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The Trophies of Victory and the Relics of Defeat: Returning Home in the Spring of 1865

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The Trophies of Victory and the Relics of Defeat: Returning Home in the Spring of 1865

Abstract
The remains of a lone apple tree, cut down and carved into small pieces by Confederate soldiers, lay along a rutted dirt road that led to the village of Appomattox Court House. Earlier on 9 April 1865, Robert E. Lee had waited under the shade of the apple tree, anxious to hear from Ulysses S. Grant about surrendering his army. Messages between the generals eventually led to a brief meeting between Lee and two Union staff offices who then secured the parlor in Wilmer McLean's house, where Grant dictated the surrender terms to Lee. As soon as the agreement was signed and Lee walked out the door, Union officers "decluttered" the parlor with Yankee efficiency, cutting strips of upholstery from plush sofas, breaking chair legs into small keepsakes, and "appropriating" candleholders and chairs until the room was left barren. [excerpt]

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Comments
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War Matters

Material Culture in the Civil War Era

EDITED BY JOAN E. CASHIN

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The remains of a lone apple tree, cut down and carved into small pieces by Confederate soldiers, lay along a rutted dirt road that led to the village of Appomattox Court House. Earlier on 9 April 1865, Robert E. Lee had waited under the shade of the apple tree, anxious to hear from Ulysses S. Grant about surrendering his army. Messages between the generals eventually led to a brief meeting between Lee and two Union staff officers who then secured the parlor in Wilmer McLean’s house, where Grant dictated the surrender terms to Lee. As soon as the agreement was signed and Lee walked out the door, Union officers “decluttered” the parlor with Yankee efficiency, cutting strips of upholstery from plush sofas, breaking chair legs into small keepsakes, and “appropriating” candleholders and chairs until the room was left barren.¹

In the meantime, Lee was making his way to his headquarters, slowly riding Traveller down the Lynchburg Stage Road as his adoring troops swarmed around him in an unforgettable farewell. The general said a few words of gratitude, evidently moved by the outpouring of affection from his devoted soldiers, before disappearing over the hillside. Within minutes Confederate relic hunters descended on the apple tree, cutting and hacking away at the limbs and bark so that the slices of wood could become precious commodities of historical and monetary value. A mixture of veneration and entrepreneurialism spawned the cutting frenzy, and the famous Harper’s Weekly illustrator Alfred Waud sketched Union and Confederate soldiers swinging axes and bargaining over the trophies. The historical magnitude
of 9 April 1865 was not lost on the veterans who wanted a piece of history, even if it came at a price.²

Such items as the furniture in McLean’s house and pieces of the apple tree were more than souvenirs or trinkets of nostalgic symbolism. Soldiers felt incredible emotional attachment to relics at a deeply personal level. At the same time, they appreciated the potential that relics possessed in shaping historical memories and influencing public meanings for years to come. Historians Joan Cashin, Megan Kate Nelson, and Michael DeGruccio, who were some of the first historians to write about Civil War material culture, are in agreement that things possess the power to stir emotions, to affirm or weaken political convictions, and even to guide behavior. Their pioneering works illustrate how ideology is only one source in understanding the inner world of historical actors. The logical outcome of their fine scholarship calls into question the primacy of ideas as the dominant source of motivation. Rather, things themselves have agency, and they possess an intrinsic power to shape behavior, as is evident in the ways that Union and Confederate soldiers responded to the outcome of Appomattox.³

At the end of the war, both sides collected objects to validate their military service and the political cause for which they had fought. Returning home from Appomattox with just a few keepsakes testified to the suffering and sacrifices by ex-Confederates. The very absence of things could be a source of shame to some soldiers, but others felt an unconquerable spirit that seemingly resided in their ragged uniforms, busted shoes, and empty haversacks. On the one hand, carrying home a piece of a Confederate banner or a copy of Robert E. Lee’s Order No. 9 stirred powerful but conflicting feelings of emasculation and mastery in defeat. Union soldiers, on the other hand, treasured items from ex-Confederates as mementos of a failed rebellion. Pieces of Confederate flags, Southern currency, and even rebel uniforms instilled in Northern soldiers a feeling of manly pride as conquering heroes.

