system through The Computer Store, one of the first dedicated microcomputer retail outlets. This helped to establish a new consumer-oriented sales model that would soon be replicated in multiple cities.⁷²

Software development was further supported by a small but growing circle of young programmers, many drawn from Gates’s earlier connections at Lakeside School. These informal employees worked out of the California Street office and stayed in an apartment shared by Gates and Allen near the University of New Mexico.⁷³

The group began with Monte Davidoff, the Harvard student who wrote key mathematical routines for Altair BASIC and received credit in its release.⁷⁴ He was followed by Chris Larson, a Lakeside associate who continued work on Traf-O-Data. Later came Ric Weiland, a childhood friend of Gates and fellow Lakeside programmer, who contributed to coding efforts and would become Micro-Soft’s second salaried employee. Allen later recalled that Weiland, like Gates, often worked until sunup in their Cal-Linn Building office.⁷⁵ Together, the group formed the nucleus of what would soon become a fully independent software company and the development Microsoft BASIC.

Over the summer, Allen and Gates grew increasingly concerned that their agreement with Ed Roberts regarding Altair BASIC had yet to be formalized. From their perspective, Roberts appeared slow to commit, even as MITS continued to market and distribute the software. The terms were ultimately settled informally at a conference room in the Cal-Linn Building. Under the resulting agreement, MITS obtained the exclusive right to distribute Altair BASIC for the Altair 8800, while Gates and Allen retained ownership of the software and were

⁷² “World’s First Computer Store,” *Computer Notes*, August 1975, 1; Walton, “The Birth of an Industry,” 7.

⁷³ The Portales Apartments, located at 1180 Alvarado SE, Albuquerque, remain extant; Bill Gates and Paul Allen resided in Apartment 114. In their memoirs, both men recalled temporary stays in Route 66 motels along Central Avenue, including the Sand and Sage and the Sundowner.

⁷⁴ Gates, *Source Code* 248.

⁷⁵ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 89.

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compensated through royalties on each copy sold—an arrangement that treated software as a distinct commercial product rather than an integrated component of the machine.⁷⁶

The agreement was finalized in July 1975. By that point, however, Roberts had already shifted his attention toward expanding MITS's product line. Seeking a lower-cost system and a broader customer base, he began experimenting with alternative hardware configurations. This included systems based on the Motorola 6800, the Altair 680b—a direction both Gates and Allen had advised against, knowing the chip to be poor quality⁷⁷—and introduced revised versions of the Altair 8800 configured for use with floppy disk drives.

While software royalties began to accumulate—enough for Gates and Allen to purchase new cars—Gates grew increasingly uneasy with MITS's business practices, particularly its reliance on lower-quality components and its continued emphasis on hardware experimentation. He was also concerned that MITS remained their sole customer, and the market had now weakened.⁷⁸

The Break

Toward the end of the summer, Bill Gates remained concerned about MITS's direction and the sense that Micro-Soft was not moving as quickly as he had hoped. Unlike others, he saw software—especially their version of BASIC—not as a product tied to a single machine, but as a package that could be sold across multiple systems: a language that could be commodified and licensed independently of any one manufacturer. With his parents' hesitant approval, Gates took the fall semester off from Harvard to continue developing Micro-Soft as a business.

He returned to Cambridge near the holidays, intending to resume his studies the following year, but his conception of software as a commodity had only sharpened. At the same time, a growing conflict became increasingly apparent. Gates calculated that in 1975 Micro-Soft reported only \$16,500 in revenue—a figure tied largely to Altair systems sold with licensed copies of BASIC.⁷⁹ He believed that MITS was not doing enough to ensure proper installation and distribution of the software, particularly as it expanded sales of both kit and assembled versions of the Altair 8800.

More troubling to Gates was what he saw as the uncontrolled copying of Micro-Soft's software. During a 1975 visit to California as part of the MITS-Mobile tour, he attended a meeting of the Homebrew Computer Club in Palo Alto, where an Altair was being demonstrated. There, a paper tape copy of their 4K BASIC was taken and later reproduced by a club member, who distributed dozens of copies and encouraged further duplication

⁷⁶ Gates, *Source Code*, 249.

⁷⁷ Freiburger and Swaine, *Fire in the Valley*, 63.

⁷⁸ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 93-94.

⁷⁹ Gates, *Source Code*, 258.

