To conclude this special issue, four historians who have researched material cultures of the Civil War era consider, in the discussion that follows, how new scholarship on the subject can deepen our understanding of the period. We hope that this conversation among Joan E. Cashin, Brian Craig Miller, Megan Kate Nelson, and Jason Phillips encourages other historians to acknowledge and interpret the things they encounter in their own work.

Why did you decide to study Civil War material cultures?

Megan Kate Nelson (MKN): I’ve always been interested in using different kinds of sources—and methodologies—to study history, even as far back as my undergraduate days. But it was really during my PhD program (Iowa, American Studies) that I began to think more about visual images and how to use them as historical evidence. Once I started thinking about paintings, illustrations, and photographs as objects in and of themselves—not just as visual content to analyze—I made that leap to the material. I didn’t come to Civil War material culture studies until I started researching Ruin Nation[ : Destruction and the American Civil War (2012)], however. All of the ruins I examine in the book are material forms, made of stone, living wood, flesh, and bone. I was interested in ruins in and of themselves, how they were created and endured in the landscape, and how soldiers and civilians encountered them. I was also interested, though, in finding out...
how ruins were depicted in print and visual forms. For me, this was the most exciting thing, to study the ways material, print, and visual culture are interconnected (and sometimes, mutually constitutive) and how together they can tell us about the lived experience of warfare.

Joan E. Cashin (JC): I got interested in material culture and the physical environment because of what I have found while doing research in the manuscripts. As I was working on my first book, *A Family Venture*: *Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (1991), I discovered that many southerners, white and black, male and female, had deep feelings about the landscapes where they lived—feelings of affection and/or alienation, depending on the person and the locale. Some of those ideas appeared in the book. Because the Virginia landscape in particular seemed to inspire a lot of commentary, I did a follow-up article in 1994.

While I was researching a documents book on white southern women, *Our Common Affairs*: *Texts from Women in the Old South* (1996), I realized that some women were highly observant about the material world, especially objects within the household. In the introductory essay, I called for more scholarship on this topic, but that landed with a thud. There was not much of a response from historians of southern women or the war era.

When I was working on the biography of Varina Davis [*First Lady of the Confederacy: Varina Davis’s Civil War*], which came out in 2006, once again I noted that she cared deeply about certain household objects. She tried hard to recover the family’s belongings that disappeared at the end of the war, with mixed results. All sorts of objects pertaining to her husband became historical relics in 1865, and after he died she had to sort out what to do with them. So material culture was a subtext in her life, although the focus of that biography was her overall life experience. When that book was done, I decided to explore the field of material studies more fully. The literature turned out to be very stimulating, with a lot of creative work in history and other fields, and I think it has a great deal to offer war scholars.

MKN: Joan, I think it’s really interesting that we both came to material cultural studies through other sources—landscapes for you, visual images for me. Now I want to know if this was the case for the rest of you! Also, [Joan,] why do you think your call to action in 1996 came to nothing?

JC: Yes, it is interesting. I believe my call for action fell on deaf ears because of the resistance in some parts of the profession to taking material culture
The Material Cultures of the Civil War

seriously. I think some historians perceive it as an intellectual fad, although it has generated a large, respectable literature in many other fields.

Jason Phillips (JP): Like both of you, I started to study material cultures because I sensed the importance of things while researching other subjects. My work seemed to take me far from material worlds, because I sought to understand how Americans anticipated the war before it happened and the effects these perceptions had once the war began. My topics seemed imaginary: rumors, beliefs, expectations, and dreams—“immaterial studies” would have been an apt term for how I first conceived of my project. After all, what could be less tangible than the future?

