



In Memoriam: Thomas J. Gasque

(1937–2023)

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Germanic Society for Forensic Linguistics, GERMANY

There are certain losses that not only shock you, but change you, leaving you with a sadness so deep that it is impossible to express everything you will miss and all that you are so very grateful for. Such is the loss of Dr. Thomas J. Gasque. Thomas was born in Marion, South Carolina on September 6, 1937.¹ He was the second child of Thomas Jefferson Gasque and Margaret Olive Gasque née Reaves. After completing high school, he earned an undergraduate degree from Wofford College, a South Carolinian mainstay. Established in 1851, the College was founded by Reverend Benjamin Wofford and his wife, Maria Barron, to “provide for the moral and intellectual development of South Carolina’s next generation of young males” (Wofford College n.d.).

After obtaining his degree, Tom left the state of South Carolina and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where he earned his MA from Emory University. He then relocated again to Knoxville, Tennessee, where he earned his PhD in English from the University of Tennessee. With his doctorate in hand, the young professional returned to his native state of South Carolina. For the first few years of his return, he taught at various institution such as Clemson University and Columbia College. Then, in 1968, he landed a permanent teaching position in the English Department at the University of South Dakota, where he served as a member of faculty for more than 30 years. As Tom would later recall, it was there that he would meet someone who would change the course of his personal and professional life. That person was Dr. Edward C. Ehrensperger, one of the founding members of the American Name Society. At the time that the two professors meet, Dr. Ehrensperger was just stepping into retirement after serving as faculty members and chair of the English Department at the University of South Dakota, where the young professor had just been hired. It was there that he joined the ranks of several internationally recognized literary and linguistic scholars. Despite their varying areas of research specialization, each of these scholars had one special intellectual passion in common: names and naming. Soon, this circle of colleagues and friends became one of the most influential generations of scholars within the ANS. The

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scholarship of this academic vanguard still continues to inform and inspire onomastic research today. These included scholars like Bill Nicolaison, Lurline Coltharp, Fred Cassidy, Kelsie Harder, Alan Rayburn, John Algeo. In no time, these onomastic luminaries became not only close colleagues, but also treasured friends. In 2001, in a Golden Anniversary issue of the journal, Tom reflected on this pivotal moment in his life when he decided to pursue a career in name studies:

My decision nearly twenty years ago to focus a large part of my research time on names has greatly enriched my life, both professionally and personally. The friendships, the travel, and the bringing together of my lifetime fascination with the verbal language of names and the graphic language of maps have turned out to be for me the right way, not the wrong way, no matter how you spell it. (303).

In 1988, he became one of only thirteen persons to serve as Editor-in-Chief of *NAMES: A Journal of Onomastics*.² Taking over the helm from Dr. Kelsie Harder, Tom edited the journal for four years.

During this time, he worked tirelessly to ensure that that works accepted for publication met the highest standards of academic excellence. As he wrote in 2001: “Above all, the Society must hold to and continue to insist on the high standards of research and scholarship exemplified by *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* so that the discipline can take its place in the company of other learned disciplines of this country and the rest of the world (303). In 1992, Tom’s editorship came to an end. However, his unwavering commitment to the journal would continue for the next 30 years. For the 2001 Golden Anniversary issue of *NAMES*, Tom took a retrospective look at his career in names and *NAMES*. He wrote:

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Tom’s two-fold commitment to both onomastics and his colleagues remained long-after his tenure as *NAMES* Editor-in-Chief ended. He served as member of the Editorial Board for more than a decade, and was always willing to offer invaluable assistance to the four journal editors who came after him. In the following passage, ANS Past President Dr. Edward Callary (1990) describes in detail how generous Tom when he took over the editorship of *NAMES*:

Tom was my friend, onomastic colleague and listening partner. For more than 30 years we lived and worked together on opposite edges of Iowa—he on the west and I on the East and on winter’s coldest days he got great pleasure in opening his emails to me with ‘I bet my below zero is colder than your below zero’. And it usually was. According to Tom, he became editor of *NAMES* somewhat serendipitously when Kelsey Harder, then editor, liked his guest edited issue in honor of Ed Ehrensperger and said to Tom [. . .] ‘You take it’. He did, and we are all the better for it. [. . .] Characteristic of Tom is the ease with which he turned over the editorship of *NAMES* to me in 1993. Typical of his consideration he asked what would be a good time and he and Alice drove from Vermillion to DeKalb with a load of materials—boxes of notes, manuscripts, and correspondence. Then he sat down and for hours we discussed the journal, the state of progress in submitted articles, what to expect from authors and printers and the like. Whatever success I had as editor was due in large part to his taking time for that meeting and I thank him for it. I will miss Tom [. . .] and the onomastic world will miss him as well. (personal communication, July 17, 2023)