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among hobbyists. While Gates would later acknowledge that this behavior reflected the informal, communal ethos of early personal computing, at the time it struck him as outright theft.

Back in Cambridge, Gates responded by drafting “Open Letter to Hobbyists,” first published in MITS’s Computer Notes and soon circulated widely through other newsletters. In it, he sharply criticized hobbyists who used Altair BASIC without paying for it, writing that “most of you steal your software.”⁸⁰ He argued that he, Paul Allen, and Monte Davidoff had invested more than \$40,000 in development time yet were earning only a fraction of that through legitimate sales. The letter provoked immediate backlash; some user groups denounced Gates, and at least one threatened legal action.⁸¹

In the longer view, the letter marked a decisive break. It exposed a growing divide between the hobbyist culture that had embraced early kit computers—grounded in the free exchange of information—and a new, more commercial understanding of software as intellectual property. Gates’s position, controversial at the time, would soon become foundational: that software, no less than hardware, was a product to be owned, licensed, and paid for.

In Albuquerque, the letter provoked a sharp reaction from Ed Roberts. While Roberts had warned against pirating, he was incensed by Bill Gates’s tone, which he viewed as grandstanding, and concerned that it might alienate the Altair’s core hobbyist market. He was further angered that Gates had used MITS letterhead to issue the statement, later insisting that Gates had never been his employee.⁸² Roberts demanded a follow-up letter of apology.

The break between Gates and Roberts—or more broadly between MITS and Micro-Soft—was inevitable, as each held a fundamentally different vision for the microcomputer. For Roberts, the Altair remained rooted in an enthusiast and kit-building culture; for Gates, software represented a portable, licensable commodity that could transcend any single machine. As characterized by Paul E. Ceruzzi, “Bill Gates had recognized what Roberts and all the others had not: that with the advent of cheap, personal computers, software could and should come to the fore as the principal driving agent in computing.”⁸³

The separation coincided with both firms leaving the Cal-Linn Building. MITS relocated to a new concrete, open-plan industrial facility near the airport by early February 1976, consolidating its operations in pursuit of greater efficiency. At roughly the same time, the nascent Micro-Soft vacated its quarters, temporarily operating out of the shared apartment of Bill Gates and Paul Allen.

⁸⁰ “Open Letter to Hobbyists,” *Computer Notes*, February 1976, 3.

⁸¹ Wallace and Erickson, *Hard Drive*: 103.

⁸² Allen, *Paul Allen*, 96-97.

⁸³ Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 236.

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The final substantive cooperation between Roberts and Gates occurred the following month at what was billed as the first World Altair Computer Convention, held March 27–28, 1976 in Albuquerque. The event featured seminars, demonstrations, and speakers including Ted Nelson. Gates, notably dressed in a tie and sport coat, delivered his first industry address, arguing that software—not hardware—was the essential component of a computer, a position that met a largely skeptical audience. Roberts was surprised by the turnout, which approached 700 attendees from across the United States and abroad. Allen later characterized the gathering as making Albuquerque “the undisputed capital of the personal computer subculture.”⁸⁴

A month later, Gates returned to Harvard to continue his studies. Before leaving, he hired Marc McDonald, a fellow Lakeside School associate, as Micro-Soft’s first employee. Revenue from contracts with firms such as National Cash Register Company and others was generating approximately \$20,000 per month.⁸⁵ McDonald and subsequent hires expanded development of BASIC into multiple variants, including versions for emerging processors such as the 6800 and 8080, laying the groundwork for later implementations on systems including early Apple computers.

While Paul Allen continued to work with MITS, he began to distance himself from the company over the course of 1976.⁸⁶ Although MITS had dominated the early microcomputer market, its share declined significantly by year’s end as more user-friendly and better-supported machines entered the field, including offerings from firms such as IMSAI Manufacturing Corporation and other emerging competitors. The IMSAI 8800, essentially a clone of the Altair, advanced the personal computer with the introduction of a video monitor and disk storage system.⁸⁷ Other machines, including the Poly-88 developed by Polymorphic Systems, soon followed, adopting and extending the Altair’s open architecture.