Once I started reading antebellum manuscripts, however, I learned that my subjects used physical objects to realize, or materialize, their thoughts and feelings about what loomed beyond the horizon. People made, gave, stole, and circulated possessions that seemed to foreshadow the nation’s destiny. Pieces of Preston Brooks’s cane, as Michael Woods writes about in this issue, bowie knives, Beecher’s “bibles,” and John Brown’s pikes mattered to antebellum Americans, because these things seemed fated to become historical relics once the future unfolded. After I read Teresa Barnett’s Sacred Relics[: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America (2013)], I appreciated how nineteenth-century culture relied on things—chips of Plymouth Rock and locks of George Washington’s hair—to engage with the past. Our field already knew how postwar Americans cherished battlefield relics and constructed monuments to materialize their memories of the Civil War. I was shocked to realize that Americans started this process of assembling historical objects before the war began. Until I understood the material cultures of my subjects—how things worried them, gave them courage, materialized their prospects, and goaded them into action—I could not comprehend how the future felt to them as it unfolded.

Even after this realization, I assumed that material culture studies reflected an antiquarian fascination with objects for their own sake. Before I read much about the approach, I expected it would be akin to an academic Antiques Roadshow. Then I found how rich and important material culture’s contributions were to other fields and wondered why so few Civil War historians pursued this method and inquiry.

Brian Craig Miller (BCM): I guess one of the reasons I love history over chemistry is because you can see the evidence—it is physical. You can touch an object
that has historical bearing—you can physically touch the letter, the journal, the diary, the lock of hair. As a small child, I became fixated on the Civil War, because I could see certain things that focused my wonderment. I loved touching the large artillery pieces scattered across the battlefields or gazing at the big cases full of bullets, artillery shells and projectiles, buttons, and the belt buckles attached to the uniforms.

For my own research on Civil War disability, I had a profound moment several years ago when I had the opportunity to hold and even use the crutches that belonged to John Bell Hood. I actually got to feel the discomfort caused by the old wooden crutch, to better understand the minute-by-minute chore that a disabled Civil War veteran faced in the aftermath of their amputation. I love the point Jason makes here—that nineteenth-century culture relied on items: they truly were living in a material world. A generation of men who had been used to using other physical objects (plows, hammers, awls, saddles, and muskets) now found their whole worldviews shaped by new objects (crutches or artificial limbs) that was necessitated because they had been physically altered by another object (the bullet, the shell, the canister, the shot, the bayonet).

Even today, so many lives are dictated by a physical object (the cell phone). Items matter, and they have the ability to continue to draw another generation of potential historians into studying the past. I was recently at a Civil War battlefield and saw an area of the museum dedicated for children to dress up as soldiers—they had the entire replica uniform garb. One particular family, consisting of a mom and her son and daughter, decided to take the plunge. The son and daughter each put on the full uniform (one wore blue and one gray), and the mom looked up for a moment from her phone to quickly snap a picture. Both generations in the same family were engaged in material items—one past, one present—and both seemed to be having a grand day.

**MKN:** I’d like to circle back to Joan’s comment that her 1996 call to action came to nothing because of resistance in the profession to taking things seriously. Jason and Brian address this in their introduction to this issue too, but I think we need to understand why this was and is. My theory is that within Civil War history circles, paying attention to things has usually been the purview of amateur historians and reenactors. Because these groups have fetishized buttons and guns and uniforms (and personal or professional collections of them), academic historians have shied away
from using material objects in any way, but especially as evidence. This
disdain has ramped up recently as well, given the debates about military
history coming from a deeply conservative but also extremely powerful
contingent of academic historians. Central to their arguments is the be-
lief that they are fighting a two-front battle against cultural and amateur
historians—both of whom are inclined to take things seriously.

I think Joan’s and my work on collecting, and Ian Stevenson’s attention
to Union veterans’ vacation homes in his essay for this issue, can really
push against this bias in the field. By proving that soldiers themselves
believed in the power of these objects to represent and memorialize their
experiences, we can combat this notion that objects and collections had no
meaning to Civil War Americans—and argue that objects should therefore
be meaningful (and useful) to historians of the period.

**JP:** Brian, I’m curious to know whether in your questions about objects you
tend to read them like alternative texts (interpreting their meanings,
symbolisms, et cetera) or focus on their physical characteristics and uses
(how were they made, what did they do, et cetera).

