Muster
Inspecting Material Cultures of the Civil War

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According to the Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States, published in 1861, soldiers were to muster for pay six times a year. These assemblies were military pageants that displayed the organizational strength and functional hierarchy of armies. “Muster” is derived from a thirteenth-century French word that meant both “the inspection of an army” and a “manifestation (of power).” The breathtaking sight of the massing of troops and the presentation of arms revealed that power. “Muster” had another original meaning: “a show of merchandise for sale.” Military musters were occasions for the inspection of soldiers’ belongings. Commanders examined soldiers’ appearances, rifles, accouterments, and clothing to make sure they were clean and presentable. They picked through the contents of knapsacks to make sure men were properly supplied and perhaps seize contraband items. At the beginning of the Civil War, volunteers received things at musters to become soldiers and march off to war. In July 1861, as his 28th Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment mobilized to depart for duty in Maryland along the Potomac River, Will Roberts began a letter to his father with a catalogue of soldiers’ stuff: “We have received all our rifles, with sword bayonets, and also caps, shoes, belts & all the other equipments, & we expect to be ordered off at a moments notice.” For soldiers, induction into the military and its hierarchy meant receiving, displaying, and carrying things.1

Photographers of the period recognized the connection between soldiers and the materiel of war but often juxtaposed soldiers and their things, situating human subjects in the foreground and inanimate objects in the background. See, for instance, James Gibson’s May 1862 photographs of the Army of the Potomac’s depot at Cumberland Landing on the Pamunkey River during the Peninsula campaign. In a famous image from this series, six Union soldiers observe the vast array of horses, tents, and supplies below them. If the enlisted men, with their backs turned toward the camera, are not exactly Gibson’s subjects, the photographer asks the viewer to contemplate military things from their perspective. Another image in Gibson’s series, however, takes wagons laden with goods, an anvil, and stacked arms as its subject, with mustering soldiers serving as a backdrop. Taking this view of things at the muster as our starting point, we hope to build on a growing historiographical trend that conceives of things as evidence and agents in history.²

By assembling a figurative muster of these objects and examining how they shaped lived experience, historians are just beginning to acknowledge that things mattered to Civil War Americans. This trend in Civil War scholarship reflects a broader material turn in the humanities that counterbalances the linguistic turn and its focus on discourse. Scholars associated with this new materialism make a point implicit in the etymology of “muster”: subjects and objects are united, interdependent, and interchangeable. We cannot study humans without encountering the accumulated stuff that made their world and shaped how they thought about it. Just as race and gender are socially constructed, relationships between humans and things form within historical contexts, change over time, and vary across cultures. Unlike race and gender, however, objects exist beyond the meanings people assign them. As historians of capitalism and the environment show, the material world pushes back, acts for and against humanity, opens prospects, and imposes limits. Things support and threaten existence, and without stuff—technologies,
infrastructures, goods, and resources—history cannot happen. An army cannot muster without things.3

Because things make history, have agency, and assemble societies, historians are activating material culture to show how objects were more than mute props or settings for the “real” story of history told in texts. Interpreting artifacts reveals a more complex past than we encounter by studying documents alone. Beyond giving voice to ideas conveyed in manuscripts, historians who study material culture show how people performed and enacted history by physically giving, possessing, making, destroying, taking, and losing things. No period of American history better illustrates this intersection and interdependence of social and material worlds than the Civil War, a conflict fought for and against the “chattel principle” in a time that created, assembled, and ruined societies and things on an unprecedented scale. Generations of historians have relied exclusively on an abundance of texts and images generated by and about this war. In this special issue of Civil War History, we hope to reorient historians’ focus to identify objects as subjects at the center of the field.4


