



# FSMS Pioneers

*A series that honors the legends of surveying in the state of Florida*

By Dominic Levings

## John R. Gargis

*Former FSMS President was an ardent lifelong student and advocate of the profession*

On February 15, 2018, John Russell Gargis, PSM #2423, passed away in his sleep at the age of 75.

His obituary reads: “No doubt he is surveying heaven as we speak”.

Perhaps there is not a more succinct way to eulogize a man who seemed to have an incessant passion for the surveying profession.

“If it wasn’t surveying, it didn’t catch his eye,” explained his widow, Kay Gargis.

“John was passionate about surveying – he lived it, he drank it. When he wasn’t working, he immersed himself in the history and the writing about it,” said Susan Jackson, a longtime friend of John and Kay.

John Gargis was born on December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1942 in Havre de Grace, Maryland, a small town on the mouth of the Susquehanna River best known for its excellent duck

hunting. He moved to Melbourne, Florida when he was 8 years old.

He began working on a survey crew at age 19 after graduating high school. Like most surveyors of his generation, he learned on the job. He became a licensed surveyor when he passed the official exam at age 27 in July of 1970.

Kimberly Gargis, John’s daughter, remembers growing up in a surveying household. Their family moved a few times in her youth, and her father would purchase property and survey it himself before building a home on it.

Kim remembers her and her brother, James, helping their father survey the lots.

“We were his rodmen,” she said, laughing. “We had to skunk through the palmetto bushes and around the pine trees.”

“I hated the palmetto bushes, let

me tell you that.”

She remembers her father attending a few night classes when she was young, so he could hone his mathematic skills and supplement what he was learning in the field. However, this was the extent of his formal surveying-related education.

“It wasn’t a formal education, it was all learning through buying books and studying and experimenting,” Kim recalled. “Other than high school he didn’t really have a formal education. It was all learning on the job and absorbing.”

It is now evident that John’s penchant for self-education extended well beyond his time preparing for the official licensing exam. In fact, by any standard, he was a prodigious writer, researcher, and programmer, who consumed, crunched, and relayed any and all surveying-related information.

According to *The Florida Sur-*

veyor archives, John wrote 37 articles for this publication, from May 1997 to December 2014.

The topics he analyzed and wrote about are wide-ranging and unique, and much of the expansive research he conducted was original. Some of his article topics include: a detailed analysis of nails, reducing overhead costs, interesting stories from the field, and government patents.

He delved into some topics so extensively that they were published in multiple installments. For example, he wrote an eight-part series on Half-Mile Posts, a three-part series on a disputed township survey in Florida in the 1800s, a three-part series on Florida's Initial Point, a four-part series on Swamp and Overflowed Lands, a four-part series on Benchmarks, and a four-part series on plat dedications.

Susan Jackson was the Brevard County Surveyor from 1998-2013. She met John through his wife, Kay, who worked in the county property appraiser's office. She distinctly remembers John's appetite for all things surveying.

"Even after he stopped working, he never stopped sharpening his saw in surveying. He continued to learn and grow. He had a hunger for it," Jackson said.

"In order to love something so much you have to be passionate about it. And that's what John was."

He was particularly interested in the history of surveying. Kim explained that she felt like her father had a certain sense of history and had always enjoyed learning about the lives of past surveyors.

"He was always a history buff for surveying. He had a great appreciation for early surveyors simply because they didn't have a lot of the modern equipment that surveyors have in today's world...they had to slog through undeveloped land that



*John's FSMS President's Portrait from the 1982-1983 year.*

was swampy and marshy," Kim said.

"It was a sense of belonging to the past as well as the future. If he was the first to plot a new piece of land, he had a sense of pride in doing a good job."

John completed his largest historical writing piece in 2011. It is an exhaustive history of Brevard County Surveyors, from the 1850s until the present day. It is a 26-page document that details the lives of the individual county surveyors, culminating with Jackson, who was the incumbent Brevard County Surveyor when John completed the

work in 2011.

It is obvious that methodical and painstaking research was required to write such a lengthy and detailed history on such a narrow and peculiar topic. In fact, John was so thorough, that at one point during his research, he employed Kim to help him.

John was researching the life of Robert Burchfiel, the Brevard County Surveyor from 1887-1895. Burchfiel moved to Kansas in 1895, and died in Harper County, Kansas in 1914. John asked Kim, who lives in Omaha, Nebraska, to drive to Kansas and find the gravestone of Burchfiel.

After a six-hour drive, Kim arrived at the cemetery and began her search, but couldn't find the gravestone. As it would turn out, John accidentally sent her to the wrong cemetery. Needless to say, Kim was not thrilled.

"That's how dedicated he was to being accurate and thorough in everything he did," Kay said of the gravestone story.

John's knowledge of surveying minutiae and his commitment to being accurate and thorough de-



*John (right) presenting an award to a fellow local chapter member.*



*John reviewing one of his articles.*

fined his surveying career. He gained a reputation as a meticulous professional, going to great lengths to be exact and factual in his work.

“He always wanted to make sure his work was correct – he didn’t like sloppy work and he wanted everything to be professional,” Kim explained. “People have always told me he was very helpful to other surveyors.”

One such surveyor was Loren Mercer, a longtime FSMS member who first met John at a Manasota chapter meeting in 1979. After moving away from the Manasota area, Mercer saw John every year at the annual FSMS conference, up until about seven years ago.

Mercer recalled that John was the go-to local expert on mean-high water boundaries, which was an area that was murkily defined back then.