**BCM:** I think for me, Jason, it is a combination of the two. For the prosthetic
limb, I like to think about both the complexity of the manufactured device
(and everything connected to getting it made, the measuring process of
the stump, the materials used, the process of waiting for construction)
as well as its meaning and symbolism (that it can cover the empty sleeve,
or eliminate the imagery of an apparent war injury). Granted, some men
just got prosthetic limbs for mobility and functionality. Others also made
clear that they wanted limbs because they helped eliminate the physical
recognition that they had been injured. The design process is also quite fas-
cinating to me—the trial and error, the selection of materials, the thought
that goes into constructing the physical item and then, the custom-made
aspect of it. I love that you could have the limb made specifically for you
in terms of measurements—a customization, a personalization of what,
as an object, would now be a major part of your life.

*How are the methods and inquiries of material culture studies different from other approaches
to history?*

**MKN:** As Civil War historians, we tend to focus mostly on written texts as
sources for our work: diaries, letters, newspaper articles, government
documents, and military records. Therefore, we deal mostly with words and their meanings. We ask: Who wrote this? When? Why? In what context? How do these words prove how a battle unfolded? What evidence do they provide of a political belief, or a set of values? Answering these kinds of questions about written texts involves reading them, analyzing and sorting the words, and then conveying their content and meaning with words of our own.

Very rarely do we consider the material culture that brought these words to us. A letter, for example, involves many different objects: the pen or pencil that put words on the page; the page itself, produced in factories and folded, perhaps shoved in an envelope, affixed with a stamp; the printing press that produced the reports, the bindery that assembled them into books. We also rarely think about how these words circulated—the distance they traveled in mail sacks on the backs of mules or in the wagons and train cars; the ways soldiers and their families opened and read and reread and packed away letters; the production of diaries in sizes to fit easily in uniform pockets or haversacks; the handing around of newspapers or military circulars in camp or on the home front, the pasting of excerpts in memory albums.

Thinking about letters as material objects shifts our focus from the words to the production of those words and the many objects that are involved in creating textual meaning. Thinking about material objects in general pushes us to ask a different set of questions. These include questions about the nature of the object itself—its size and shape, the materials out of which it is made, how it is intended to be used by people. What is this object supposed to be doing? How do people actually use or react to it? Who has owned or used this object over time? When we answer these questions, we are producing an object history. Michael Woods's essay on Preston Brooks's cane is fascinating in this respect—and the model of how to research and write this kind of history.

The analysis of an object's meaning, though, is what brings material culture historians and other historians of the Civil War together, because this is the endgame for everyone who seeks to understand this period. How does it create identity or social value? What kind of cultural beliefs does it embody? Did this object shape the course of a battle or campaign in some particular way? What can we learn about the Civil War—its events, the experiences of soldiers and civilians—from examining this one thing?
The profusion of questions to ask about material objects is exactly why I find them such interesting and useful pieces of evidence. There is much to discover if we push beyond written texts to the material world to expand our knowledge of the lived experiences of the past.

That said, one cannot analyze objects without the written word. We can only go so far with the analysis of an object if we have no object history, no date, no location—all important pieces of information usually communicated with words. To study material culture history, we still need written texts and the tools that all historians use to analyze them.

**JC:** I agree with much of what Megan says. But I’d like to add that material culture methods require us to get inside the heads of nineteenth-century Americans in a new way, to try to see the physical world the way they saw it. These methods require a new way of thinking about people and objects in the past and how people related to the material world in daily life. Material culture methods require us to exercise our historical imaginations, within scholarly parameters and disciplined by what we already know about the period.

I am often struck by how much hard work went into the creation of objects people used in order to survive in an agricultural society (most Americans in the Civil War era lived on farms, whether they resided in the North or South). So much labor went into making a table, the food that was served on the table, the cutlery people used, and the clothing they wore when they met to share a meal. The same is true for nonessential objects inside the household, such as tablecloths, and ornamental personal objects, such as jewelry. The same would be true of course for objects outside the household, whether a plow, a hoe, or a harness.