As in the earlier calculator business, Ed Roberts struggled to scale production and adapt to a rapidly shifting market that increasingly favored fully assembled, consumer-ready machines over kits. Instead, in June 1976 MITS released the Altair 8800b, a larger version of the original Altair with additional expansion and input ports, priced at \$840 as a kit and \$1,100 assembled (Fig. 7).⁸⁸

This instability was compounded by the acquisition of MITS by Perdec Computer Corporation. Initiated by a letter of intent in December 1976 and finalized in May 1977, the transaction did not immediately end the Altair line but subordinated it within a larger corporate structure focused on hardware and peripherals. MITS, now operating as a division within Perdec, was effectively reduced to assembling and marketing existing products. Its

⁸⁴ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 97.

⁸⁵ Gates, *Source Code*, 266.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁸⁷ Ceruzzi, *A History of Modern Computing*, 240.

⁸⁸ “Second Generation 8880,” *Microcomputer Digest*, August 1976, 6.

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once informal and enthusiast-oriented newsletter, *Computer Notes*, was transformed into a more conventional corporate publication emphasizing business applications.

Pertec's control also directly affected Micro-Soft's ability to market its software. As MITS lost ground to competitors, Roberts—according to Allen—began restricting licensing agreements that would have allowed Micro-Soft's BASIC to run on rival machines.⁸⁹ Following the acquisition, these restrictions intensified. Micro-Soft's efforts to license its software broadly were curtailed. When the company challenged these limitations, Pertec initiated arbitration and obtained a restraining order that temporarily halted distribution of Micro-Soft's products, severely constraining its cash flow.⁹⁰

Through a legal contact arranged by his family, Bill Gates retained Albuquerque attorney Paull Mines to represent the company. Mines focused on the "best efforts" clause in the original agreement, arguing that MITS—and subsequently Pertec—had failed to adequately market Micro-Soft's software. In November 1977, the arbitrator ruled in favor of Micro-Soft, restoring to the company full rights to its BASIC interpreter and associated products.

This decision effectively severed Micro-Soft's dependence on MITS, completing a transition that had begun within the Cal-Linn Building from a supporting software effort to an independent commercial enterprise.

Epilogue

Following the arbitration ruling, Pertec Computer Corporation curtailed production of the Altair line and reassigned Ed Roberts to an "idea man" role, providing a budget of \$250,000 and a small group of technicians to develop new products.⁹¹

Among Roberts's concepts was a portable computer—an early articulation of what would later become the laptop. Pertec declined to pursue the idea, and Roberts soon departed, receiving approximately \$6 million in stock.⁹² He relocated to Georgia, where he acquired a 900-acre farm. There, he pursued a long-held ambition, enrolling in medical school in his forties and later practicing as a family physician in the town where his mother had been born.

In the months following the arbitration, Microsoft modified its name and formalized its corporate structure, incorporating in New Mexico in November 1976 with Bill Gates as president and Paul Allen as vice president. Freed from exclusive ties, the company rapidly licensed BASIC to multiple manufacturers—including Tandy Corporation, Commodore International, and Apple Inc.—establishing a non-exclusive original equipment manufacturer (OEM) model that positioned it as a leading supplier of microcomputer languages.

⁸⁹ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 106.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

⁹¹ Walton, "The Birth of an Industry," 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*

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By 1978–79, Microsoft had extended this model beyond early microcomputer firms to larger manufacturers such as Texas Instruments, supplying the BASIC interpreter for the TI-99/4 and demonstrating the viability of software as a platform-independent commodity. By 1978, the company had reached \$1 million in sales. Allen later recalled that the company had achieved what it could in Albuquerque, and both he and Gates felt the pull of the Pacific Northwest.⁹³

On December 8, 1978, eleven of its original thirteen staff gathered at Royal Frontier Studio in Albuquerque, where one employee had won a free portrait sitting (Fig. 8). The now-iconic photograph shows Gates in an open-collar shirt and Allen with a long beard, surrounded by young programmers with sideburns and mustaches—markers of the era’s informal, improvisational culture.

Within weeks of the photograph, Gates and Allen departed separately for Seattle. The informal, improvisational culture that had defined Microsoft’s Albuquerque years—rooted in the modest spaces of the Cal-Linn Building—had come to an end.