Veterans returning to their Northern or Southern homes also worried that civilians might question their dedication to the cause. They turned to relics to ward off any potential criticisms, believing that material items would stand the test of time. Things, in their estimation, possessed an intrinsic historical truth of valor and sacrifice. These relics, in others words, existed beyond the murky world of interpretation and debate. The things of war constituted an indestructible source of historical evidence that would forever remind future generations of the sacredness of the respective cause and their own personal sacrifices in fighting for it.⁴

The craving for the material objects of war became a preoccupation dur-
Figure 11. Union and Confederate soldiers chopping up the apple tree for Appomattox relics. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)
ing 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. The demise of the rebel armies, beginning with Lee's army on 9 April and continuing with the surrender of Joseph Johnston's Army of Tennessee on 26 April, Nathan Bedford Forrest's on 9 May, and Kirby Smith's on 2 June, produced a windfall of battle flags, rifles, backpacks, and other articles of war treasured by both sides but interpreted in very different ways. The material elicited a range of conflicting emotions and feelings—despair, futility, optimism, pride, and jubilation—while attesting to the triumph of the Union and the military devastation of the Confederacy. The material culture associated with Union victory and Southern defeat affirms the observations of historians Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, who argue that material culture can reveal the traumatic consequences of events like a civil war while showing that artifacts are also historical actors unto themselves, always bringing the past into the present. The things that veterans carried home were not forgotten oddities but relics that prompted people to access wartime sacrifices long after Appomattox. 5

Rather than detailing the surrender proceedings of the various Southern armies or charting the vast multitude of soldier experiences and reactions during the final months of the war, which has been done admirably by other scholars, this essay highlights the surrender experience of a select number of white soldiers on both sides. Two men in particular—the Union's John Smith of the 118th Pennsylvania and Virginian John H. Chamberlayne—receive special attention. Both soldiers take center stage at various points because their writings are exceptional in showing how material culture helped soldiers make sense of the end of the war. Chamberlayne, a graduate of the University of Virginia who had pushed hard for secession while working as a lawyer in Richmond before the war, "skipped" the surrender parade at Appomattox. He joined a band of diehard Confederates who ran to Mississippi during the summer of 1865. Chamberlayne provides the perspective of a radical Confederate who wrote with astonishing introspection while he sought refuge from defeat through self-exile. And on the Union side, the letters of Corporal John Smith, a Philadelphian who was only nineteen when Lee surrendered, detail his journey from Appomattox to the Union Grand Review in Washington, D.C., on 23 and 24 May 1865 with remarkable detail. His letters shine light on the ways that patriotism and profit inspired soldiers on both sides to collect the things of war. 6

In this essay, my aim—by combining material culture and primary documents—is to explore how Civil War soldiers understood Union victory and the downfall of the Confederacy. I am not concerned with the conditions on

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the Northern or Southern home front that awaited soldiers as they returned home, nor do I explore the long-term problems of veterans readjusting to civilian life. Those important topics go beyond the scope of this chapter, and there are many fine works that address the numerous layers of the veteran experience. Instead, I begin by reviewing the last week of the war and the events that led to the surrender at Appomattox. An examination of Southern reactions to the collapse of the Confederacy’s armies follows, and then I move into the ways that material culture figured into the act of surrendering and how relics shaped Confederates’ perceptions of themselves as conquered soldiers.7

The Army of the Potomac at Appomattox is the focal point of the next section. The analysis is centered on the ways that material culture shaped how Union soldiers imagined Northern victory and Confederate defeat. The extensive fraternization with Confederates at Appomattox receives considerable attention as a way to locate the amicable and entrepreneurial spirit that prevailed between both sides at the end of the war. This section gives special care to the return of Union soldiers to the battlefields in the Fredericksburg area—a pilgrimage that was not a sacred ritual of nationalism but a poignant reminder of their own harrowing experiences as survivors of organized killing. And by examining the mementos that John Smith collected and sent home for safekeeping, the chapter concludes by focusing on how Smith experienced the Grand Review in Washington and on his exit from the army.