I also think that the labor factor—the investment of time and effort—affected the way the average person saw his or her material objects. I think Americans had a highly developed sense of the significance of the material world. They took nothing for granted. It was the opposite of the throwaway culture of the modern world, when so many things are disposable and easily replaced. I think they tried hard to preserve their material environment and they were all the more disturbed when they lost their possessions, for whatever reason.

**BCM:** I would love to see more of an exploration of this as a historical topic. How much wartime stuff did the soldiers actually keep? I know we hear the tales of the battlefields and campaign roads being littered with the material
items of war scattered about along the roadside and under trees. I know that when they retreated in haste, like our Yankees at Bull Run, soldiers threw their items to the side in order to expedite the process. Did another soldier, though, for instance, consciously decide to keep something, to put a button in his cap or a pocket? Did he then have that item at home, on his mantle? Was it tucked away in some small box hidden under the floorboards? I wonder if it made a difference if the soldier was wounded in the war—as if he wanted to discard any remnants of a war that could remind him of the injury he would always carry with him.

I actually think objects—which, as Megan noted, have been the purview of the reenactor, the buff, and the collector—have a deeper connection to Civil War memory than has been acknowledged. Items trigger memories. Touching an old rifled musket triggers a memory of combat. Smelling the bacon grease in a pan triggers the memory of a night by the campfire. The objects themselves have the power to trigger positive and negative memories; they are also markers of identity. Soldiers who wanted to define themselves as veterans put on their old uniforms when they marched in parades or attended reunions; they even used them to confirm their identities as veterans in order to be allowed to beg on street corners in northern and southern cities in the decades after the war. I would love to see more attention paid to inventory lists in homes or at reunions to see what specific items may, indeed, hold keys to understanding how veterans remembered or misremembered the war on a daily basis.

**JP:** All three of you make excellent points about how studying material culture opens new questions and perspectives for Civil War historians. To reinforce your insights, I propose that working with material culture inspires scholars to trace the provenance of things. When I focused solely on manuscripts in the archive, I breezed past the provenance of collections, thinking this information only mattered to librarians. Provenance seemed an antiquated but necessary detail for internal bookkeeping. Now when I study artifacts in the archive, the provenance of things opens new veins of research. As Michael Woods’s article explains, when possessions circulated through society, they delineated relationships. Following how something moved through a world that valued objects so highly, as Joan reminds us, deepens our understanding of family, friendship, rivalry, and all sorts of social ties and antagonisms in the nineteenth century.
Provenance can even confirm relationships that lack sufficient textual evidence. For generations, historians have debated local black knowledge of and involvement in the Harpers Ferry raid. During the 1990s, in his great-grandfather’s attic, Charles Cephas found a bird gun that matches the description of a fowling piece lost by Lewis Washington during the raid. Beside the weapon were two 1858 model Harpers Ferry rifles. By tracing the provenance of these possessions, Hannah Geffert and Jean Libby have begun to unearth a network of black support for John Brown that has not survived on paper, if it ever appeared in print. In addition to empowering silent historical actors, tracing provenance can return, in spirit at least, things powerful people and institutions took from the dispossessed. After the Civil War, abolitionist Horatio Rust used his position as an Indian agent for the federal government to gather exceptional collections of Native American artifacts and then sold them to American museums and universities. Without provenance, a hunt for things Rust took from people would begin and end in paperwork instead of concluding with the potential resolution and restitution of finding things.