⁹³ Allen, *Paul Allen*, 116.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
 - Other State agency
 - Federal agency
 - Local government
 - University
 - Other
- Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Approximately 1.5 acres

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 35.0775759 | Longitude: -106.5788281 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

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Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Verbal Boundary Description: The boundary follows the legal description of the nominated parcel, comprising Lots 4 through 12, Block 17, Fairgrounds Addition. The parcel is rectangular, measuring approximately 142 by 454 feet, and is bounded on the north and east by streets, on the south by a service alley, and on the west by adjoining property.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The nominated parcel includes all land historically associated with the Cal-Linn Building and contains all resources that contribute to its significance.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: John W. Murphey, Architectural Historian
organization: Architctural History Services
street & number: 2833 Plaza Verde
city or town: Santa Fe state: NM zip code: 87507
e-mail John@architecturalhistoryservices.com
telephone: 505-577-7593
date: April 7, 2026

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Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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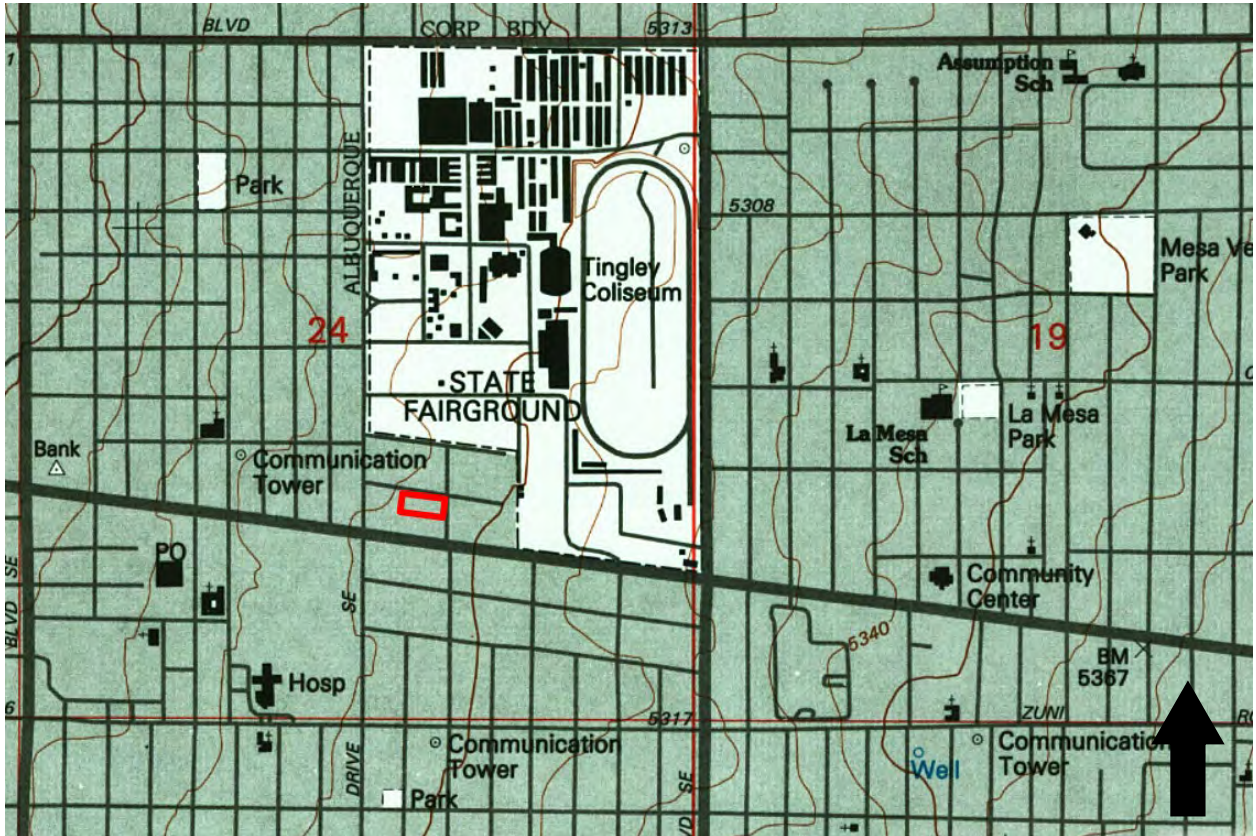


Figure 1: Cal-Linn Building (MITS and Microsoft Headquarters). Boundaries of the nominated property appear in red and correspond to points of latitude/longitude in Section 10. U.S. Geological Survey, Albuquerque East 7.5-minute quadrangle, 1:24,000 scale (1990; updated 1996).