Upon hearing of Tom’s death, Dr. Frank Nuessel who served as the Editor-in-Chief of *NAMES* from 2007 to 2018, wrote: “he was always willing to provide me with excellent counsel and advice whenever I sought it. [. . .] He personified the outstanding colleague throughout his career and his entire life. He will be sorely missed by all”. The warmth of this sentiment was shared by ANS Past President (2003–2004)³ Dr. Christine De Vinne, who has served as the Book Review Editor of *NAMES* for more than 15 years. In the following passage, she reflects on her cherished colleague and friend:

Tom was a gentleman and a scholar, always keen in his insights, always kind in his actions. He was a big part of my introduction into the American Name Society and the study of names. He preceded me as president of ANS and served as my mentor and guide in the role. Fascinated by both onomastics and history, he combined the two in his research, especially in medieval and early modern studies and in toponymy. [. . .] He lived with zest, shared with many, and was generous to all. (personal communication, July 17, 2023).

As Drs. Callary, Nuessel, and De Vinne observed, Tom’s contributions to the American Name Society went far beyond its journal. Since the very early days in the 1950s and 60s, Tom’s intellect, wisdom, humor, kindness, and guidance were key to the foundation, establishment, and growth of the ANS as an internationally recognized academic society. Indeed, in retrospect, it is truly hard to think of a role that Tom did not play in the ANS. Aside from his four years as *NAMES’* Editor-in-Chief and more than a decade on the ANS Editorial Board, he also served several years as an active voting member of the Executive Council, and was elected to serve as ANS President from 2001 to 2002. As fellow Past President of the ANS, Dr. Don L. F. Nilsen (2007–2008) fondly remembers, Tom was also a frequent and favored presenter at the annual ANS conferences.

Thomas and Alice Gasque never missed a meeting of the American Names Society that I know of. Tom’s presentations were always timely, insightful, and thought provoking. During various ANS meetings I took four pictures of Tom in action (above). Tom Gasque is one of the reasons that the American Name Society is such a great organization.

In the following passage, Dr. Michael McGoff, who served many, many years as ANS Treasurer, *NAMES* Editorial Board Member, and voting member of the ANS Executive Council, talks about the countless contributions Tom made to the ANS and his own life over the years:

I was deeply saddened by the death of Tom Gasque. He was my friend, my colleague, and my mentor for many years. Not many remember that, had it not been for the leadership, the strength, the perseverance, and the hard work of Tom Gasque, the American Name Society might not exist today. [. . .] Many times over the years Tom ran interference with publishers and printers, he corresponded with and recruited members, and he scrutinized the details of several contracts to the society’s advantage.

Of all of my many interactions with Tom, none is more significant and more emotional for me than a time when I underwent a severe health crisis. Without hesitation Tom volunteered to take over the numerous details and the editorship of The Ehrensperger Report until I was back on my feet.

No task was too small or too beneath Tom. At one point, during some troubled times in the management of the society, he and his wife Alice drove to New York City to retrieve historical and membership records of the ANS thus ensuring its survival. [. . .] Tom was a kind, generous, and creative scholar. He was a mentor and friend to many young students, some of whom he brought into the study of names. Tom’s death is a great loss to many. I cherish my memories of his friendship. The American Name Society owes much to him. (personal communication, July 19, 2023).

Former ANS President (2005–2006) and beloved Coordinator of the ANS Name of the Year Vote, Dr. Cleveland K. Evans, also stressed Tom’s uncommon legacy of service and dedication to the ANS. As Dr. Evans wrote:

I think Tom Gasque was one of the nicest and most supportive members of ANS that I had the pleasure to know. Many years ago, he had me drive up to the University of South Dakota to give a guest presentation in one of his classes and that was a great experience. He was always kind and polite and very knowledgeable about ANS, and I think of him as one of the quiet steady presences who kept the organization going even when it was having difficulties and internal conflict. (personal communication, July 17, 2023)

Dr. Grant Smith, another Past President of the ANS and long-time member of the International Council of Onomastic Sciences, also stressed Tom’s never-ending dedication to the ANS was what helped to make the Society the community it is today:

Tom was one of my closest friends in ANS. Coincidentally, he and I were born just a couple of weeks apart in 1937. My BD is July 26, and his is in September, but he got a much earlier start in ANS than I. When he was editor of *NAMES*, he received a Fulbright grant to study in Germany and asked me to guest edit an issue dedicated to indigenous names (37, no. 2, 1989) [during his absence. Doing the edition was a very steep learning curve for me, but I loved it.