**BCM:** I love Joan’s idea here of getting inside the head of the household member who did the manufacturing. This reminds me a lot of Joe Beilein’s work on guerilla warfare and the shirts the guerillas wore under their uniforms [Joseph M. Beilein Jr., *Bushwhackers: Guerrilla Warfare, Manhood, and the Household in Civil War Missouri* (2016)]. He notes how the women who constructed these shirts did so with a purpose, one of time and labor and love, and sewed flower insignias into the shirts to symbolize faithfulness or love. When they rode about on their rides, the men then wore these underneath the Confederate coats or Yankee coats they had stolen. I love the idea that they always had those shirts closest to their hearts, even when they took on a Yankee identity to commit a dastardly ambush. I wonder, as Joan writes, if objects had more value in a nineteenth-century household because they were constructed within the household, even as the market revolution churned out mass-produced items. Did soldiers invest more value in the things they took with them to war or received in the mail because they were hand-constructed by a wife, a daughter, a mother, or a community? Did that pair of socks have so much emotional value to the soldier because it had been made by a wife or a community of women secretly supporting the war effort at home?
I love how Megan brings up the envelope and the writing of the letter and all that is involved in the production of the items that become so meaningful for historians seeking knowledge about the past. I am always struck by the decisions soldiers made regarding the type of material object to do the writing and how that writing is done. Ink pen or pencil? Written on a book, on the ground, or at a desk? That soldiers could purchase stationery with specific insignias is fascinating to me. When I have looked through letters from soldiers and their spouses and family members (including the Iowa soldier in my edited collection *A Punishment on the Nation: An Iowa Soldier Endures the Civil War* [2012]), many write on basic paper. Silas Haven from Iowa started with basic paper but then used stationery with symbols of Columbia, patriotic insignias; one of his letters even bore the image of George B. McClellan (which was distressing to him and I am sure to his family, who were about as anti-Copperhead and anti-McClellan in 1864 as you could imagine). The paper and the imagery sent a message to the recipient—maybe something that could not be said or did not need to be said about the need for supporting the war effort behind the lines.

**JC:** Brian raises a very interesting point about how people felt about different kinds of objects, the homemade or handmade, versus something purchased in a store. I have seen evidence among both soldiers and civilians that homemade belongings had special meaning because of the personal association with the maker. It is a cliché, the spouse giving her husband a homemade scarf or pair of gloves as a token of love when he heads off to war, but it is a cliché for a reason. The ritual seems to mean a lot to both parties.

I have also seen plenty of evidence of the appeal of the shiny new thing that could *only* be purchased in a store. Most human beings love novelty, and the market is designed to appeal to that desire for the new. In the late-antebellum era, men and women both were fascinated by the new cloth and new clothing that the market made available, broadcloth for men and dyed silk for women. The soldier’s uniform combined the traditional and the new, with traditional military designs that were new to soldiers who were not career military. The insignia, the sash (when appropriate), the headgear, and the weaponry also communicated some direct messages about masculinity, strength, and hierarchy. It strikes me that soldiers learned how to “read” those uniforms pretty quickly after they joined the army, whereas many civilians did not. Someone could write a good article on the uniform as an artifact of material culture.
BCM: Exactly, Joan, and then how did the guerillas who disguised themselves with the uniforms take on a perceived masculinity or a perceived outward appearance of honor? The uniform, in so many ways, was the true marker of manhood as defined by battle. Soldiers looked down on guerrillas because they were not enlisted men, because they did not don the true old gray coat. At the same time, think of Frederick Douglass’s quote, which I will attempt to paraphrase, in which he indicated that if you allow black men to wear the blue suit, to put on that “US” belt buckle and the buttons emblazoned with the American Eagle, that they then will have earned citizenship. The uniform marks so much in terms of identity and manhood, or masks it or hides it (note how men used the uniforms to showcase the empty sleeve by pinning it).

How can new materialism deepen our understanding of the Civil War and Reconstruction?

JP: We’re already identifying a treasure trove of Civil War–era things that merit more scholarly attention, so I want to direct our attention toward theories and methods that can guide the field’s research and interpretation of these objects. New materialism promises to change not only how we approach things but also how we understand humanity and its history. Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett stand out as scholars who have exposed modern binaries of subject/object, human/animal, organic/inorganic, and life/matter. Their work shows how our prevailing ontology misses the vitality and effectiveness of nonhuman “actants,” Latour’s term for any thing that can do things. Actants make a difference by imposing limits, enabling changes, and affecting outcomes. Some of the most powerful of these, such as germs, harmed Civil War Americans more than combat, but our prevailing ontology privileges human agencies and movements over nonhuman powers and circulations. New materialism insists that you cannot understand the former without accounting for the latter.

