

OHIO'S NOT THE MOON, BUT CLOSE

State's proud aerospace legacy welcomes visitors

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

Forty years before Hollywood turned his book *First Man* into an Oscar-winning biopic starring Ryan Gosling as astronaut Neil Armstrong, Auburn University history professor James R. Hansen was a frequent visitor to Wapakoneta, Ohio, the humble birthplace of the first man to set foot on the surface of the moon. ■ Located in northwest Ohio — between Fort Wayne, Ind., where Hansen is from, and Columbus, Ohio, where he attended graduate school at Ohio State University — the town of just 10,000 people is movie-set charming. Along with a stately courthouse, there's a historic cinema, an eccentric rock garden people drive miles to see and even a modest water park. What put Wapakoneta on the map, however, was its hometown hero, who in 1969 became a household name worldwide.

“Everybody associates Neil with Wapakoneta, and the people there are very proud of that,” Hansen says. Armstrong was born on his grandparents’ farm in Wapakoneta in 1930 but didn’t actually reside there until 1944, when he was an incoming high school freshman, he says. Before that, the Armstrong family moved 20 times in 15 years. Although each town he lived in left its own mark on the future astronaut, the mark he left in return was strongest in Wapakoneta, where an adolescent Armstrong learned to fly at a nearby airport.

Today, Wapakoneta is home to the Armstrong Air & Space Museum and the Summer Moon Festival, an annual carnival featuring live music, presentations from astronauts, science demonstrations, air- and space-themed inflatables, a series of “Run to the Moon” races, mini rocket launches and a Moon Pie-eating contest. Taking place July 17–21, this year’s event will be especially festive because it will be the grand finale of a 10-day celebration commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 landing.



Above: A teenage Neil Armstrong lived in this home at the corner of Benton and Buchanan streets in Wapakoneta, Ohio. Right: Armstrong as a young naval officer with his grandmother. He was born on his grandparents’ farm in Wapakoneta in 1930. ABOVE: SAM GREENE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER; RIGHT, VIA CINCINNATI ENQUIRER





Exhibits at the museum in Wapakoneta include the Gemini VIII capsule commanded by Armstrong in 1966. MICHAEL E. KEATING CINCINNATI ENQUIRER



The former site of the Wapakoneta drugstore where Armstrong worked to earn money for flying lessons.

SAM GREENE, CINCINNATI ENQUIRER

That celebration starts July 12 with a hot air balloon rally; a parade July 14 will recreate the homecoming parade Wapakoneta hosted in 1969 when Armstrong returned from his famous flight.

"Being Neil's hometown, Wapakoneta is ground zero for the 50th anniversary," says Donna Grube, executive director of the Auglaize and Mercer Counties Convention & Visitors Bureau. "It's going to be a big party, and we're very excited about it."

When Hansen was younger and traveling to and from Ohio State, he had no idea that Wapakoneta, which was on the routes, occupied such an important place in space history. Most people don't. When they think of American space centers, they think of Houston or Cape Canaveral. But Ohio has produced more astronauts per capita than any other state, according to Hansen.

He has a theory as to why. "Ohio is full of huge, vast cornfields. Compared to other states that are more heavily forested, there's this incredible 'open sky' sensation," he says, recalling a visit to the farmhouse where Armstrong was born with Gosling and director Damien Chazelle while filming *First Man*. "It really impressed them. They had the sense there was something about the aesthetic experience in Ohio that draws young minds and imaginations skyward."

Space enthusiasts of all ages can experience Ohio's connection to aviation and space at an array of attractions in the state, starting at Wapakoneta's aforementioned **Armstrong Air & Space Museum** (armstrongmuseum.org), whose collection includes a moon rock, the Gemini VIII space capsule and Armstrong's spacesuits.

An hour south, near Dayton, is the **National Museum of the U.S. Air Force**

(nationalmuseum.af.mil) at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. The museum has four airplane hangars full of exhibits, including a full-size representation of a NASA space shuttle orbiter. Because Dayton also was home of the Wright Brothers, a visit to the **Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park** (nps.gov/daav) is a must for anyone interested in aviation and aerospace; you can visit a former home of the Wright Brothers' bicycle shop, see the world's first practical airplane that they built in 1905, and retrace their flight paths at Huffman Prairie Flying Field, where they continued flying after their historic first flight in Kitty Hawk, N.C.

From Dayton, head east to Columbus, whose **COSI** (cosi.org) science museum is home to Ohio's largest planetarium, not to mention a space exhibit with three interactive spaceflight simulators. South and east of Columbus, respectively, are **John Glenn Astronomy Park** (jgap.info) and **The John & Annie Glenn Museum** (johnnglennhome.org). Located at Hocking Hills State Park in Logan, the astronomy park hosts stargazing events on clear Friday and Saturday nights from March until November. The museum, in New Concord, is the restored boyhood home of the late John Glenn, who in 1962 became the first American to orbit the Earth and in 1998 became the oldest person in space at age 77. (In between, he represented Ohio in the U.S. Senate.)

Next, head north toward Cleveland. On the way, a detour to Warren yields a quirky attraction: the **First Flight Lunar Module** (firstflightwarren.org), a half-scale replica of the Apollo 11 lunar module on the site where a 6-year-old Armstrong took his first airplane flight.

In Cleveland, several attractions await. One is the **International Women's Air & Space Museum** (iwasm.org), which celebrates women's contributions to aviation and aerospace. **NASA Glenn Research Center at Lewis Field** (nasa.gov/centers/glenn), is a facility where Armstrong began his career as a test pilot. Although public tours are offered just once a month, there's also a downtown NASA Glenn Visitor Center at **Great Lakes Science Center** (greatscience.com), where exhibits include an actual Apollo command module and artifacts from Glenn's 1962 mission.

Ohio might owe its space enthusiasm to its view of the sky, but Tourism Ohio director Matthew MacLaren says it owes its many space assets to the local pioneers who had the guts to venture into it. "We have a lot of great places and events where you can celebrate space and aviation history," he concludes. "And that's because of all the brave and inspiring Ohioans that have taken flight."