

Charles Donahue

Biography

After graduating from Portsmouth Priory (now Abbey) School in Rhode Island, where I had the benefit of a thoroughly old-fashioned classical education, I attended Harvard College and concentrated in Classics and English. From Harvard, I went to the Yale Law School, which allowed me to spend virtually all of my third year in the Graduate School. I worked with two extraordinary legal historians, W. H. Dunham in English legal and constitutional history and Stephan Kuttner in the history of medieval canon law. A military obligation took me to Washington, where I worked for two years as an attorney-advisor in the office of the General Counsel of the Air Force and for a year as Assistant General Counsel of the President's Commission on Postal Organization. The completion of the military obligation brought me to a crossroads, and after thinking seriously about staying in Washington in private practice, I joined the faculty of the University of Michigan Law School, with the intention, since fulfilled, of becoming a legal historian. I visited at the Harvard Law School 1978–9 and joined the faculty full-time in January of 1980.

My interests range broadly over the field of private law, but history and property seem to go together, and I have taught first-year property now for more than forty years. Other than that, my teaching and research have been in the area of European legal history. I regularly offer courses in Roman law, English legal history and Continental legal history. I have published an obscenely long book on marriage litigation in the ecclesiastical courts of England and what I had to call the “Franco-Belgian” region in the later Middle Ages, and am now working on the fourteenth-century volume of the new Oxford History of the Laws of England. In addition to law students, I am also interested in teaching legal history to undergraduate and graduate students. My basic legal history courses are cross-listed in the College, and I offer a seminar on medieval law in the History Department. I serve on the Committee on Medieval Studies of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and on the University Committee on Religion. Outside of Harvard, I am a past president of the American Society for Legal History, a fellow of the Medieval Academy of America and of the Royal Historical Society (UK), and a life member of the American Law Institute. My research interests take me Europe virtually every summer and sometimes during the academic year as well. In the past, I have held visiting appointments at the London School of Economics and the Vrije Universiteit te Brussel.