In the week that followed the Confederate evacuation of Richmond and Petersburg on 2 April, the conflict between and the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of the Potomac rapidly came to an end. Grant’s forces hunted down the Army of Northern Virginia with the dogged determination of a veteran army. At every turn, they blocked Lee’s attempts to move south while piercing the soft underbelly of the Confederate column with slashing cavalry attacks. By the evening of 8 April, Robert E. Lee had nowhere to go, but his army was like a dying beast, possessing just enough life for one last desperate attack for survival. The Southerners struck early on the morning of 9 April, punched a hole in the Union line before Federal reinforcements filled the gap, and sealed the fate of the Army of Northern Virginia.8

Lee had little choice but to accept Grant’s demands, as the Union army was poised for a bloody showdown that would have likely resulted in Confederate annihilation. When news of the surrender swept across the Army of the Potomac, members of the rank and file erupted in joy, tossing their hats in the air, rolling on the ground, and blasting horns and beating drums in an unbridled celebration of victory and life as part of the inevitable chain

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of human progress. After years of frustration and public ridicule, the rank and file of the Army of the Potomac had accomplished what many observers thought was unattainable—the capture of Richmond and the destruction of Lee’s forces. All of that changed during the first nine days of April, when Grant had achieved both in what amounted to the knockout blow to the rebellion. At the time, soldiers knew that Appomattox guaranteed the reunion of the nation and the end of slavery. They claimed that their part in this magnificent victory affirmed their belief in Lincoln’s words that America was the world’s “last best hope.” When Grant warned against excessive celebrating, few disobeyed his order out of a soldierly admiration for an enemy who had experienced the similar trials of army life.⁹

When news of the surrender passed through the ranks, many Union soldiers, including John Smith of the 118th Pennsylvania, exercised their new freedoms and headed straight for the rebel camps to acquire a memento of the historically momentous day. Rushing to the scene, Smith crossed a wooden rail spanning a stream swollen by recent rains, lost his balance, and plunged into the waters. “I cried! Cussed!!,” he wrote to his mother on 11 April. “But made up my mind I would get a piece of that great apple tree if I fell in forty creeks.” When Smith reached the tree, he saw one of Grant’s orderlies carry off a limb while other Union soldiers were paying between five dollars and ten dollars for chips. A Confederate standing nearby asked, “‘What would you do with it, Yank?’ ‘Why, take it home as a great relic,’ say I to him, so he cut in and cut out big chips.” Smith tried to give him ten dollars for the pieces, but the Confederate would not accept the money. “‘Here, Yank, with my compliments,’” he said. When Smith returned to his regiment, his comrades hustled off to get their own piece, but they were too late. The tree—including the roots—was gone. They pleaded with Smith to sell some of his pieces, offering as much as five dollars for a wooden sliver, but “I said to them, ‘No, go fall in the creek as I did.’”¹⁰

That Robert E. Lee spent so much time near the apple tree, resting under its branches and occasionally conferring with his staff, invested the space with a sacred aura. For those Union and Confederate soldiers who were fortunate enough to get a hunk of the prized wood, they put very different meanings into their souvenirs that in turn validated their respective service during the Appomattox campaign and the war as a whole. Grant’s veterans held up a slice of the apple tree as a tribute to a complete and smashing victory earned by the Army of the Potomac’s relentless drive, superior bravery, and exceptional leadership. It is telling that Union soldiers showed no impulse to desecrate the tree site or to do anything that might denigrate their fallen enemy.¹¹
Confederate veterans craved shards of the apple tree out of a deep admiration for their commanding general, but the wooden relic could not be dissociated from the painful memories of surrender. How could any soldier forget the defeat of the white South if he owned a slice of the tree? Would not feelings of shame crash down on a Southern veteran every time he came in contact with the wooden trinket? Diaries and letters would suggest that Lee’s veterans wanted to distance themselves from the surrender altogether and that relic hunting would have been unthinkable to any self-respecting Confederate. Yet the search for souvenirs provides a different interpretive layer to the popular generalization that all Confederates forever buried their faces in shame. These wooden shards symbolized a once mighty military regime, and any soldier who owned the heirloom possessed a sacred link to the incomparable Robert E. Lee. Moreover, he had proof that he had followed the general to the bitter end.

