

A Short History of Domain Names

From a single text file in Menlo Park to 360 million+ names and a global industry: how we got here.

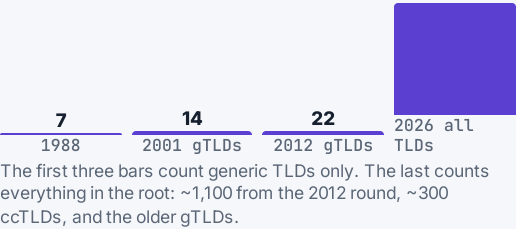
1971: one HOSTS.TXT file
2026: ~1,450 TLDs, 360M+ names

1969–1983 Before DNS One list, one keeper.	1970s	Every ARPANET host is listed in <code>HOSTS.TXT</code> , a single file maintained by the Network Information Center at SRI in Menlo Park, California. Sites download fresh copies to look up addresses.
	1982	With hundreds of hosts and constant changes, the central file is clearly breaking down. Work begins on a distributed replacement.
1983–1995 The research era Government-funded, academic, and free.	1983	Paul Mockapetris designs the Domain Name System (RFCs 882/883): a hierarchy where each zone delegates to the next. Final standards (RFCs 1034/1035) follow in 1987 and are still in use.
	1985	The first TLDs go live: <code>.com</code> <code>.edu</code> <code>.gov</code> <code>.mil</code> <code>.net</code> <code>.org</code> , plus the first country codes (<code>.us</code> , <code>.uk</code> , <code>.il</code>). On March 15, symbolics.com becomes the first registered <code>.com</code> .
	1988	Jon Postel at USC's Information Sciences Institute formally runs the IANA function: the root, TLD delegations, and protocol numbers, largely on his own authority.
	1993	The NSF contracts Network Solutions to run InterNIC registrations for <code>.com</code> / <code>.net</code> / <code>.org</code> . Registration is free. The web takes off; <code>.com</code> begins to dominate.
1995–1998 Monopoly & gold rush Domains become property, and a fight begins over who controls the root.	1994	Postel's RFC 1591 sets out how ccTLDs are delegated to managers who serve their local community, the basis of ccTLD governance today.
	1995	Network Solutions starts charging \$100 for two years . As the sole <code>.com</code> registrar, it becomes enormously profitable.
	1996	Cybersquatting arrives: speculators register famous brand names and offer to sell them back; the first lawsuits follow.
1998–2011 ICANN & competition The registry/registrar split creates a retail market.	1998	Postel asks operators of 8 of the 12 root servers to load the root from his server rather than Network Solutions'. The "root redirection" test is quickly reversed under US government pressure.
	1998	The US Commerce Department's White Paper calls for a private nonprofit to take over DNS coordination.
	1998	ICANN is incorporated in September. Postel dies in October, weeks after it forms.
	1999	The Shared Registration System lets competing registrars sell <code>.com</code> ; Network Solutions remains the registry. Retail prices fall fast. The UDRP and the US Anticybersquatting Act give brands a way to recover names.
	2000	Verisign buys Network Solutions. ICANN approves seven new TLDs: <code>.biz</code> <code>.info</code> <code>.name</code> <code>.pro</code> <code>.aero</code> <code>.coop</code> <code>.museum</code> . Tuvalu licenses <code>.tv</code> , an early ccTLD windfall.
2012–today The great expansion Over a thousand new TLDs, a global ICANN, and the privacy era.	2003	Verisign's Site Finder wildcard sends every mistyped <code>.com</code> to its own ad page; it's withdrawn within weeks after an outcry.
	2005–08	Mass-market registrars advertise during the Super Bowl. Domain tasting (free 5-day trials, abused at scale) is curbed by ICANN fees in 2008.
	2010	The root zone is signed with DNSSEC . The first non-Latin (IDN) ccTLDs launch. <code>.co</code> relaunches as a global alternative to <code>.com</code> .
	2012	ICANN receives 1,930 applications for new gTLDs at \$185,000 each. The first are delegated in late 2013; <code>.guru</code> , <code>.bike</code> , and others open to the public in early 2014.
	2016	The US government hands IANA stewardship to the global ICANN community. A Verisign-backed bidder wins <code>.web</code> for \$135M, setting off a years-long dispute.
	2018	GDPR takes effect; public WHOIS data is redacted almost overnight. The root's DNSSEC key is rolled for the first time.
	2019–20	<code>.org</code> 's price caps are lifted and PIR is sold to a private equity firm for \$1.1B; ICANN blocks the deal after a public backlash.
	2023–25	The AI boom makes Anguilla's <code>.ai</code> a major source of national revenue. A UK–Mauritius deal over the Chagos Islands raises questions about <code>.io</code> . RDAP replaces WHOIS for gTLDs (Jan 2025).
	2026	ICANN's second new gTLD round takes applications from April 30 to August 12, at \$227,000 each.

The price of a .com

1985	Registration via NIC	free
1995	Network Solutions, retail	\$50/yr
1998	Fee cut, still a monopoly	\$35/yr
2000	Registry wholesale (after competition)	\$6.00
2012	Wholesale; then frozen until 2020	\$7.85
2024	Wholesale after four 7% increases	\$10.26

How many TLDs exist



Headline sales

business.com	\$7.5M · 1999
sex.com	\$13M · 2010
.app (the TLD)	\$25M · 2015
voice.com	\$30M · 2019
.web (the TLD)	\$135M · 2016

People to know

Elizabeth "Jake" Feinler: led the SRI NIC, which kept HOSTS.TXT and ran the first domain registry.

Paul Mockapetris: invented DNS in 1983.

Jon Postel: ran IANA by hand for decades; his work shaped ICANN.

Vint Cerf: TCP/IP co-inventor, chair of ICANN's board 2000–2007.

Patterns that keep repeating

Scarcity sells. Every new namespace sets off a land rush, then a long tail of unsold names.

Who controls the root? The question behind 1998's redirect, the 2016 transition, and every ccTLD sovereignty fight.

Brands vs. registrants. Each expansion brings new dispute and rights-protection tools.