That endeavor may be a tough sell. We must ask questions that we do not normally ask, like *how did things do things?* At first glance, giving power to objects seems an absurd conclusion to decades of valuable work that restored agency to human subjects. Assuming everyone and everything had the same kind of agency robs that concept of all meaning and utility. But, as Walter Johnson has argued, defining agency as free will and resistance reflects a nineteenth-century, liberal understanding that equates agency with humanness while obscuring other, nonhuman aspects of the concept, including instrumentality. The sociologist Bruno Latour, one of the key figures inspiring material culture studies, makes this point when he envisions a person using a hammer to hit a nail. A human, holding the hammer, swings it to hit the nail. What Latour argues, though, is that we must appreciate that humans and objects both have agency and that they influence each other. As he writes, “hitting a nail with and without a hammer” are not the same actions producing the same results. History happens—causes and effects occur in certain ways—because of contingent, dynamic relationships between people and things.\(^5\)

Artifacts exist at the intersection of matter and meaning. How they are made and what they signify are not separate issues but dimensions of the same interpretive question. Objects participated in the Civil War and shaped how the conflict unfolded. To put a fine point on it, consider the war without the objects at the muster: no knapsacks, no canteens, no tents, no “sword bayonets,” no bullets, no guns, no clothes. Without these things, the Civil War would be unrecognizable and even unfathomable. These objects structured Civil War soldiers’ experience, determining what they could carry, the circumstances under which they slept, how they could defend themselves, and how they would keep warm and healthy.

These items tied Americans together even as the war pulled them apart. Volunteers’ daguerreotypes, such as the one portraying William Rockwell of

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the 18th North Carolina, displayed the tools of their new trade—uniforms, caps, knapsacks, muskets, bayonets, and bowie knives—just as artisans identified their craft in occupational portraits. Once men left for war, these photographic likenesses stood in for the missing men they represented, signifying emotional attachment to loved ones at home. They even registered the ways Americans sought to communicate feeling through things. After his first battle, staff officer William Wilkins wrote his wife, “I would I could daguerreotype to you the feelings of my own heart.” While images of soldiers rested on mantels and bedsides, pictures of wives and children accompanied men on the march and were buried with the dead. Likenesses of loved ones helped soldiers approximate the “good death” by conjuring the presence of family members for men who uttered their last words and exhaled their dying breaths. For African Americans, Civil War photographs commemorated the breaking of bonds to antebellum masters, presenting them as independent subjects.6

Examining the production, use, and provenance of Civil War things can yield rich and innovative histories. Tracking objects can encompass the skills and conventions of the hands that crafted them, the materials that things constituted, the paths along which objects circulated, the consumption that merchandise enabled, the relationships that gifts honored, the identities that possessions conveyed, and the memories that relics recalled. Following goods as they moved through production and consumption networks can help us trace the connections between home front and battlefield, as products passed through the hands of seamstresses and farmers, merchants and contractors, families and soldiers. We can illuminate the ways objects had both intended and unintended uses, both fundamentally important for our understanding of how they made history. A bayonet could intimidate enemies and potentially gore them. But in reality, most Civil War soldiers did not experience hand-to-hand combat in which bayonets would prove useful. More typically, they repurposed their bayonets to heat food over the campfire or to dig entrenchments. Even raw materials might mean different things in different hands and settings. Shoe leather sped armies on the march and kept men safe from illness and infection. It was the source of income for a poor cobbler trying to earn extra money in camp and a desirable commodity pilfered from corpses on the battlefield. Its significance ranged from the military to the economic to the medicinal. The theft of a personal possession could expose a government’s inability to protect its citizens or express a conqueror’s desire to memorialize victory and assert dominance by taking a memento from the vanquished. Depending on the perspective employed, the same theft could represent proof of the enemy’s barbarism, retaliation for a past offense, or payment for uncompensated labor.7

