

Holmes, Urban Tigner, Jr. ^[1]

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by Alfred Garvin Engstrom, 1988

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Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr., medievalist, Romance philologist, author, and editor, was born in Washington, D.C., the son of [Urban Tigner Holmes](#) ^[2] (1869–1940), a career naval officer who was graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, and Florence Fielding Lawson Holmes (1871–1951) of Philadelphia. His grandfather, David Thomas Holmes (1832–1905), had been a Methodist [circuit rider](#) ^[3] in Georgia before moving with all of his family to Arkansas in 1867. But when young Tigner's parents became Episcopalians, their son was baptized in the [Episcopal church](#) ^[4], which would remain his spiritual home throughout life.

Holmes received his early schooling in the nation's capital and in the Danville School for boys in Danville, Va., where, at age eleven, his reading of [Irving's *Alhambra*](#) ^[5] inspired his purchase of a Spanish grammar and aroused his lifelong passion for languages. In 1916 he was enrolled in the U.S. Naval Academy, but resigned the following year because of ear trouble. Entering the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 1917, he turned to the study of medieval France under the influence of the Bayeux Tapestry and Professor J. P. W. Crawford. In the fall of 1920, with an A.B. degree and honors from Pennsylvania, he entered Harvard on a tuition scholarship and studied Romance languages under J. D. M. Ford and Charles H. Grandgent. That summer, while teaching at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada, he met Margaret Allen Gemmell (1900–1973), whom he married on 22 June 1922.

Harvard awarded Holmes a master's degree in 1921 and a Ph.D. in 1923, the latter after his return from advanced study on a Sheldon Travelling Fellowship in Europe, where his teachers included Mario Roques, Joseph Bédier, Antoine Meillet, and, for a short time, Edmond Faral and Vendryes. After serving as assistant professor of French from 1923 to 1925 at the University of Missouri, Holmes was appointed associate professor of [Romance philology](#) ^[6] at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[7] and set about making his department one of the most outstanding in the country in the field. At age twenty-seven he was appointed full professor. Holmes was a visiting professor at the University of Chicago in the spring of 1929 and at the University of Southern California in the summer of 1939. In the latter year he was on the council of the Modern Language Association of America, and in 1941 he was elected president of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association. In 1941 and 1942 he was director of the Linguistic Institute of the Linguistic Society of America.

During [World War II](#) ^[8] Holmes served in Washington, D.C., as a liaison officer between the Office of Strategic Services and the Department of State. In 1945, after his return to the university, he was named Kenan Professor of Romance Philology and was made a Fellow of the Mediaeval Academy of America. In 1948 and 1956 he was lecturer in the Mediaeval Institute at Notre Dame University. Other honors included a Litt.D. from Washington and Lee University (1948) and Western Michigan University (1965) and an LL.D. from Tulane University (1971). In addition, he was named Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur (1950); visiting professor at Louisiana State University (1950); distinguished visiting professor at Michigan State University (autumn 1950); Fulbright Lecturer for two terms at the University of Melbourne, Australia (1960); member of the Royal Archaeological Institute (1961); Fellow of the Royal Numismatic Society (1961), of the American Numismatic Society (1962), and of the Royal Society of Antiquaries, FSA, London (1967); clerk (1964–67), second vice-president (1967–69), and president of the Fellows (1969–72) of the Mediaeval Academy of America; Senior Fellow of the Southeastern Mediaeval and Renaissance Institute (1966); and lecturer for the North Carolina Association of Eastern Colleges (1969) and at Notre Dame University (1970).

In 1965 at a banquet honoring his sixty-fifth birthday, Holmes was presented [festschrift volume](#) ^[9] with contributions by fifteen of his former students. As a fitting tribute to an outstanding career of teaching and scholarship, he was invited to accept an appointment for the spring semester of 1973 at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, N.J. But he was not to enjoy this final honor. In the spring of 1972, while at Memphis State University to deliver a series of lectures, he died suddenly of a heart attack.

Among the most notable of Holmes's numerous books are *The Life and Works of Du Bartas* with John Coriden Lyons and Robert White Linker (3 vols., 1935–40); *A History of Old French Literature from the Origins to 1300* ^[10] (1937); *A History of the French Language* ^[11], with his friend, Alexander H. Schutz (1940); *Daily Living in the Twelfth Century* ^[12] (1952), his favorite work; *Chrétien de Troyes and the Grail* ^[13], with Sister M. Amelia Klenke (1959); and *Chrétien de Troyes* ^[14] (1970). He also edited the first volume of *A Critical Bibliography of French Literature: The Mediaeval Period* (1946), as well as *Mediaeval Studies in Memory of E. B. Ham* (1967). In addition, Holmes published scores of reviews in scholarly journals, particularly in *Speculum*, one of the major publications in his field, where his influence was widely felt over the years. His range and versatility are also evident in well over a hundred articles and notes that appeared during his long career on such varied subjects as the chronology of Old French writings, the identity of medieval authors, etymologies, onomastics, literary sources, foreign influences on French vocabulary and syntax, medieval and Renaissance gem lore, the position of the North Star in the thirteenth century, interpretation of the earliest story of the Grail, the beast epic, coins in Old French

literature, Waldensian dialects in North Carolina, the identity of a bird in Chaucer, the bombardier beetle in a poem by Villon, the medieval minstrel, and the medieval concept of the monster. Holmes was for many years an associate editor of *Studies in Philology*. He was the major influence in founding the *University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures* (1940) and *Romance Notes* (1960), and was editor of both of these internationally known publications until his retirement in 1971.

In nearly half a century as a graduate professor in the university at Chapel Hill, Holmes directed over 150 dissertations and theses, and sent a steady stream of teachers and scholars in Romance philology to important positions in many prominent colleges and universities in the United States and Canada.

Holmes devoted his life to his family, his university, his church, and his community. He was active in dramatic performances, sang in the church choir, and read "The Christmas Story" for the Planetarium in his magnificent bass voice. Both he and his wife were influential members of the Episcopal church, where Holmes served as vestryman and delegate to diocesan conventions. They were among the first members of the American Church Union in North Carolina and were the first couple to receive the Keble Award when the Union's Annual Council met at Raleigh in 1968. The respect and admiration of his churchmen is reflected in a long article that appeared after his death in *The American Church News* on All Saints' Day 1972.

Holmes was buried near the top of the hillside in the new Chapel Hill Cemetery; the following year his wife was buried beside him. He was survived by two daughters, Mary Cleland (Mrs. L. L. Bernard)^[15] of South Bend, Ind., and Florence Anne (Mrs. Hampton Hubbard^[16]) of Clinton, N.C.; a son, the Very Reverend Urban Tigner Holmes III, dean of the School of Theology of the University of the South at Sewanee, Tenn.; a sister, Mrs. John T. Knight of Metairie, La.; a brother, Edward Lawson Holmes of Kirkwood, Mo.; seventeen grand-children; and three great-granddaughters.

The annual Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr., Graduate Award in Mediaeval Studies and Romance Theology was established at The University of North Carolina by his former students and his colleagues as a continuing memorial. There is a fine oil portrait of Holmes (the gift of his three children) by Ray E. Goodbred of Charleston, S.C., in Toy Lounge of Dey Hall on the Chapel Hill campus.

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Subjects:

Biographies^[18]

Educators^[19]

Writers, journalists, and editors^[20]

Authors:

Engstrom, Alfred Garvin^[21]

Origin - location:

Orange County^[22]

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill^[23]

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