



*Samuel W. Fomon*

# THOMAS DUANE LARSON

1928-2006

Elected in 1985

*“For outstanding contributions in academic leadership, and for creative research and management accomplishments contributing to the advancement of U.S. transportation.”*

BY PHILIP D. CADY  
SUBMITTED BY THE NAE HOME SECRETARY

**T**HOMAS D. LARSON, educator, administrator of transportation agencies at the state and federal levels, leader in transportation associations, and consultant to the transportation industry, died on July 20, 2006, at the age of 77. Larson was born on September 28, 1928, in Philipsburg, Pennsylvania, and grew up on a farm in nearby Grassflat, Pennsylvania. He received his primary education in Philipsburg and earned his B.S. (1952), M.S. (1959), and Ph.D. (1962) from Pennsylvania State University. He also completed postdoctoral studies at Oklahoma State University (1966) and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (1982).

Dr. Larson began his career as a plant engineer at Bethlehem Steel Corporation in Bethlehem and Steelton, Pennsylvania. From 1954 to 1957, he served in the U.S. Navy Civil Engineers Corps, where he was officer-in-charge of construction at Grand Turk and Nantucket, Rhode Island, and public works officer at Camp Lejune, North Carolina. Also, in 1957, he was a designer in the Flood Control Division of the Pennsylvania Department of Forests and Waters.

From 1957 to 1962, while working on his M.S. and Ph.D., he was an instructor in civil engineering at Penn State. By 1979, he had advanced to the rank of full professor, researcher, and

administrator. He founded and directed the Pennsylvania Transportation Institute at Penn State, which was a source of significant funding for research, mostly on highways and bridges. As a result of this research, Larson published some 100 reports, technical papers, and journal articles, as well as one textbook.

From 1979 to 1987, Dr. Larson was secretary of transportation for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania under Governor Richard Thornburgh. During that time, he was recognized by the National Governors Association as “Outstanding State Cabinet Official” and was elected a member of the National Academy of Engineering (NAE). He returned to Penn State as a chaired professor in 1987.

In 1989, Dr. Larson retired from Penn State as Pennsylvania Professor Emeritus of government and Management and professor emeritus of civil engineering. On August 10 of that year, he was appointed by President George H.W. Bush as the twelfth administrator of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), responsible for the overall management of the organization, including the Federal Highway Aid Program. While at FHWA, he was involved in the development of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, one of the top items on Bush’s domestic agenda. The measure was signed into law in 1991.

Larson was named Construction Man of the Year (1982) by *Engineering News Record*; Man of the Year (1985) by the International Road Federation; Outstanding Pennsylvania Government Official (1985) by the Pennsylvania Chamber of Commerce; recipient of the George S. Bartlett Award for Highway Progress (1989); a fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration (1989); distinguished alumnus of Pennsylvania State University (1990); recipient of the William N. Carey Jr. Distinguished Service Award (1992); and recipient of the American Society of Civil Engineers Medal (1993).

In addition to his regular membership in NAE (1985), he was councillor and a member of the Executive Committee of the NAE Council; a member of the Charles Stark Draper Prize Committee; and a fellow of the National Academies Committee

on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy. He was also a member of the National Academy of Public Administration Committee on Management; a member of the Board of Directors, Baker Corporation; president of the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO); chairman of the National Governors Association Task Force on New Federal Transportation Regulation; chairman of the National Research Council Transportation Research Board; and chairman of the Strategic Highway Research Program Executive Committee. In 1993, when he completed his term at FHWA, he returned to his home in State College, Pennsylvania, where he remained active as a consultant on government and management issues.

Dr. Larson lived his personal life with the same energy he exhibited in his professional life. In October 2004, he was thrown from a horse-drawn cart and hit his head on a tree. He was hospitalized and, initially, showed some improvement, but he never fully recovered. He is survived by Esther, his wife of 50 years, and three daughters, Catherine Bisbee, Suzanne Fetter, and Merilee Peery.