The Civil War upset Americans’ connections to and interactions with things. Union and Confederate soldiers (and a great many civilians) experienced

scarcity at various times during the war, the result of broken-down distribution networks, poor-quality goods that wore out in the harsh conditions of camp life and battlefield, and the Union blockade of southern ports that choked off commercial access to Britain and northeastern cities. As we become accustomed to training our focus on things, we can discard our binary thinking about objects and subjects, material and immaterial worlds. Civil War Americans did not separate these worlds. Objects shaped their experience even as the war reshaped the meaning of those objects. The essays in this special issue have emerged from a conference we organized at West Virginia University in October 2015, “Objects as Subjects: The Material Cultures of the Civil War Era.” Taken together, they explore the ways new materialism can illuminate the era’s politics, medical knowledge, and architecture. These essays show how things helped to cause the war, spread anxiety about disease, and foster memories of the conflict. A forum in which Joan Cashin, Megan Kate Nelson, Brian Craig Miller, and Jason Phillips assess the state of the field and potential historiographical directions concludes the special issue.

Michael E. Woods asserts that material culture “puts us in touch with disunion” by exploring “the visceral experience of sectional strife.” Woods brings this valuable insight to bear on a thing that caused disunion: the cane that South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks used to beat antislavery Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner in 1856. Brooks’s cane, its reproductions, and its imitators exchanged hands before and after the assault. Some of these exchanges forged friendships among political allies or across sectional divides. Others intensified sectional unity, like the gift of hundreds of reproduction canes to Brooks or the denotation of the cane by the Boston museum that displayed it. Tracing the provenance of the cane and competing claims for authenticity at the end of the century shows how exchanging things transformed their meanings and affected sectional relationships.

Sarah Jones Weicksel emphasizes in her contribution to this special issue that Civil War Americans cared deeply about their attire; they perceived that disease lurked in the porosity of garments. Weicksel traces the movement of clothing from hovel to sweatshop to store to wharf to army camp to hospital, as various unclean and disloyal hands might contaminate it and as benevolent sorts tried gamely to cleanse it along the way. Studying this circulation of things demonstrates how Civil War garments were “actants,” things with power and agency that participated in history. Uniforms affected how Civil War Ameri-
cans fought and thought about the conflict. Moreover, they influenced the ways Americans understood their nations. Just as Brooks’s cane portended national disunion, so too did soldiers’ garments represent the scope of grand conspiracies against the governments for which soldiers fought.

C. Ian Stevenson’s essay about the summer cottages that Maine veterans built in the late-nineteenth century reminds us that the spaces in which historical people encountered things matter for the study of material culture. While some examinations of historical memory focus on the positioning of monuments in public squares, Stevenson contends that to understand the process of memory making we need to move inside and pay more attention to spatial dynamics and dimensions. These buildings are Civil War monuments: consciously constructed, carefully crafted environments that affected the ways these men reencountered the war. Beyond public commemorations, veterans remembered the war in private, together with comrades and families, while on vacation. Stevenson suggests that we ought to understand the connections between wartime relics and memory through the spatial dimensions in which men interacted with them. To understand how and why men recollected the conflict by constructing beach houses, we must revisit the architecture of nineteenth-century memories, which were private and communal as well as public and monumental.

As the word “muster” suggests, the materiality of Civil War history has long existed and awaited our attention. Keywords and central events of the era—disunion, preservation, emancipation, reconstruction, and remembrance—defined a material world divided, threatened, liberated, rebuilt, and recollected. If we cannot understand the Civil War without first knowing how a regimental company formed, we cannot know how those companies assembled without first understanding how things—and not just people—composed them. Our subjects knew this truth, because they lived it. Civil War historians pride themselves on being more empirical and pragmatic than scholars in other fields but seldom take things seriously. For soldiers, civilians, and enslaved Americans, the war meant carrying things, facing things, destroying things, and enduring things. This special issue tries to recover the material dimensions of their stories by answering a call to arms articulated by Norwegian archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen: “I am tired of the familiar story of how the subject, the social, the episteme, created the object; tired of the story that everything is language, action, mind and human bodies. I want us to pay more attention to the other
half of the story; how objects construct the subject. This story is not narrated in the labile languages, but comes to us as silent, tangible, visible and brute material remains: machines, walls, roads, pits and swords.”

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