

## **Memorial: Helen M. Burns (1922–2002)**

¶1 “Helen Marie Burns, a former law librarian at the Federal Reserve in New York City, died on May 17, 2002. In her will, she bequeathed the generous sum of \$5,000 to the AALL. The Association extends its condolences and gratitude to Ms. Burns’ family.”<sup>1</sup>

¶2 Many of the law librarians in the New York City area were saddened to learn of Helen Burns’s passing with this announcement in *AALL Spectrum*. Our thoughts immediately went to the library that Helen so lovingly crafted and in which many of us were so privileged to have had the opportunity to grow professionally.

¶3 Helen came to New York City from Baltimore, where she had served as librarian of the Maryland State Planning Commission (1949–53), planning to stay for a few years and then return home to her family. Instead, she began work as an assistant law librarian at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in 1953 and remained there until she retired as chief law librarian in 1979. In those twenty-five years, she built the law library, devising a classification plan that would accommodate the nuances of banking law before the K tables were perfected. The banking law legislative history collection that she began for the law library is today without parallel. She also became responsible for the Legal Department’s records, providing indexing and abstracting so that attorneys could research their own precedents. During this time she also completed her Ph.D. in history at New York University in 1965. She combined her interest in history and banking to conduct a major study of banking reforms. Her dissertation was later published by Greenwood Press.<sup>2</sup>

¶4 Many of the senior level officers at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York began their careers in the FRBNY Legal Department, and learned to love the law and banking through their early training at the hands of Helen Burns. It is no stretch to say that she touched history. From the Franklin National Bank failure, to the 1975 New York City fiscal debacle, the savings and loan failures, the financial bailouts of various foreign nations, and the Iranian hostage crisis and resolution, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York played a huge role in them all; and the repository of information that enabled its officers to offer reputable advice and counsel in each situation stood ready as a result of the consummate skills and foresight of Helen Burns.

¶5 In addition to her skills in collection development and reference, those of us who had the privilege of working with Helen, marveled at her organizational aptitude and her ability to meet the needs of the Legal Department. She made supervision

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1. *Memorial*, AALL SPECTRUM, Sept. 2002, at 32, 32.

2. HELEN M. BURNS, THE AMERICAN BANKING COMMUNITY AND NEW DEAL BANKING REFORMS, 1933–1935 (Contributions in Economics and Economic History, No. 11, 1974).

look easy while at the same time she enjoyed engaging in the politics needed to get things done the way she wanted them. We who worked directly for her can honestly say that she was the best boss we ever had. And her impact as a librarian has now extended beyond us to other generations of law librarians who have worked at the FRBNY Law Library, leading one to comment, “I never met Helen Burns, but I am grateful to be a beneficiary of her legacy.” And now, with her generous gift to AALL, countless others will be “beneficiary of her legacy.”—*Federal Reserve Bank of New York Legal Division Librarians, Past and Present*<sup>3</sup>

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3. Hugh Tidwell, Roberta G. Laskowitz, Teresa E. Wrenn, John Williams, and Lucy Curci-Gonzalez.