Lee’s men were the first to make a rush on the apple tree, catching the eye of Smith and other Federals who joined the gathering in what turned into a veritable bazaar of trading and selling slices of the apple tree and currency. The Confederates could not get rid of their worthless and burdensome currency quickly enough, and they found a long line of eager buyers among their former enemies who handed out greenbacks for Confederate bills. His desire for Southern money was a little peculiar, but in the future John Smith could display Southern currency as a relic of an extinct nation that had threatened the Union from within.

The trading of currency and the hawking of the apple tree spawned a convivial spirit among the former combatants, and their conversations elicited a range of conflicting Confederate reactions to Lee’s surrender. Smith and fellow Pennsylvanian Jacob Zorn described a similar spectrum of Confederate opinions after the surrender. “Some of them feel very indignant in regard to the Surrender,” Zorn wrote in his diary, “and express themselves hoping to See the day yet when they will have a chance at us again. Others appear to hail the day when peace will again sound throughout the whole land. They Say they are tired of this war and cant See any use of carrying it on any longer the expressions of the latter are those who done the fighting and that of the former those who had some easy position and not of the rank and file of the army.” N. H. Pangborn, also of the Fifth Corps, heard from many fiery Confederates “that they would meet us again if they got a chance.” Lee’s veteran comrades told Pangborn that these outspoken soldiers “held bomb proof positions in the army, such as musicians & quartermasters clerks & who were all ways out of reach of bullets in time of a fight.”

While Union soldiers found overwhelming material proof of the Confed-
eracy's fall, plenty of Southern soldiers were oblivious to the physical disintegration of their own army. The call of honor awoke some diehard Confederates from the stupor of humiliation that hung over the army. These men fancied themselves as the hotspurs of the rebellion, and in the final months of the war they lived up to their reputations as unconquerable warriors who never grew weary of hearing the music of the shell. They felt they had no choice but to carry on the fight. No floodgate could hold back the rage and humiliation of these fanatics, who promised to follow the Confederate flag wherever it might fly. Virginia's John H. Chamberlayne was one of the few who refused to quit fighting. "McIntosh and myself with several others refused to attend the funeral at Appomattox C.H.," he wrote on 12 April, "& as soon as the surrender was certain we cut or crept our way out, thro' adventures many & perilous wh. I cannot tell of now." Chamberlayne and his party intended to rally with Johnston's forces. If the Army of Tennessee had disbanded by the time they arrived, Chamberlayne would continue to ride to Texas, where the war against the Yankees, he believed, could be waged indefinitely. Still clinging to a romantic view of war, Chamberlayne wrote, "I am not conquered by any means & shall not be while alive. My life is of no further value—Farewell my beloved Virginia—What exile should I fly from himself—The cause was thrown away and such blood." 13

Chamberlayne's final act of soldiering was full of grand illusions and inspired more by vanity than ideology or politics. He would not allow defeat to crush his dream of eternal fame as a Confederate hero. From the moment he enlisted in 1861, ambition stalked Chamberlayne, pressing him to fight recklessly on the battlefield, but the promise of glory was never fully realized. He spent much of the war incarcerated in a Northern prison camp while his friends from the University of Virginia racked up battlefield accolades. His temperament fueled his impatience for combat laurels while also creating a fiery devotion to the Confederacy. He was drawn to the drama of exile, possibly because of his attraction to Romantic literature. Chamberlayne would follow a plotline after Appomattox that came straight from Lord Byron. The famous Englishman's personal life and published writings turned banishment into a noble adventure. The itinerant life brought fame and notoriety to Byron, but Chamberlayne discovered what it meant to be a man alone. By the end of May 1865, he had reached Mississippi, feeling fatigued in body and disheartened in spirit, but he remained undeterred, still searching for an organized Confederate force to continue the fight. Every morning on his relative's farm in Mississippi, Chamberlayne awoke feeling emotionally numb to the past. All the sacrifices, the suffering, and the bloodshed weighed on the present, an invisible but pervasive force.
dragging him down and disorienting him to a point where he could “hardly say ... [if] I exist.” 14 Even in his abject state of depression, Chamberlayne remained defiant, expressing rage against the North in an apocalyptic fantasy in which the South would rise again. He was no different from defeated people in other nations who believed, as historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, that “the idea of war, death, and rebirth are cyclically linked ... [and] do not allow for absolute eradication.” It was not unusual for former Confederates to indulge in revenge fantasies as a way to assure themselves that their honor would ultimately be redeemed. 15

