

## War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era

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*Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, St. Louis*

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*War Matters: Material Culture in the Civil War Era*, edited by Joan E. Cashin. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. xi, 263 pp. Map, graphs, table, illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95 paperback.

Reviewer Nick Sacco is a Park Ranger at the Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site in St. Louis.

Americans' fascination with the Civil War stems in part from their interest in collecting relics from the conflict. Relic hunting started as early as the Appomattox surrender proceedings, when Union officers and soldiers who were aware of the event's historical significance promptly took furniture and other items from the parlor of Wilmer McLean's home. Since then, historians and enthusiasts have collected everything from weapons and bullets to clothing, letters, and diaries. For collectors, these artifacts give the American Civil War a tangible quality that provides a deeper meaning to the country's deadliest war and bridges the divide between past and present.

Despite a popular interest in Civil War artifacts and relics, Civil War historians have largely neglected this aspect of study. In *War Matters*, historian Joan E. Cashin has edited the first collection of essays devoted solely to Civil War material culture. Cashin and the various contributors provide two different arguments that serve as the intellectual basis of the book. The first argument focuses on the state of Civil War studies. Cashin argues that previous scholars have not provided enough attention to material culture, which she defines as "the study of physical objects as evidence of cultural values" (3). She asserts that material culture, among other things, holds the potential to enhance scholars' understanding of "the common soldier's experience" during the war and wartime allegiances to the Union and Confederacy. Attention to material culture can also offer "new approaches to race, bondage, and emancipation" (3-4). Analyzing physical objects the same way a scholar might undertake a textual analysis of a written document can yield new insights into the Civil War era.

The second argument comes through in the book's various essays, which demonstrate the ways material culture can shape environmental, political, and cultural history. Each essay in the book demonstrates a strong understanding of both the historical subject and the theoretical aspects of material culture studies. A number of essays are particularly noteworthy for their scholarly contributions. Lisa M. Brady and Timothy Silver's essay on the environmental history of the Antietam battlefield takes readers back several hundred million years, when the area sat under water on the floor of an ancient sea. They remind readers that before it became a cultural and historical site, Antietam "existed as an artifact of nature" (55). Earl Hess explores the relationship soldiers had with

their weapons; in particular, he examines the story of William Vermilion of the 36th Iowa Regiment, who purchased a bulletproof vest and wrote a detailed letter to his wife about the experience. Hess points out that Vermilion was concerned about the possibility of death but hid his purchase from the rest of his comrades for fear of being labeled a coward. "The boys here don't know it," Vermilion pointed out, stating that "I consider it my duty to protect myself in every manner possible" (110).

Sarah Jones Weicksel explores the material culture of "refugee relief," examining the African American community of Mitchelville, South Carolina, home of the first self-sustained black community in the United States. Weicksel argues for textual, photographic, and archaeological research at refugee camps to better understand the lived experience of slave refugees during the Civil War. Finally, Peter Carmichael's essay examines the collection of war relics in the aftermath of the Appomattox surrender, pointing out that "the craving for the material objects of war became a preoccupation during the last weeks of the Confederacy's existence, when both sides were grasping for things to help them remember the past as they transitioned to a future without war" (201).

*War Matters* is best suited for students and public historians working at Civil War historic sites throughout the country. For the former—to whom the book is dedicated—this useful volume serves as an effective introduction to the idea that physical objects have just as much to say about the Civil War as does a letter, diary, or official government paper. For the latter, the book's various case studies can serve as a useful guide for analyzing historical artifacts at museums, battlefields, and other historic sites that interpret Civil War history. Ultimately, *War Matters* pushes readers beyond the idea that relics are just "things" collected by Civil War enthusiasts and are instead meaningful artifacts that speak to the history of the American Civil War.

*The War for the Common Soldier: How Men Thought, Fought, and Survived in Civil War Armies*, by Peter S. Carmichael. The Littlefield History of the Civil War Era. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. 408 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Donald C. Elder III is professor of history at Eastern New Mexico University. He is the editor of *Love Amid the Turmoil: The Civil War Letters of William and Mary Vermilion* (2003) and *A Damned Iowa Greyhound: The Civil War Letters of William Henry Harrison Clayton* (1998).

The term *sound bite* did not enter into common usage until the 1970s, but long before that Civil War historians had mastered the technique of using highly selective quotes to support their assertions about the conflict.