Tom and his wife Alice both taught at the University of South Dakota, and I believe they both served as chair of the English department at some time. [. . .] Throughout our years in ANS, we socialized together at the annual meetings. Alice and my wife Lelia would usually go to museums and shop while Tom and I went to meetings. We also socialized together at annual meetings of COGNA (Council of Geographic Names Authorities). He would represent South Dakota even after he moved back to SC. [. . .] The last

time we got together was at the ANS meeting in Washington D.C. in 2016. We dined together and saw a wonderful production of “Kiss Me Kate”. [. . .] Until the end, Tom demonstrated the fine intellect and mindfulness of detail with which he served ANS for many years. It was always a joy to work with him. (personal communication, July 17, 2023)

As Dr. Smith mentions, Tom’s contributions to onomastics were by no means limited to the American Name Society. Over the years, he was also a valued and respected member of several organizations across the global onomastic community. Without question, Tom was recognized internationally as “one of the leading name scholars in the United States” explained ANS member Dr. André Lapierre, who worked many years on the Geographic Names Board of Canada as well as the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. In response to the news of Tom’s death, Dr. Lapierre shared the following thoughts:

I was shocked and saddened to hear of the passing of my longtime friend and colleague. [. . .] My fondest memories of Tom go back to the many dinners I shared with him and his wife Alice. Although he may have appeared to be a reserved person, he was a bon vivant and we somehow always managed to get together for a good meal while attending COGNA or ANS meetings. Between food and wine, we had lengthy discussions on the etymology of names as well as conversations on the latest happenings at ANS business meetings, which could be inharmonious at times. He provided useful insights and guided my own research on French place-names in the USA, drawing on his keen knowledge of American history and cultural traditions. He was a beacon of name scholarship and will be sadly missed. To Alice and his family, I offer my deepest condolences. (personal communication, July 18, 2023).

Long after his retirement from the University of South Dakota, Tom continued his prestigious scholarship. One of his last book publications told the story of one of his aunts, Carrie D. Reaves, who left her life of privilege in South Carolina to work as a teacher in a remote mission school located in the mountains of Appalachia. Along with this fascinating history, Tom also continued his onomastic research.

For *NAMES* alone, before his death, his record included over 20 publications. A few of his most recent contributions include a 2019 book review of Scott Lloyd’s 2017 work, *Arthurian Place Names of Wales* (vol. 67, no. 1: 59–63); a 2020 book review of Lucie A. Möller’s 2017 work, *Of the Same Breath: Indigenous Animal and Place Names* (vol. 68, no. 4: 240–246); and a 2021 death notice for his friend and colleague Dr. Edwin Lawson (vol. 69, no. 3). Over the years, Tom wrote more than a few *NAMES* obituaries for ANS colleagues (e.g., Dr. Edward Charles Ehrenperger (1895–1984) (vol. 33, nos. 1–2); Dr. Irene LaBorde Neuffer (1920–2005) (vol. 53, no. 1); Dr. Edwin D. Lawson (1923–2021) (vol. 69, no. 3); and Dr. Robert Rennick (1932–2010) (vol. 62, no. 4).

On July 12, 2023, just a few months before celebrating his 86 birthday, Dr. Thomas James Gasque passed away at Lexington Medical Center in West Columbia, South Carolina. Among his many relatives, he is survived by his two sisters, Ann Gasque Depta and Dorothy Gasque Smith; his daughter, Susanne Gasque White, son-in-law, Chris White, and grandson, Preston White; and his most beloved wife, Alice Tealey Gasque. A celebration of Thomas’s life was held on July 22, 2023, at the Laurel Crest Retirement Community in South Carolina. The ANS extends its most heartfelt condolences to the Gasque family on their loss; and expresses our deepest gratitude for his outstanding scholarship, mentorship, dedication, and extraordinary friendship.⁴

Notes

¹Biographical details taken from Dr. Gasque’s official obituary:

<https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/thestate/name/thomas-gasque-obituary?id=52474886>

² A complete list of *NAMES* Editors-in-Chief, past and present, can be found here:

<https://www.americannamesociety.org/editors-of-names-past-and-present/>

³ Interested readers can find a chronological list of all ANS Presidents here:

<https://www.americannamesociety.org/about/ans-presidents-past-and-present/>

⁴ Memories and condolences may be shared at www.ShivesFuneralHome.com

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