

# War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era

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## Review

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**Cashin, Joan E., ed.** *War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era.*  
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The Civil War remains a pivotal event in southern history, with many themes resurfacing throughout its long academic life. Yet, one area that Civil War historians tend to ignore is material culture, which could open an entirely new vein of interpretation while also underscoring the intersections between race, class, and gender on the battlefield and home front. *War Matters* offers a refreshing analysis of the economic, social, political, and cultural nuances of the Civil War era through the use of material culture. Editor Joan E. Cashin and her fellow contributors focus on objects as small as pocketbook bibles and as vast as battlefields in order to deepen our understanding of the ongoing debates in the field and to familiarize us with newer themes.

As a multidisciplinary approach, material culture uses theoretical strands from many fields, such as archeology, anthropology, sociology, and art history, and weaves them together to create historical discourse. Theoretical debates abound within the community, as witnessed by the theory discussed by many of the contributing historians in their essays. Do objects have agency because they can provoke human action? Or do objects and humans remain dependent on each other? Better yet, is material culture not about agency at all, rather about the change of meaning over time and according to place? These are the debates that remain central to the scholars' analyses. The reader gets the sense that many of these debates are still ongoing.

The breadth of topics in this volume points to the wide applicability of material culture as an approach in the historical profession. Joan E. Cashin and Peter Carmichael both tackle the relics saved by soldiers on both sides of the war and how that played into their identities. Cashin emphasizes the use of revolutionary era symbols by both sides to legitimize and validate their cause, while subsequently demonizing the other. Carmichael studies the divergent ways Confederate and Unionist soldiers understood and interpreted the relics they collected upon the close of the war. In a similar vein, Yael A. Sternhall traces the attempts made by Jefferson Davis

to retrieve his personal effects from the federal government after the war to better understand the intricacies of public memory as well as some of the myths surrounding his capture of unionist troops.

Some of the historians in this collection took a much more archeologically-minded approach. Sarah Jones Weickel tackles the conflicting ideas of race by studying the objects found at Civil War refugee settlements. By combining salvaged items, objects stolen from their ex-masters, and newly acquired commodities, freed people asserted their freedom to move forward. Where northern relief workers portrayed contraband settlements as areas of degeneracy, African Americans viewed their neighborhoods as locations of hard-won independence and hope. Lisa M. Brady and Timothy Silver study landscape as material culture in their essay about the Antietam battlefield. By comparing the National Park Service's goal to keep the battlefield in a condition as close as possible to that of the eve of the battle to the historical reality of that day, Brady and Silver emphasize the way war and nature shaped each other during the conflict.

Others in the collection focused on the lived experiences of soldiers and those that awaited their return home. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray trace the history of pocketbook bible shields as a means to better understand the role of divine intervention and death in the way soldiers experienced the violence of war. Earl J. Hess examines the relationships soldiers held with their weapons to demonstrate the varied experience of men. Jason Philips also examines weapons, specifically John Brown's bowie knife, to better understand the ways in which certain objects can stir up political action and how their symbolic meaning can evolve over time. Victoria E. Ott's work on the non-elite white experience also toys with politics. By studying the material culture surrounding working class whites, Ott emphasizes the way that their material circumstances swayed the political allegiances.

The work of Robert D. Hicks evades categorization. Part intellectual history, part medical history, Hicks studies "scabs and lymph" as artifacts to better understand the ways confederate surgeons confronted the other enemy, smallpox. By battling against this invisible beast, confederate surgeons fought for control over soldiers' bodies, and in the process developed long-standing scientific discourse.

*War Matters*, and the study of material culture in general, is not without its shortcomings. Specifically, where does an historian draw the line on what is considered material culture and what is not? Are descriptions of scabs and lymph in a doctor's medical notes or descriptions of

personal possessions in letters and diaries still considered material culture? It seems like written literature would be considered a more traditional source for historians. Despite this conundrum, *War Matters* delivers an invigorating facet to the ongoing debates within the Civil War field of history.

*Emily Wells is an MA student at LSU studying the role of middle-class women in antebellum southern economy. She is interested in material culture as a means to explore the tangibility of the lived experience.*