Accounting for nonhuman actants in Civil War history can explain many things beyond obvious matters like an army’s strength. Consider Jim Downs’s work on the process of emancipation [Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction (2012)]. By including nonhuman actants, Downs revealed how Union policies in contraband camps spread sickness and death when authorities shuttled infected people from place to place. By practicing history on a
microscopic level, Downs revealed how material causes substantiated im-
material claims that the Negro race would go extinct after emancipation. As a discipline, history privileges human causes and explanations: doomsday forecasts about the future of African Americans emanated from racism, political calculations, the labor needs of northern capitalists and former masters. All of these factors contributed to social perceptions of contraband camps, but what was happening in the camps themselves and within the bodies of black people in those camps mattered more. In this issue, Sarah Weicksel’s analysis of fomites also reveals the power of actants and illustrates how new materialism can help us understand and interpret them.

Historians are only beginning to sketch a framework for interpreting the past that accounts for nonhuman actants: possessions, microbes, climates, and energies. But let me clarify something. New materialism does not necessitate a “guns, germs, and steel” model for explaining the Civil War. I am not suggesting that nonhuman factors and forces determined historical outcomes. Quite the contrary. Nonhuman actants contributed to the web of contingencies that made Civil War history. Human and nonhuman movements depended on each other. Human and nonhuman actions, conditions, and events intersected to make history.

When you consider the promises of new materialism in Civil War history, how do you see its theories and methods reframing the field?

JC: I’ll say a few words about theory. It is always interesting, and sometimes it is inspiring. I have spent years thinking about actor-network-theory (ANT), put forward by Bruno Latour [Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (2005)] and others. I am not yet convinced, but it is tantalizing. In my research, I usually start with the specifics that turn up in the manuscripts, and then I go back to theory (or comparative history) when I find something astonishing, startling, or weird. The Civil War provides many instances of all three phenomena. The theoretical literature is so large that I can almost always find something that gives me a new way to think about my research. But I am research-oriented, like most historians. Goethe said that gray is all theory, and green is the tree of life.

MKN: I think there is a lot that theory (both material culture theory and other forms of cultural and literary theory) can offer to Civil War studies. I found some of it useful in thinking about collecting as cultural practice and also
issues of space/place/architecture (Yi-Fu Tuan, for example [Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (1977)]) while I was writing Ruin Nation. Theory also offers us a chance to see interesting connections between Civil War history / material culture and other fields of study, which again leads us into interdisciplinary waters (my preferred place to swim). As I think we all know, though, any use of theory prompts a lot of eye-rolling among more traditional Civil War historians, so the caveats Jason offered (that we are not saying that objects have interiority, or intention, or motivation when we talk about them as historical “actors”) are necessary for convincing the traditionalists that theory-driven (or at least informed) analysis of Civil War objects produces knowledge of use to everyone. I would say new materialism can illuminate a lot of different fields of inquiry with which Civil War historians are both comfortable and familiar: soldier studies, civilian life (and the connections between home front and battlefield), environmental history, gender and warfare, and war memory.

Civil War relics have long fascinated tourists, enthusiasts, and collectors. How can material culture studies engage this public interest and intersect with the work of public historians?

MKN: When we think of objects in public history, we probably think first of museums. In most Civil War museums, exhibit curators seem to use one of two approaches: a case of objects of similar types (“Weapons,” for instance), or a thematic case that brings together a profusion of different objects related to that theme (such as “Life in Camp”). These are both useful ways to get as many objects as possible in front of audiences and give them a way to access the lived realities of Civil War Americans. What material culture studies can contribute to museums as a form of public history is a larger contextual frame, and different or additional approaches to presenting objects in these spaces. So if we take Michael Woods’s essay as a model: create a case exhibiting Brooks’s cane with the rest of the display (images and text) built around it and its history. This would emphasize not only the object as a way to access the past, but the object as something that has its own past, present, and future. I have other thoughts about how to integrate objects into other kinds of sites (particularly battlefield parks), but that’s more about technology (virtual reality) than material culture studies as a discipline.

