

## Elizabeth Walsh (1953-2017)



All SAAers who have conducted research at the Folger Shakespeare Library will mourn the loss of the Reading Room's Head of Services, Betsy Walsh. She welcomed both newcomers and old hands with grace, kindness, and wit. Betsy was an estimable matchmaker of persons and resources, offering essential guidance to generations of scholars through her unerring and comprehensive knowledge of the Folger collections. Her long memory for Folger lore encompassed staff, readers, visitors, and the library's ghosts; her skills as a story-teller were legendary.

From the Folger website:

Betsy was an inseparable part of the Folger—indeed, for many of us, she was the embodiment of the Folger Reading Room. She worked here for forty-three years—about half of the Folger's existence since it opened in 1932. During that time,

she was a guide and friend to many readers, high school English teachers, exhibition curators, colleagues, and a long line of directors. Her knowledge of the Folger was unparalleled, as was her tactful, humorous way of recounting the history of this place and its people.

Betsy was born and raised in Washington, D.C. In 2009, when she contributed to *The Curatorial Eye: Discoveries from the Folger Vault* exhibition, she shared some of her early recollections of the Folger. As a child, she would go to Woolworth's, swing by the Folger to see the Puck statue at the fountain, and proceed to her mother's office. Her school brought her to the Folger for field trips and student matinees, and she volunteered at the Folger in high school.

Betsy graduated from Trinity College in Washington, DC, in 1975, majoring in English with a focus on American literature. While at Trinity, she took a summer job as a circulation page at the Folger in 1974, before her senior year. She seems to have been at home immediately. "I liked it," she recalled. "I liked the people and the work." She worked part-time at the Folger as she earned a master's degree in library science at the University of Maryland. She then became a full-time reference assistant at the Folger. She was appointed Head of Reader Services in 1986.

Betsy was a contributor to *Shakespeare Magazine* and was co-editor with Thomas Gravell of *American Watermarks, 1690–1835* (Oak Knoll Press, 2002). She co-curated several Folger exhibitions, including *Yesterday's News: Seventeenth-Century English Broadsides and Newsbooks* (1995), *The Reader Revealed* (2001), *Voices for Tolerance in an Age of Persecution* (2004), and *The Curatorial Eye: Discoveries from the Folger Vault* (2009). She also served as a consultant for *Breaking News: Renaissance Journalism and the Birth of the Newspaper* (2008) and *Open City: London, 1500–1700* (2012), among other projects. Some of these exhibitions included early modern newsbooks, which she especially liked—illustrated pamphlets on topics ranging from the weather and spectacular crimes to the Great Fire of London.

Her knowledge of the Folger's history and collections were unparalleled—something which both readers and staff could use to their full advantage. Not only did her steel-trap memory mean that she could recall what precise copy of a book was used in a particular tour (often with the call number!), but she could give

someone exact directions to find the material they were looking for. She would say something like “Go to the cabinets by the table, bottom drawer, third folder, it was a typescript letter on yellow typing paper.” And you would go to the cabinet and pull out the folder and lo and behold, the information that you needed was staring you in the face.

Betsy often gave tours to special groups, from librarians, doctors, and lawyers to the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Jewish National Theater, always with books that reflected their interests. Among her favorite tours, however, were “Aunt Tillie tours,” groups of people from a wide range of backgrounds. She found that rare books on nonacademic topics, from cooking to curing tonsillitis, appealed to almost anyone.

For *The Curatorial Eye*, which showcased works chosen by members of the Folger staff, Betsy selected books offering practical advice. “I enjoy books that relate directly to early modern readers, that provide insight into how people used books and what interested them,” she said. One of her favorites was a fairly basic early manual on swimming, which “came to my attention when a reader called for it,” she said. “And it really appealed to me. The writer instructs the reader on all aspects of swimming—like how to enter the water, by running, jumping, or flopping. And buoyancy—if you put your feet up, you may drink a lot of water.”

But even beyond her prodigious knowledge, it is Betsy’s warmth and good cheer that will be most missed in the Reading Room. She had a way of putting everyone, from a wide-eyed graduate student to the most senior scholar, at ease; this ability has made the Folger Reading Room a welcoming place for scholars of all stripes. We can only hope to continue the excellent example that she set for us all.

Betsy died on September 22, 2017, aged 64.