



**James J. John**

July 25, 1928 – October 23, 2023

James J. John, professor emeritus of history, died on October 23. He was 95.

A specialist in the study of Latin manuscripts and the history of universities, John was a part of the Cornell community for more than 50 years, teaching medieval intellectual history, historiography and paleography – the study of historical writing systems and manuscripts.

Colleagues and students remember John for his fundamental contributions to the study of Latin texts, a lively dedication to his students and an unwavering commitment to Cornell's Medieval Studies Program, of which he was a founding member in 1966.

“For generations of students and colleagues, Jim was an amazingly upbeat yet practical guide to much deep learning in medieval European intellectual and social history, especially in book-history and paleography,” said Andrew Galloway, the James John Professor of Medieval Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S), a chair named in John's honor.

“He was world-renowned for his ability to date and localize with astounding precision both large tomes and tiny scraps of medieval writing across a millennium. Trained by the best in that field, Jim soon became one of the best. He helped make Cornell's Medieval Studies Program a world-class Ph.D.-granting program, in which Latin paleography remains a (sometimes intimidating) common reference point.”

“His many brilliant contributions ensured the program's success and added luster to its reputation,” said Andrew Hicks, associate professor of music and director of the Medieval Studies Program (A&S). “His paleography seminars were legendary, and his mentorship and scholarly generosity extended well beyond the classroom.”

“Jim John was the best of teachers,” said Carol Neel, Ph.D. '81, professor of history at Colorado College. “He had, as medievalists say, the ‘oculus palaeographicus,’ an uncanny ability to decipher what was written in medieval books in scripts utterly unintelligible even to most trained

eyes. But he also saw through those texts, with extraordinary clarity, the material and human worlds from which they emerged. In the same twofold way, he recognized in his students the historical and linguistic skills we brought to the craft of medieval studies, then called us to greater insight by attending to our individual backgrounds and engagement with historical voices and artifacts.”

John continued to be a presence in his students’ lives long after graduation, said Margot Fassler, Ph.D. ’83, who studied with him from 1979 to 1983.

“There was a wonderful group of medievalists among the graduate students in those years, and we all took a year-long course in paleography with Jim,” said Fassler, the Keough-Hesburgh Professor Emeritus of Music History and Liturgy at the University of Notre Dame. “He was a thorough teacher, and his bibliographies are famous among us.”

John was one of the great medievalists of the 20th century, and to his students, he was a model of scholarly generosity and support, said Michael Twomey, Ph.D. ’79, the Charles A. Dana Professor Emeritus of Humanities and Arts at Ithaca College, who also recalls John’s keen interest in sports. “In the 1970’s, we grad students played pickup softball, and Jim’s level of play showed us why he had once been scouted (as rumor had it) by the Brooklyn Dodgers. You didn’t want to be guarding first base when Jim came tearing down the line.”

John was born in Long Prairie, Minnesota, in 1928 and grew up in Browerville, Minnesota.

With a scholarship, he attended Notre Dame beginning at age 16. He originally planned to study journalism but instead became a history major and stayed on to complete his master’s degree and Ph.D. in medieval studies under Father Astrik Gabriel, a renowned historian of medieval universities.

While completing his Ph.D., John worked as a researcher for E.A. Lowe at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. He lived in and travelled across Europe in the 1950s, searching Latin manuscripts for the “Codices Latini Antiquiores” (CLA), a magisterial catalogue of all Latin manuscripts written before the ninth century. John returned to Princeton for sabbaticals and continued to work on the CLA into his retirement.

In 1965, John took a position in Cornell’s Department of History, where he taught medieval history and paleography and mentored generations of students.

John lectured regularly in Europe and served as a visiting professor at universities including the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Yale. After retiring from teaching in 2001, he continued to research.

Throughout his career, John maintained an international reputation as an authority, particularly on paleography. His writings are found in academic journals, edited collections, and many of the dictionaries and encyclopedias that scholars consult today, including the “New Catholic Encyclopedia,” “Dictionary of the Middle Ages,” “Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,” and “Der Neue Pauly.”

The International Congress on Medieval Studies honored John for his work in 2009. He won fellowships and awards from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies and the American Philosophical Society.

To honor his role in starting and supporting Cornell's Medieval Studies Program, John's family established the James John Professor of Medieval Studies endowment, for his 90th birthday in 2018.

John is preceded in death by his first wife, Margaret (Peggy) Donohue, who died in 1995, and by his second wife, Carol Knight, whom he married in 2002 and who died in 2016. He is survived by six children and 12 grandchildren.

*Written by Kate Blackwood  
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