Like so many former Southern soldiers, Chamberlayne looked for something in the past to rescue his reputation in the present, and a captured pair of Yankee boots helped to restore his self-esteem. “Tho’ the country is for a time enslaved,” he wrote to his friend Sally, “tho friends are dead & exiled, and no man has a home, & tho I have not a dollar in the world, nor any property but one pair of top boots (with spurs attached), still I can laugh.” The boots were the property of a Maine colonel whose person and possessions were captured during the 1862 Maryland campaign when the armies grappled along the South Mountain chain. When Chamberlayne looked at his boots, his mind conjured up memories of a daring adventure. The Yankee shoes became the muse for his epic tale. “We strove with them until night,” Chamberlayne wrote, “and we girded our loins in the night season; and we wrestled mightily with them about the rising of the sun, and the voice thereof was the noise of a mighty nation; and we smote them for about the space of two hours, and prevailed against them exceedingly, and took them captive; and took their food, & their raiment, and their horses, and cattle, yea and their creeping things, for a spoil, & for a prey.” He admitted to Sally that the story might sound like “nonsense,” but the Yankee boots stood as incontestable evidence of the fighting prowess of Confederates, who, even in defeat, used trophies of war to enshrine their individual and collective valor as Southern soldiers. 16

Military artifacts like Chamberlayne’s Yankee boots were not harmless tributes to a chivalric warfare or simple props for nostalgic tales. Relics possessed tremendous emotional power, as they had the capacity to assign meaning to life’s experiences. In Chamberlayne’s case, the boots materialized gender relations by bonding women to a romantic view of the Confederate soldier as a knightly warrior. Objects could also induce avoidance of the present, as illustrated by Chamberlayne’s peculiar attachment to his Yankee boots as a reminder of days of Confederate superiority. The shoes were a source of pride that helped him cope with the shame and humiliation over Appomattox. He feigned surprise to Sally when he stated that he could
not understand how the Yankee boots "should walk into ... our confab," and yet he purposefully wrote at length about the captured boots to prop up his need for mastery, noting that it was one of his few possessions in the world. Their mere existence, moreover, proved his superiority over a foe that now ruled over him by sheer force and not daring.\textsuperscript{17}

Such relics would soothe the wounded pride of Southern men for generations to come, but in the moment of surrender, the vast majority of Confederates returning home were not laden down with war memorabilia or mementos. As Richmond’s Carlton McCarthy recalled, “To roll up the old blanket and oil-cloth, gather up the haversack, canteen, axe, perhaps, and a few trifles in time of peace of no value,” was all that they could do when leaving Appomattox. Yet McCarthy and his fellow survivors could hold their heads high as they walked home, knowing that they had “faithfully performed their duty.” Above all else, the meager possessions of war demonstrated to those at home that they had suffered and sacrificed for the cause. He did not feel the overwhelming sense of disgrace and worthlessness that cut Chamberlayne to his core. Personality and circumstances largely explain why McCarthy embraced the future without bitterness or rancor.\textsuperscript{18}

Unlike Chamberlayne, McCarthy had read Lee’s farewell address, General Orders No. 9, and the general’s words offered emotional sustenance to his soldiers by affirming their place in history as men of unsurpassed devotion to cause and comrade. Lee’s staff officer Charles Marshall wrote the proclamation, but Lee edited and ultimately approved the language of the intellectually charged message that framed the Lost Cause explanation of Southern defeat—one that subsequently twisted the pages of history for generations to come. By emphasizing Yankee numbers as the cause of the Army of Northern Virginia’s demise, Lee essentially exonerated himself and his men for surrendering while removing Grant and the Union armies as architects of their own victory. General Orders No. 9, as historian Elizabeth Varon writes, “had layers of meaning and deep, tangled roots” that anchored the overwhelming numbers and resources explanation of Union victory as a matter of might over right. The general’s words were not combative toward the North, but they were certainly passive-aggressive by suggesting that the Army of Northern Virginia had not been outgeneraled or outfought by the Army of the Potomac but rather worn down by the enemy’s ruthless execution of a hard-war strategy that preyed upon the weak and terrorized the helpless. Above all else, General Orders No. 9 enshrined Lee’s veterans as a band of loyal brothers whose courage reigned supreme even in defeat.\textsuperscript{19}

