

Association of Retired Faculty & Professional Staff

In Memoriam: Robert Kerby, Professor Emeritus of History

📅 April 20, 2021

👤 [Dennis Brown](#)

For more than a quarter-century, anyone passing by a classroom on the east end of the University of Notre Dame Main Building's fourth floor could hardly help but stop and stare at the blackboard. On it, history professor Bob Kerby would draw intricate maps and diagrams of Civil War battles in a chalk rainbow of colors.

It was teaching as performance art and is remembered fondly by the students of every major across the University who took what became a legendary course.



Robert L. Kerby, professor of history at Notre Dame from 1972 to 1998, died April 14 in South Bend after a long illness. He was 86.

“Bob Kerby’s Civil War class was a must-take course,” recalled Kerry Temple, the editor of Notre Dame Magazine whose office for many years was adjacent to Kerby’s classroom. “He told vivid stories of battles, offered intimate portraits of the war’s participants and shared a thorough understanding of the causes and lasting repercussions of this momentous conflict in American history.

“He would begin an hour before class to hand-draw — using different colored chalks on a slate blackboard — maps, grids and battle lines to illustrate the day’s lesson. He also adorned the classroom with authentic war flags and carried antique swords and guns as he delivered lectures with a deep, authoritative voice. He was a storyteller who knew even minute details of the war and made it more real than could be found in any text or history book.

“I enjoyed a good many conversations with him in that hallway outside his classroom as he would pace and rehearse the day’s lecture.”

Born and raised in New York City, Kerby earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in history from Notre Dame. He entered the Air Force after graduation and piloted a variety of propeller-driven aircraft in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, early in the United States’ involvement. He received numerous awards, including the Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, Bronze Star, Air Medal, Air Force and Army commendation medals and the Purple Heart.

After leaving the military, Kerby earned a doctorate in American history from Columbia University in 1969. A year later, with prior approval from Pope Paul VI, he was ordained a priest of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church and founded and pastored for 37 years the St. John of Damascus Melkite Greek Catholic Church in South Bend.

Kerby joined the Notre Dame faculty in 1972 and was the author of two books on the Civil War, “Kirby Smith’s Confederacy: The Trans-Mississippi South, 1863-1865” and “The Confederate Invasion of New Mexico and Arizona, 1861-1862.” He received the Sheedy Award for excellence in teaching in 1994 and was elected fellow of the senior class in 1998.

Kerby is survived by his wife of 63 years, Mary, two sons and their wives, five grandchildren and a brother and sister-in-law.

A private funeral service has been held. In lieu of flowers, memorial donations can be made to the Center for Hospice Care in Mishawaka, 501 Comfort Place, Mishawaka, IN 46545.

Condolences may be sent to: Mary Kerby, 918 Simon Court, South Bend, IN 46615-3626

[Link to Obituary in South Bend Tribune](#)

Originally published by Dennis Brown at news.nd.edu on April 19, 2021.

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Notre Dame, IN 46556 USA

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