

# A Tribute to Dr. Louis De Vorsey, Jr. (1929–2012)

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When The Library of Congress decided to produce its first resource guide to help celebrate the 1992 Columbus quincentennial, it made two important decisions. The first was that its initial publication would focus on the library's vast holdings regarding the Age of Discovery, and the second was that Dr. Louis De Vorsey Jr. would write it. Who better to do it! Geographer Louis De Vorsey not only had a deep knowledge of the Library of Congress, but was also a leading American authority on historical documents and maps, and was in the vanguard of scholars who were celebrating the 1492 discovery of America. He recently had served as President of the Society for the History of Discoveries, and he had co-edited *In the Wake of Columbus: Islands and Controversy* in 1985, a series of essays that argued the locations of places in the Caribbean that may have been the site of the first landfall. In a paean to the Library of Congress, Lou in his resource guide literally takes the hands of his readers, and happily leads them to the diverse places where Columbian and other important documents related to the Age of Discovery are housed. In 1992, Louis's lavishly illustrated volume, *Keys to the Encounter: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of the Age of Discovery*, received the American Librarians Association Award as one of the ten best books

published that year by an agency of the U.S. government.

Louis De Vorsey's long, illustrious career ended in Athens, Georgia on April 29, 2012 after a short, fatal bout with pancreatic cancer. He was 83 years old. At his death, several articles he wrote had been accepted for publication, and others were in various stages of completion. His most recent study (about Savannah, Georgia) was published this year in *The Southeastern Geographer*. Lou De Vorsey never stopped doing what he loved best. His publication record spanned over sixty years.

I first met Lou De Vorsey in 1963 when he had just begun to teach at East Carolina University. He then taught at the University of North Carolina (1965–1967), after which he joined the geography faculty at the University of Georgia in 1968 where over the next twenty years he became one of the most distinguished scholars in the United States. He retired as Professor Emeritus in 1988. A favorite personal memory of Lou De Vorsey occurred in 1993 when I was a visiting professor at the University of Georgia. I was scheduled to teach a course in geographical exploration and discovery, and though long-retired, Lou attended every class, and actually we team-taught the course. Students got much more than what they paid for. Another memory occurred when Lou and I

shared a room at a geographical conference in Providence, Rhode Island. During the night, it seemed like every fire truck in New England was clanging right outside our room. We woke to learn that a whole nearby city block was on fire. It was an auspicious welcome to Rhode Island.

Louis De Vorsej was born on April 6, 1929 in Newark, New Jersey, and attended school in nearby Lyndhurst. He earned the BA degree at Montclair State University in New Jersey, and then completed the MA in geography at Indiana University in 1954. Before he continued his academic studies, he entered the U.S. Navy Officer Candidate School in Newport News, Rhode Island, where he was commissioned as an ensign. While on active duty as a photo/radar navigator, Lou served in Japan, Okinawa, Thailand, Guam, and Alaska. One of his brief assignments while in the navy reserves was at the Naval History Division in Washington, D.C., where he worked on a volume titled *The American Revolution, 1775–1783: An Atlas of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Maps and Charts* (1972). Lou was proud of his service in the navy—he held the rank of Commander, USNR-Retired. Prominently displayed at his memorial service at Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Athens, Georgia was his Commander’s hat.

While maintaining his commission in the U.S. Naval Reserve, he continued his academic studies first at the University of Stockholm, and then at University College, London. He received the Ph.D. degree in historical geography from the University of London in 1965.

No one in the discipline of geography was more respected than Louis De Vorsej in regard to litigation concerning both land and sea boundaries. He called it “forensic geography.” In the course of his ca-

reer, Lou served as an expert witness in legal cases that involved local, state, federal, and international boundary lines. He testified before the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of the United States, and the states of Georgia and Massachusetts. In a case before the World Court in The Hague, the Netherlands, he supervised a major research effort under contract to the U.S. Department of State to support the United States in its case against Canada in the seaward boundary dispute in the Gulf of Maine. Lou was one of three geographer legal consultants to the U.S. litigation team. He participated as an expert witness in a total of fourteen cases. In addition to the *Gulf of Maine* case, Lou testified as the sole expert witness before the U.S. Supreme Court where Florida’s seaward boundary was in contention. Another case that Lou loved to talk and write about was the *United States vs. Alaska* in which the argument was whether the Dinkum Sands was an island or a low tide barrier island in the Beaufort Sea.

Over a period of almost four decades, Lou was an acknowledged authority on early American Indian maps. In 1971, he wrote “Early Maps as a Source in the Reconstruction of Southern Indian Landscapes.” His interest in Amerindian cartography never waned, and thirty-nine years later, in 2010, he published “The Importance of Native American Maps in the Discovery and Exploration of North America,” in *Terrae Incognitae*, the journal of the Society for the History of Discoveries.

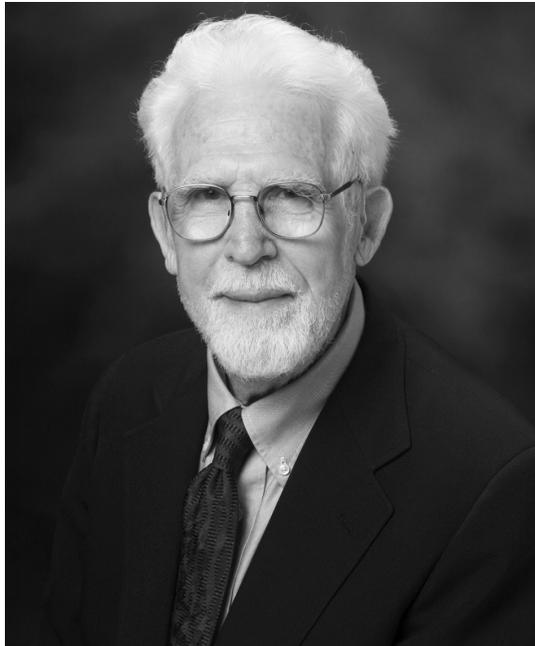
Louis De Vorsej’s corpus of scholarly output was honored early and often. In 1975, he received the Association of American Geographer’s Honors Award for “Meritorious Contributions to the Field of Geography.” In 1980, the University of Georgia

Research Foundation presented him its medal for "Research Creativity in the Social Sciences." In 1983 he received the AAG's Honor Award in Applied Geography. The Society for the History of Discoveries in 2005 elected him a Fellow, its highest honor for distinguished scholarship. One particular accolade, least expected but highly prized, was presented in 1998 by the Lyndhurst High School in New Jersey when he was elected to the school's Academic Hall of Fame.

One cannot praise Louis De Vorsej without including his family. Lou met Rosalyn Dennis in 1959 when he was a student at University College in London. A year later they were married in her home town, Weybridge, Surrey. Rosalyn De Vorsej was the quintessential mate, and at Lou's death they had celebrated fifty-two years together. Ros accompanied Lou almost everywhere he

traveled, and it was rare she was not with him at professional meetings. Being with her gave me and others added pleasure of attending those conferences. Their three children, Megan, Kirsteen, and Kevin today are far-flung. Kirsteen is a nurse living in Melbourne, Australia. Megan (mother of their only grandchild, Sophia Johnson) practices law in Concord, New Hampshire. Megan's husband, Chris Johnson, is the Appellate Defender for the State of New Hampshire. Kevin works for the National Archives and Records Administration in New York City as a Supervisory Electronic Records Format Specialist and resides in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Louis De Vorsej was a wonderful friend and colleague, a memorable, distinguished scholar, and a loving husband and parent. The discipline of geography has lost a titan, and he will be missed.



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