

Memorial Minute for Peggy Pennell

February 2026

Peggy Polsky Pennell
October 11, 1936 - June 26, 2023

For over 20 years, Peggy Polsky Pennell was a cheerful, friendly, thoughtful, and pragmatic presence at Old Chatham Monthly Meeting. She gave generously of her spirit, time, and wealth and we sorely missed her when she moved to Kendal-on-Hudson for her final years of life.

Peggy was born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina, where she and her sister came out as the first Jewish debutantes in the city. Peggy did not enjoy one element of this and found herself more comfortable when she was sent north for a better education at George School, a Quaker boarding school in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

While a student at Radcliffe College she met Bill, a student at Harvard University, and they began their 61 years of marriage together 6 days after her graduation in 1958. While Bill studied law at the University of Pennsylvania, Peggy worked as an administrative assistant to a scientist retained by PepsiCo because of a lawsuit about botulism. The scientist proved nothing could live in a drink of Pepsi. Peggy's advice to her children was: Don't wait for an interesting career to happen to you; instead, search for something you find compelling and do that.

After Bill earned his law degree, Peggy and Bill moved to and settled in Brooklyn Heights, New York, where they raised Kate, born in 1963, and Tom, born in 1964. The children were still quite young when Peggy obtained a Master's in Library Science and began a career as a librarian at Chemical Bank (later JP Morgan), which lasted almost 40 years. In the days before Google and artificial intelligence, she used her extraordinary research skills to answer all manner of questions that the bank's analysts brought to her regarding various industries and markets. She later developed a database for the bank's library collection. It turned out that she could be quite steely in negotiations with vendors to whose products the bank subscribed, drawing on her fluency regarding the sources, uses, and value. So the bank gave her responsibility for handling all of them.

Peggy and Bill were intent on broadening their children's horizons and they traveled extensively, making summer trips to China, the Soviet Union, and many parts of Western Europe. Bill had a great hunger for such experiences, while Peggy was skilled at planning all the travel details.

For years, Peggy pushed Bill on the idea of owning a summer home in the country. After renting for a few years and enjoying the rich offerings of Tanglewood, the Mount, and other cultural venues in the Berkshire and Taconic Hills, in 1989 she persuaded him to seize the opportunity to build on Shaker Ridge in Canaan exactly the house they wanted and designed to require zero exterior maintenance, and it worked perfectly.

A few years after settling into the Canaan house, Peggy began attending the nearby Quaker Meeting in Old Chatham in her late 50s, having become more spiritual following the death of her mother. Her daughter Kate said that the Meeting was a surprising gift to Peggy - that engaging with the community was like slipping into a warm bath, which filled a need she hadn't explicitly identified.

Peggy became a member on October 4, 1995, and served the Meeting in many roles over the years. As Treasurer, she was conscientious and reliable during the period when the Meeting's financial activity ramped up from \$10,000/year to \$100,000s associated with fundraising for and building a meetinghouse. She put her tech skills to work when she moved the Meeting's financial recordkeeping online and assisted with digitizing the Meeting records when she served as Recorder. As Recording Clerk, she was known for writing efficient minutes. In addition to these appointments, Peggy served as an inaugural member of our Finance Committee as well as on other committees related to property and other practical matters. She warmly welcomed groups to meet in her home overlooking beautiful Queechy Lake.

Peggy was a booklover, volunteering at the New Lebanon library, and later the library at Kendal-on-Hudson. She was so happy to announce after meeting for worship one Sunday the arrival of her first of two beloved grandchildren, for whom she carefully chose books.

With Peggy's passion for books, she played a lead role in the Meeting's most successful meetinghouse fundraisers - five Book & Art Sales that raised over \$13,000 total. With Bill's help, she obtained 501(c)(3) status for the Meeting, providing the Meeting with access to grant funds and other resources. These were only two of many ways that Peggy demonstrated dedication and generosity during the fundraising for and construction of the Meeting's beautiful timber-framed meetinghouse, which was completed in 2013.

Peggy was not only a generous supporter of Old Chatham Meeting, but also of George School and other Friends' institutions. She was also attentive to individuals' personal struggles and needs and helped them quietly.

After moving to Kendal-on-Hudson in 2009, Peggy continued active engagement in Old Chatham Meeting until 2016 when she ceased having any official role as she cared for Bill, who died in 2019, and worshipped with Friends at Kendal. Occasionally, during the pandemic, she and her two cats joined Old Chatham Friends in worship via Zoom, much to our delight.

Peggy's quiet, steady presence strengthened us all, and her spirit endures in our building and our community.

Approved by Old Chatham Monthly Meeting on February 8, 2026
Christine (Spee) Braun, clerk