It is no surprise that the address became a coveted artifact that forever linked a soldier to Lee—the idol of white Southerners—while exalting the
rank and file as exemplary men of duty. Copyists at Lee’s headquarters sent the original copies to corps and division commanders, and from there it was likely that clerks made copies for brigades and that the process was then repeated at the regimental level. Plenty of copies were nailed to trees or tacked to tent posts for the rank and file to read. Some of these copies even reached the Army of Tennessee by the middle of April, carried by Lee’s men as they headed south from Appomattox.

The speedy and wide circulation of the address both inside and outside the Army of Northern Virginia is a shocking fact when considering the rush of practical demands bearing down on soldiers in the midst of disbanding an army. The portability and compactness of the document made it possible to carry on one’s body with ease, and if a soldier’s military record was called into question, the document offered on-the-spot vindication. The desire to have a copy of the Farewell Address spurred some soldiers to make handwritten copies as a treasured keepsake, but it was also an artifact that possessed the power of touch—it could be held to read and reflect on in order to remember the words of Lee enshrining his small band of soldiers with words of dignity and honor. As soon as a copy of the Farewell Address fell into the hands of Colonel H. Perry, he collected some Confederate stationery and pulled out a bass drum to use as a makeshift desk. With great care, he copied General Orders No. 9 for his own use. When he finished his transcription, Perry visited Lee’s headquarters and managed to see the general long enough for an autograph as an incontestable authentication of the document’s “truthfulness.” Virginian John E. Roller also wanted to take a piece of Appomattox history home, and he instructed an orderly sergeant to make a number of copies before passing the papers among the veterans who were still in the unit. “I thought it due to the men who had served to the close of the war,” he noted, “that they should have the fact preserved.”

The effect of Lee’s General Orders No. 9 suggested equality between former adversaries, a calculated message that could be constructed only by denying what actually had occurred behind the parlor doors of the McLean house. Grant had laid down an unconditional demand to surrender, and Lee had had no choice but to abide by it. Yet the idea of a gentleman’s agreement ending the Civil War cannot be rejected as a purely historical falsification inspired by flag-waving nationalism and a militaristic spirit. It is impossible to deny that the actual surrendering of all Confederate forces stretching from Virginia to North Carolina and beyond the Mississippi into Texas was carried out in an orderly and respectful fashion with little to no violence between the opposing forces. The spirit of conciliation is often seen as a uniquely Appomattox phenomenon, but in actuality there was
less goodwill shown to Lee’s men in Virginia than there was to Confederates at the other surrender sites. Only the Army of Northern Virginia had to participate in a surrendering parade. Union officers who were part of a surrender commission apparently insisted on a formal parade of Confederate infantry marching between opposing ranks of Federal troops. This was a march of shame in the eyes of Lee’s lieutenants, a degradation to be avoided, but they had little choice in the matter since the Federals controlled the distribution of the paroles. This slip of paper almost always protected the surrendering Confederates from future molestation by Federal authorities. They could not, in other words, get arrested on the way home and then sent to a Northern prison camp as a prisoner of war.\(^{22}\)

Under a cold and drizzly rain, Lee’s men embarked upon a march that would end with the extinction of their army. The thin procession of Confederate troops passed by the site of the uprooted apple tree and splashed across the North Branch of the Appomattox River before ascending an extremely steep hill that crested at a wide plateau opening up to the village of Appomattox, where 5,000 Federals of the Third Brigade, First Division, Fifth Corps, lined both sides of the road and waited in silence. At the helm of the column rode Confederate general John B. Gordon. His appearance cued Maine’s Joshua Chamberlain, who thought that Lee’s veterans deserved “the honors due to troops,” and he accordingly gave the command “at shoulder,” which the Federals executed with soldierly precision.\(^{23}\)