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Figure 2: Satellite image of Cal-Linn Building (MITS and Microsoft Headquarters).
Boundary highlighted in red. Approximate scale: one inch = 115 feet.

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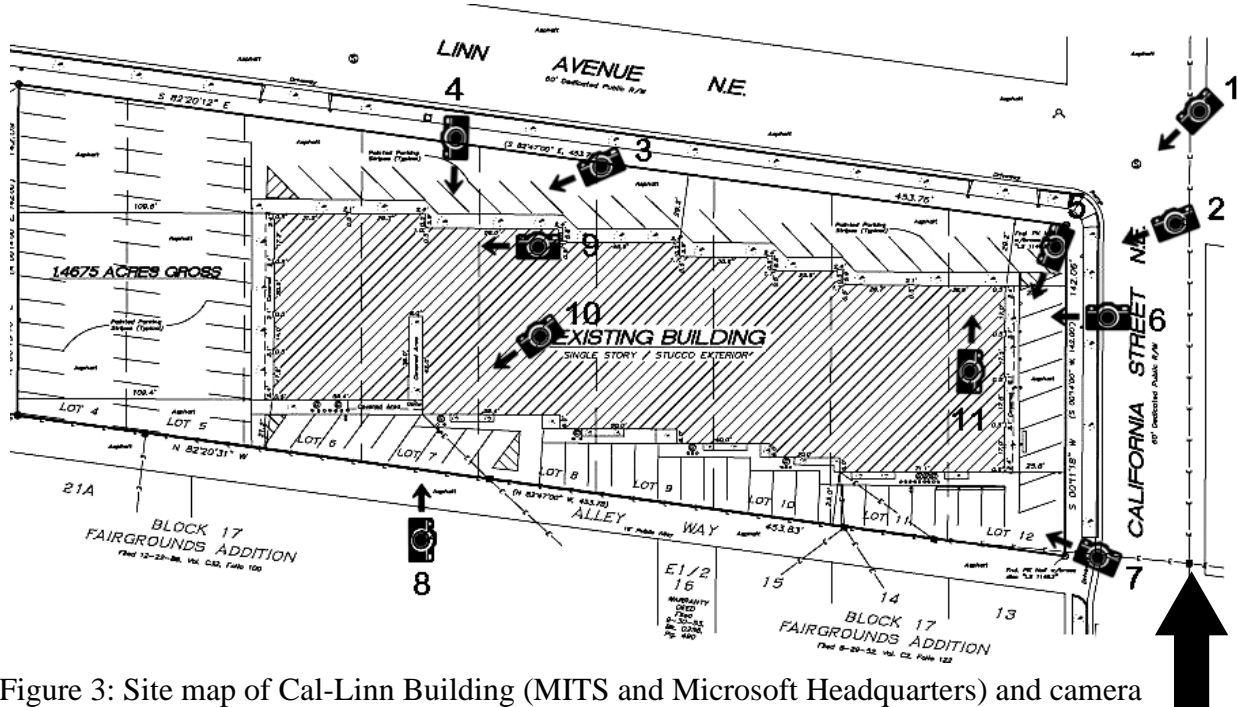
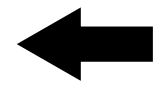
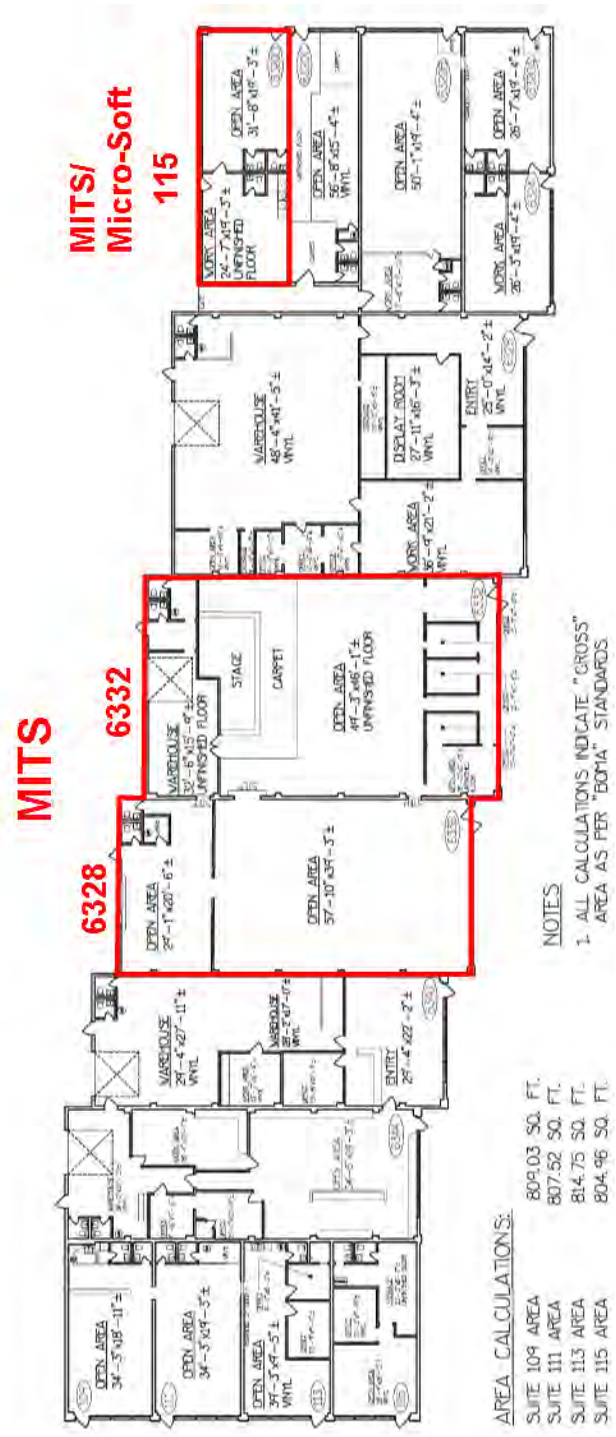


