



Photo: Jonah Enfinger

Kathryn Braund | 2026 Alabama Humanities Fellow

TURNING ON THE LIGHT

By Wayne Flynt, Ph.D.

The further back into history we go, the dimmer the light is. That is one reason why most historians prefer more recent times, where memory is sharper and primary sources more numerous. Kathryn Braund chose the harder way with great success.

Kathryn Braund was one of my favorite Auburn University historians. As anyone familiar with university

culture already knows, preening and posturing is just part of the academic game. It is amazing how many “scholars” spent more time weaving other scholars’ research into a “new paradigm of worldwide importance” than in the trenches digging for hard and fast evidence of something wholly strange and remarkable that no one else had noticed.

As chair of Auburn's History Department, I valued those new insights that moved history in directions not often explored. And that is where my friendship with Kathryn began. First, she was mapping an important part of American history that preceded "American history." How could that be? There was an America before Americans arrived? Yes! Though you wouldn't have known it from the lack of strong scholarship at the time on the indigenous people of this very land.

As our only such scholar at the time, I noticed that some senior faculty diminished the topic. But Kathryn waded right in, ignoring some of the senior "Americanists." She was mature enough to ignore those who thought her work not "important enough," or not focused on the "right subjects." And she won them over with hard work, voluminous research, fascinating historical storytelling, innovative analysis, and a kind and sweet spirit. In the end, she became one of Alabama's — indeed, the South's — finest and most respected scholars of early America. And she taught Auburn's History Department far more than the department taught her.

Throughout her career, Kathryn has remained one of those rare academics whose humility is as large as her accomplishments. And that is saying something when you consider how sterling those accomplishments are, by any measure.

Kathryn became the Hollifield Professor of Southern History at Auburn University, and has authored or edited some of the most important and accessible books on Creek-settler history in our region. Those works include *Deerskins and Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815*; *The Attention of a Traveller: Essays on William Bartram's Travels and Legacy*; *Tohopeka: Rethinking the Creek War and the War of 1812*; and *The Old Federal Road in Alabama: An Illustrated Guide*.

One of the most fascinating projects she's authored is *Mapping Conquest: The Battle Maps of Horseshoe Bend*. In it, Kathryn analyzes a collection of a dozen hand-drawn battlefield maps created by soldiers in the aftermath of, arguably, the most consequential battle ever fought within Alabama's borders. Brilliantly, the book doesn't exist to evaluate war strategy; it exists to highlight the human response to war and examine how these conflicts — right down to the battle maps — shape our collective memory.

Of course, I have long been impressed not only by the range and excellence of Kathryn's scholarship but also by the human qualities she exhibits. Chiefly, her respect for others and her willingness to go out of her way to

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help any student or colleague who was floundering and in need of guidance. The word “colleague” meant something to me that it did not always mean to others in academia. After all, we must “watch out for ourselves,” or so many academics think for the sake of tenure, publication, and other feathers in our caps. Not Kathryn! She always had time for her students and for struggling faculty. She had a kind of moral grounding that pulled her outside herself.

Speaking of outside herself, she also always sought to push her discoveries far beyond the halls of academia — to make her fascinating findings available and accessible to all. She is a frequent public speaker who continues to bring this history to life for anyone wise enough to listen. Yes, Kathryn knew what was required of her in terms of academics and administrators. But her sense of deepest responsibility has always been to her students, of all stripes. And her work ethic remains a model to every young (and old!) aspiring historian and lifelong learner — here at Auburn and far beyond.

Wayne Flynt, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of history and retired chair of history at Auburn University. He has also been a partner scholar with Alabama Humanities since its beginnings in 1974, including as founding editor of AHA's *Encyclopedia of Alabama*.