In 1923, German physicist Hermann Oberth first used the term “space station” to imagine a wheel-like facility that served as a jumping-off point for travel to the moon and Mars. In 1952, Wernher von Braun, one of Oberth’s former students in Germany and later the first director of NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center in Alabama, developed his own concept of a space station—250 feet in diameter, orbiting 1,000 miles above Earth.

The Soviet Union launched the world’s first actual space station, Salyut 1, in 1971; and the United States followed with the Skylab “orbital workshop” missions of 1973–1974. In 1986, the USSR launched the first modules of the Mir space station, which remained operational until 2001.

In 1998, Canada, Japan, Russia, participating countries of the European Space Agency, and the United States signed an intergovernmental agreement on International Space Station cooperation. The first two modules of the station were launched and joined together in 1998, and two years later, the first crew members arrived. Fifteen nations are currently working together as partners to complete the space station by 2010.