Figure 3: Site map of Cal-Linn Building (MITS and Microsoft Headquarters) and camera positions.

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Cal-Linn Building floor plan with MITS and Microsoft Headquarters highlighted in red.
 No Scale.

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Cal-Linn Building

City or Vicinity: Albuquerque

County: Bernalillo

State: NM

Photographer: Tom Drake

Date Photographed: February 7, March 1, and March 9, 2026

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

- 1 of 11. Setting. Camera facing southwest. March 1, 2026.
- 2 of 11. North elevation. Camera facing southwest. March 1, 2026.
- 3 of 11. North elevation, Suite 6328. Camera facing southwest. March 1, 2026.
- 4 of 11. North elevation, Suite 6328, entry detail. Camera facing south. March 1, 2026.
- 5 of 11. East elevation. Camera facing southwest. February 7, 2026.
- 6 of 11. East elevation, Suite 115. Camera facing west. February 7, 2026.
- 7 of 11. South elevation. Camera facing northwest. February 7, 2026.
- 8 of 11. South elevation, loading door to Suite 6328. Camera facing north. March 9, 2026.
- 9 of 11. Suite 6328, reception area. Camera facing west. March 9, 2026.
- 10 of 11. Suite 6328, back room. Camera facing southwest. March 9, 2026.

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11 of 11: Suite 115, reception area. Camera facing north. March 9, 2026.

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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Figures



Figure 1: undated photograph of Ed Roberts. Source: Source: Make online magazine - <https://makezine.com/article/technology/the-kit-that-launched-the-tech-revolution>.

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Figure 2: Illustration of early MITS rocketry product. Source: *Popular Electronics*, Archive.org.

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Figure 3: Newspaper illustration of Doris Brit assembling a calculator in the Cal-Linn Building. Source: *Albuquerque Journal*.