“It was a big deal in those days,” he said. “Who owned the submerged land? Where did the upland start?”

Mercer says that John developed a system for defining mean-high water boundaries by himself, and that the local surveyors used his method until a more modern and formal method was created.

“He was interested in things not too many people knew about,” Mercer said. “It always intrigued me how deep he would go to make sure he was right on anything.”

John was also an extremely pro-

efficient computer programmer. He was especially fluent in DOS coding, the original line-by-line coding system that was a hallmark of early IBM computers.

He developed several survey-related programs. The first program he wrote, on an early computer he purchased from Radio Shack, simplified the process of archiving data points and other records. Instead of having to handle physical documents, a surveyor could store and retrieve pertinent numbers and figures on the computer.

Later, he would write numerous programs that served as calculators and converters for data. A user simply had to input numbers from data gathered in the field, and it would be crunched out into the desired result, instead of having to make the calculations by hand.



*John at a family wedding.*

“He had a fascination with the computer and how it could help the surveyor make his work more efficient,” Kim remembered.

When it came to John’s passion for the profession, and his devotion to bettering it, he perhaps could not have accomplished what he did without one person – his wife, Kay.

“It’s hard to have a conversation about John without having one

about Kay,” explained Jackson. “It was Kay who was such a support system for his passion.”

“It was like a team. You didn’t have one without the other, really.”

Kay is originally from Huntington, West Virginia. She moved to Florida in 1992 and began working in the Charlotte County Property Appraiser’s office, in the mapping department. It was here that she first met John, in 1993.

She recalls that he would come into the property appraiser’s office quite often, asking for old maps and other documents to aid him in his work. Her supervisor and other coworkers always helped him, and he was a familiar face to everyone in the office.

One day, John refused help from one of her coworkers, and asked for Kay instead.

“I guess he’d been checking me out,” she recalled, laughing. “He told me later he didn’t need anything, he was just making it up.”

John would go on to ask Kay to dinner a few times, but she denied, because she said it was against office rules and she would lose her job. Eventually, she agreed to meet him for lunch.

It was at this lunch that Kay discovered John had a habit for being late. He arrived just as she was about to leave, and he offered to pay the check. Her response was about as cool as it gets.

“I told him, ‘Absolutely not. I have no use for men,’” she said.

But John didn’t give up. He sent flowers to her office every week, sending a fresh bouquet before the previous one died. One arrangement of two dozen roses was so big, it couldn’t fit through the doorway.

He also sent her small gifts, including a watch that ran backwards.

“He told me that he wished time ran backwards so we could have more time together,” Kay said.

A relationship developed, and John and Kay were together for five and half years before marrying in 1999.

John’s first wife had died from cancer, and he had two children – Kim and James. Kay had also been previously married, and had one son and two daughters - Kenneth, Jamie, and Keri. Kay says they didn’t marry earlier because her two daughters were still in high school.

“I didn’t want to subject them to him, and him to them,” she recalled.

Later, Kay asked John what made him stick with her.

“He told me he stayed with me because I was the only one who told him no,” she said. “I was the challenge... I was the only person who refused to go out with him.”

John had already been a member of FSMS for several years prior to meeting Kay and was the society president in 1982-1983. He had also been extremely involved on the local level, serving as the President of the Space Coast, Manasota, Charlotte Harbor, and Peace River chapters. He won the Chapter President of the Year award twice, in 1974 and in 1997.

Jackson remembers that John and Kay were a dynamic duo when it came to their efforts for FSMS. She was a fellow member with them in the Space Coast chapter.

“Everything we did in the community, he was in support of it,” Jackson said.

“Any type of fundraiser or



*A rare occasion when John wasn’t writing. “Note the ever-present thumb drive,” Kay said.*

event we did, it was Kay who was out there in the front, selling tickets or getting the support of FSMS or the community. She just never stopped.”

Jackson said the couple were instrumental in the revitalization of the Space Coast chapter, which had gone through a slump in the mid-2000’s. Along with Jackson, they injected new life into the chapter, which culminated in Space Coast winning the Chapter of the Year Award in 2009 – no small feat for a chapter with a small group of members.

“They were part of the group who resurrected the Space Coast chapter and brought it to the height of winning chapter of the year,” Jackson said. “They were a big part of us winning.”

John had his first stroke in 2010 and was wheelchair-bound until he passed away. But friends and family say his limited mobility did little to curb his commitment to FSMS and the profession.

Kay said that even when he couldn’t move on his own, he would remind her when it was time to go to chapter meetings.

“He loved being at conference, being at seminars, being at chapter meetings, being in the company of other surveyors,” Jackson said.

Kay says John remained a writer

and programmer until the end, sitting at his computer until about six months before his death, when his health declined so much that he could no longer muster to do so.

“The whole time, even in long-term care, he’s sitting at his computer writing programs for surveyors to use in their surveying,” she said.

Those who knew John best will remember him as a man who was committed to the advancement of his profession until the end of his life, who worked year after year to promote surveying and share his love of it with others.

“He wanted the profession to advance and be considered as something to be looked upon as a good career choice,” Kim said.

One specific image comes to mind when Kim thinks back on her father, an image from her youth.

“I mainly remember him hunched over the drafting board, him plotting out things and looking at things,” she said.

There is no doubt that John Gargis is hunched over a drafting board as we speak, surveying heaven.

*John's celebration of life is on Thursday, April 5, 2018 at 10am at Royal Palm Memorial Gardens, Punta Gorda, Florida.*