

Elizabeth A.R. Brown, Historian Who Refuted the Existence of Feudalism, dies in New York City, August 8, 2024

Elizabeth Atkinson Rash Brown, Ph.D., known to her friends, colleagues, and foe as Peggy, died in her Upper Westside Manhattan apartment. She was 92.

Born on February 16, 1932, from childhood Peggy challenged authority, even earning coverage as a young girl in the *Louisville Courier Journal* during World War II. According to the press, Peggy refused to stay on an army base with her mother and two sisters while her father served in Europe, preferring to take a train across the South alone to visit her grandfather, Judge Homer Batson, a noted Kentucky judge and leading businessman. Defying her parents by attending the co-educational college, Swarthmore, rather than a single-sex Seven-Sister, Peggy married Ralph Brown, a student from Boston, requiring the Dean's permission because they were undergraduates. Peggy graduated Phi Beta Kappa with "Highest Honors," making her the top student in her class.

Peggy went on to become a Ph.D. candidate in history at Harvard while her husband attended the Law School. After some negotiations, based on merit and class standing, Peggy became a teaching assistant in the Harvard history department. Although her Ph.D. advisor initially told her that "women have nothing to teach men," Peggy protested and was given the position. Although Peggy was also told, "It's too bad you are not a man" when she earned Distinction with her Ph.D., Peggy went on to publish numerous books and articles, teach undergraduates and mentor graduate students, and become a leader in her field.

As an early female scholar who wanted to excel at work and also have a family, which many professional women in the humanities and sciences gave up during the period, when Peggy and Ralph had two children, Peggy timed the births perfectly: her daughter was born in 1960 while Peggy wrote her dissertation and first book; her son was born ten years later during Peggy's sabbatical from teaching at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York.

Peggy authored six books on Philip the Fair of France, taxation, and the Middle Ages, as well as a plethora of articles and encyclopaedia entries that remain foundational in the field. She was known to take young scholars under her wing, particularly in the archives.

In 1974, Peggy published "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe" that directly refuted the work of Marc Bloch, who had defined the twentieth-century approach to the field. Along with Lucien Lefevre, Bloch had founded the Annales School that rejected traditional 19th-century approaches to diplomacy, war, and specific events to understand historical

structures and the “longue durée,” and defined the category of Feudalism. Peggy returned to the roots of fact-based historical discourse to refute Bloch, arguing that medieval social and economic structures were far too nuanced and complex for the term to have any meaning. The article appeared in the *American Historical Review*, and the journal’s front cover featured a *New Yorker* cartoon chosen by Peggy.

Historians in the field understood the work as a challenge to the Annales school, which led to controversies, infighting, numerous conferences, and edited volumes. Peggy encouraged the debate through letter-writing campaigns to all authors of textbooks and histories about the period who used the term, demanding that they define its meaning and justify its use.

As a historian who engaged actively with “facts,” “truth,” “objectivity,” and “Big Men” through her study of taxation and the French king, Philip the Fair, Peggy shied away from feminist and Marxist turns in the 1970s and ‘80s. As a female trailblazer in the profession, some believed she had betrayed her sex. Yet feminist authors as well as scholars in other areas, even those shunned by Peggy, used her work to retheorize their own approaches. Later in her career Peggy delved into the history of individual women including the publication of several articles on Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Peggy taught at Brooklyn College for decades. After retiring and serving as Professor Emeritus, Peggy continued to teach in the United States at Yale and Berkeley Universities and lectured throughout Europe and Eastern Europe. The CUNY Graduate Center recognized her work at a “Peggyfest” conference during her lifetime. She served as vice-president and president of the Society of Medieval Historians from 2010-2011, which also recognized her at a conference. Students and her peers edited a collection of essays dedicated to her work and mentoring.

When the COVID pandemic created the initial lockdown, Peggy was one of the few historians who attended an early zoom conference, speaking to historians in Poland from her home. She became an active member of a new professional group with young historians that emerged during COVID, the Global Biography Working Group, or GloBio, always framed by her history book collection that she had begun in high school.

After the tragic fire at Notre Dame in 2019, Peggy contributed to the early discussions on its rebuilding. As an expert in its stained-glass windows, at the age of eighty-seven she learned computer cadcam practices to assist with the project. From the late 1950s, Peggy spent months in French archives. In the 1980s, she settled in an apartment blocks from her beloved cathedral.

Peggy continued to work through several near-fatal operations, and her subsequent battle with cancer. On at least three occasions, she was given only months to live and survived for years. In one incident in Paris, while walking to the Bibliothèque Nationale, Peggy was run over by a speeding bicycle. Because it hit her replacement hip, she survived.

After being given months to live at the age of 89, she fought both ovarian and colon cancer while continuing to mentor young students and work on her own articles. Like her father, who retired as an Army Major General and jogged two miles twice a day through his 90s, Peggy walked rapidly every day to recover from chemo treatments. She was a known figure on the Upper Westside, swinging on the children's swings in Central Park and shopping at Trader Joe's. She refused grocery delivery, insisting on carrying everything home herself in recycled plastic bags. On her deathbed, she wanted no pain medication, insisting that she could do yoga.

Peggy's papers are held at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, where she established an archive dedicated to preserving the professional papers of medieval historians.

Peggy passed away in her home, surrounded by her beloved papers and books.

Contributions in her memory can be made to the Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania FBO Elizabeth AR Brown Medieval Historians' Archive Fund, University of Pennsylvania Libraries, 3420 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104

Notes of condolence can be sent to her husband and children, Ralph S. Brown Jr., Victoria Phillips, and Al Brown, c/o Ralph Brown, at the Inspir, 1802 Second Avenue, 1006, NYC, NY 10128.

If you would like to call on Ralph, we ask that you arrange a visit by emailing his sister, Lucy @ lucylbrown616@gmail.com, Al @ alex@rlprj.com, or Victoria @ vphilliphistory@gmail.com.

Victoria Phillips