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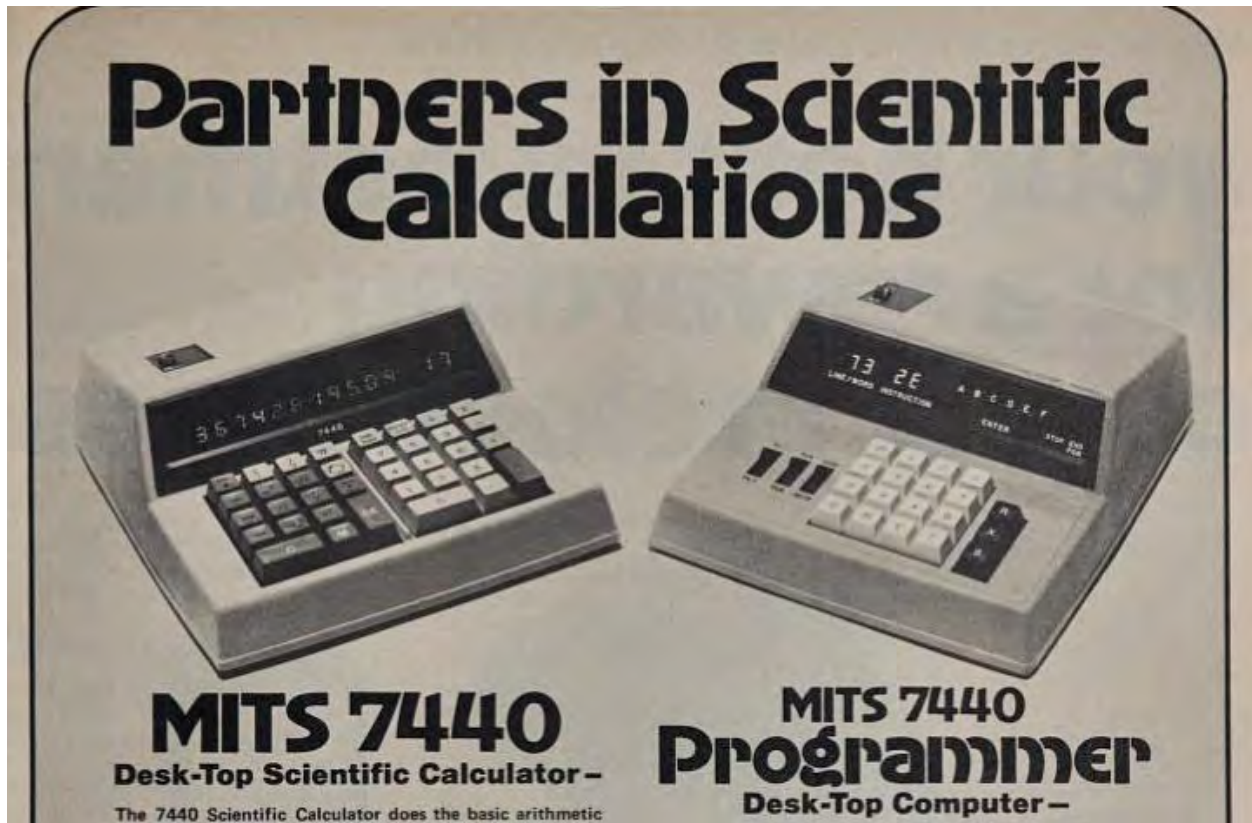


Figure 4: Advertisement for MITS 7440 kit calculators. Source: *Popular Electronics*, Archive.org.

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Figure 5: January 1975 Popular Electronics cover story on the MITS Altair 8800. Source: *Popular Electronics*, Archive.org.

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Figure 6: Early Altair 8800 model with external keyboard. Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History.

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Figure 7: Marketing brochure for the MITS Altair 8800b. Source: MITS, Inc., Archive.org.

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Figure 8: Microsoft staff portrait, Albuquerque, New Mexico, December 7, 1978.
Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History.

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1 of 11. Setting. Camera facing southwest. March 1, 2026.

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2 of 11. North elevation. Camera facing southwest. March 1, 2026.

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3 of 11. North elevation, Suite 6328. Camera facing southwest. March 1, 2026.

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4 of 11. North elevation, Suite 6328, entry detail. Camera facing south. March 1, 2026.

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5 of 11. East elevation. Camera facing southwest. February 7, 2026.

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6 of 11. East elevation, Suite 115. Camera facing west. February 7, 2026.

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7 of 11. South elevation. Camera facing northwest. February 7, 2026.

Cal-Linn Building (MITS and Microsoft
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8 of 11. South elevation, loading door to Suite 6328. Camera facing north. March 9, 2026.

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9 of 11. Suite 6328, reception area. Camera facing west. March 9, 2026.

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10 of 11. Suite 6328, back room. Camera facing southwest. March 9, 2026.

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11 of 11: Suite 115, reception area. Camera facing north. March 9, 2026.