BCM: I have been struck by how museum exhibits have evolved over the last few decades. We are now seeing a blend of different types of objects—an exhibit
on slavery, for example, may have some photographs of slaves such as the one depicting “Gordon,” a male slave whose back was covered in scars created by the lash, combined with a ledger that may show the number of slaves living on a particular plantation and their value, as well as a set of rusted shackles. Exhibits on the common soldier showcase both the uniforms and guns but also the items needed to survive in camp (decks of cards, writing utensils, dishes, cups). I have also been struck by how modern museums include audio tours and information related to soldiers and their objects (particularly effective here is the Pamplin Park museum near Petersburg, in which visitors pick a soldier based on his photograph and follow him through the war on an audio tour—they also have the option to select different audio presentations that can speak about the usage of a particular item or experience in camp). The reproduction items are fun for children to “play” soldier—put on a uniform, wear a cap, tap on a drum. Many of the souvenir shops carry muskets or swords or uniforms for kids to take home and continue their own backyard battles. I am struck that for many young people, seeing the items of war may be their first exposure—those exhibits in the visitor center bring the war to life in a sensory way that may be absent on the fields themselves, where they have to use their imaginations. The material exhibits show them the reality of war.

JC: Research scholars can engage in fruitful collaborations with public historians, museum curators, and archivists. I have done consulting work for a number of museum exhibits over the years, and I have been struck by the enormous number of artifacts contained in American museums. Those vaults are full, from ceiling to floor! I have always had the impression that only a small percentage of their holdings ever show up in exhibits. I have heard scholars complain that museum holdings have an inherent class bias toward elites, but my experience has been that there are many artifacts in the museums that were created and preserved by ordinary citizens. We can contribute to the process of presenting a wide array of objects to the public. Research scholars can provide context for museum exhibits, working in concert with other professionals. We can bring certain objects into the light, as it were, as the intellectual interests of the profession change over time. As scholars in the last generation began to explore the history of slavery, race, and gender, it became possible to present exhibits with objects pertaining to those topics. Many seemingly mundane objects, such as slave shackles or spinning wheels, took on new meaning. The general
public has an eager interest in almost all war-related objects, including those connected to the newer topics of the last twenty-five years. That was visible in the large crowds that visited the exhibit on slavery in New York City in 2005 and the exhibit on women and the Civil War at the University of Maryland in 2012. We can tap into this kind of enthusiasm.

JP: All of you make excellent points about how Civil War material cultures can bridge public history and academia. The best material culture studies challenge all of us to see Civil War relics as more than props associated with important events. Our first instinct may be to display an object as an illustration of a particular place or person in time. If we ask deeper questions of these things, we realize that even mundane objects have stories to tell. Interrogating things can bring them to life. Like Joan, I have been fortunate to work with public historians and museum curators. When Mississippi designed a new state history museum, the directors sought my help interpreting objects and presenting the state’s history. The sheer volume of things the museum displayed was staggering, but the building itself proved to be the biggest challenge. The museum was housed within the Old Capitol building, the place where Mississippi seceded from the Union and imposed harsh black codes during Reconstruction. Because the museum would teach Mississippi history to thousands of schoolchildren on field trips, the building mattered as much as the objects within it. The directors did a wonderful job renovating the old building and addressing its troubled past. *Tangible Things* [*Making History through Objects* (2015)], by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and others is a great new resource for scholars and public historians who are fascinated by how we organize and display things to make history.

*In what ways can material culture studies enrich social and cultural histories that have traditionally examined identity and power? Should we speak of material cultures in the plural, because race, religion, class, region, and gender affected how people valued and related to things?*

MKN: I think we must talk about material cultures in the plural, given the vast range of objects and the wide variety of people who are creating / using / making meaning from them. What an attention to objects does is to reveal to us how individuals were creating new identities during the Civil War. For example, Civil War historians often talk about “soldiers” as a group of people engaging in action, without really examining the process
these men went through to acquire that identity. American men became “soldiers” once they mustered into the armies, and they used all kinds of things—uniforms, weapons, tents, souvenirs, daguerreotypes, pipes whittled from wood, et cetera—to define and sustain those identities. And these things gave them different kinds of power in different contexts and were central to the ways that soldiers negotiated power within their army camps and asserted control over their experiences and the relationships to those they left behind.

BCM: I really love that point, Megan. Items have the ability to help an individual craft an identity; the farmer or bookkeeper became the soldier once he acquired the uniform and the materials of war. Again, it reminds me of Douglass on his call for black soldiers—that once they donned the blue uniform and wore the brass buttons emblazoned with eagles and the buckles with the “US,” they would become not only soldiers but also citizens. Thus, I would love to see what happened to these men once the items of war no longer applied—in some ways, they were reappropriated. I am reminded of all the veterans who attended reunions in uniform. Did they actually need to wear those uniforms to feel like soldiers, or at least to remind themselves of their previous identities, especially after time had passed and the material goods around them had gone from the accoutrements of war back to the plow and ledger? I am also struck by those who went to gather these items from the battlefield after a conflict—and Michael DeGruccio has written more deeply on this—but what motivated civilians to pick stuff up? Financial reasons? Or did they need these items to feel a deeper connection to the war? To touch it? I think this conversation reveals how material culture is now a necessary avenue for exploring deeper notions of identity that the historical community has long taken for granted. It is easy to see civilians, soldiers, veterans, doctors, nurses, and politicians as monolithic entities. Perhaps the material goods that these people surrounded themselves with helped dictate their identity—or perhaps not, but it would certainly be worth exploring.

JC: To address Brian’s questions, I have also written about the motives for soldiers who gathered items from battlefield. Some of these were in fact financial: individual soldiers did sell their battlefield relics for profit, during and after the war. They also wanted to contribute to the collective memory, by donating them to institutions back home. Yet others kept their war souvenirs as private possessions, sometimes for decades. Finally,
there are documented cases of soldiers who took battlefield objects and then threw them away. That suggests that the desire to own a relic could be powerful but fleeting—that simply possessing the object was a kind of triumph. Soldiers also took objects from civilians, including women, black and white. Again, they seized these objects for a variety of reasons. Soldiers took dresses from women of both races to put the cloth itself to practical use and to take the dresses home to their own female relatives. They also demonstrated their power over civilians by tearing the clothes apart, or, even more interesting, putting the dresses on themselves and then taking them off again. That could be interpreted in a variety of ways, which I have already explored in print. Human behavior is indeed complicated. Material objects also mattered a great deal to civilians of both genders, all racial and ethnic backgrounds, throughout nineteenth-century America and in other societies. That is one reason the scholarly literature is so large. So I believe we need to think about material cultures, plural. That is one of the major reasons I find the field so exciting.

**JP:** It’s unanimous! I concur that Civil War Americans not only engaged with their material world differently than we do but also displayed diverse material cultures within their world. Civil War things, most obviously uniforms and arms, empowered some groups at the expense of others. Battle trophies articulated the supremacy of victors. Evidence abounds of soldiers invading homes and mocking civilians by wearing women’s dresses or men’s waistcoats over their uniforms—victims experienced such behavior as personal assaults. This practice was not limited to Union soldiers in the South. Missourians who sacked Lawrence during Bleeding Kansas practiced the same ritual.

More research into the material cultures of Civil War Americans will help us understand the many ways people possessed things and were in turn changed by their possessions. Surely some of these distinctions were personal. In some ways, how individuals valued and approached objects was as unique as their temperaments or senses of humor. But scholarship suggests that a host of factors—class, region, age, race, religion, and gender—fostered distinct material cultures that changed over time. Future research will enrich our understanding of these relationships between subjects and objects. We have so much to learn.