In recognition of the soldier salute, the Confederates came to shoulder arms as they passed the Maltese Cross, the designated flag of the Fifth Corps. Lee’s men continued to march until they reached the left end of the Union line anchored near the McLean house. They then turned to face their former adversaries, stacked their rifles, hung their accoutrements on their bayonets, and rolled up their flags. This process was repeated throughout the day, and by late afternoon the Federals had confiscated some 15,000 rifles and seventy-two battle flags. Scores of Confederates refused to participate in the march; they simply left their muskets in their empty camps before starting for home. Some companies tore their battle flags into small mementos rather than surrender their beloved banners to the enemy. A number of flags were made of silk, often from the wedding dresses of the wives of prominent officers. One Union soldier noted the feel of the banners, remarking that “some few of them were silk, but the most of them were of very coarse goods.” The material carried tremendous emotional and ideological power by reminding Confederates that the struggle was not just a war for slavery; because silk was often associated with the female gender, it also represented a defense of Southern womanhood. Giving up the flags

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likely touched on Southern male fears that the Yankees would violate the virtue of their daughters and wives. The symbolic power of the battle flag resided in its connection to the blood sacrifices on the battlefield, where so many comrades had given their lives under the banner. To hand over these cherished flags—connected to so many powerful memories—felt like the ultimate act of betrayal of the dead.24

By all accounts, Union forces carried out the surrender parade with great solemnity and respect. In victory, of course, it was easier for Northern soldiers to feel sympathy for the enemy, and they had also forged a kinship with an adversary who knew the life of a Civil War soldier—unlike the civilians behind the lines. “Poor Fellows,” Union officer Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of Maine wrote a day after the surrender. “I pitied them from the bottom of my heart. Those arms had been well handled & the flags bravely borne.” The things they carried, above all else, embodied the manly spirit of warfare that resonated with Chamberlain and countless other observers that day.25

The exceptional silence and solemnity of that day impressed the Confederates deeply, convincing them that they had received the honor due to them as soldiers and as men. Some were so forlorn that they could hardly speak, while others were more expressive, even making witty remarks as they stacked their weapons. Pennsylvanian John Smith overheard one of Lee’s men say to his gun, “My dear wife; I hope that I will never see you again. If you kill as many Rebels as you have killed Yanks you will do very well.” He then kissed the gun “with the remark ‘Good-bye.’” Another Confederate could not part with his musket soon enough: “Good-bye gun. I am darned glad to get rid of you. I have been trying to for two years.” To these soldiers, their weapons had become the personification of a comrade who bore witness to battle with a sturdy dependability. Over the course of the war a soldier developed a practical relationship with the tools and materials of war, but the relationship was more than functional. The relics and materials of war were soaked in memories of violence and blood, forged during incredible physical and emotional duress. A rifle, flag, tent, uniform, canteen, or haversack could fill a man with a range of emotions and meanings.26

There was little humor when the color bearers gave up their beloved flags. “Many had tears streaming down their faces,” Smith observed. “It effected them more than others; the thought of having carried the flag through so many battles and then were compelled to surrender at this time. I tell you, it was an affecting sight, looking at those brave men.” The Confederates’ filthy uniforms, their bare haversacks, and their banners shredded by Northern bullets offered incontestable evidence of an endurance, devotion, and
manly spirit that would forever reside in the things of war. At the same time, Union soldiers visualized Confederate defeat as an irreversible fact. Worn cartridge boxes empty of rounds, the broken scabbards, the tattered shoes, and the frayed battle flags were the remnants of a defeated army and a dead nation. 27 Union soldiers stationed along the surrender route tore off pieces of the captured Confederate flags and sent them home, including the obsessive collector John Smith. He packaged a number of Appomattox artifacts collected from Confederates, among them two printed Confederate songs and a ring traded by “a fine looking Reb.” Of all his souvenirs, Smith treasured his piece of “a Rebel flag” with its stenciled letters r and g. “The two letters that are on it,” he explained to his mother, “would be . . . of the word Fredericksburg, where his regiment suffered horrible losses. Take . . . the pieces and when I get home I will tell you all the particulars about them.” 28

Northern soldiers did not become civilians overnight as their Confederate counterparts did at Appomattox. The staggered surrenders of rebel armies necessitated that a substantial number of Union forces remain in the field until the war’s work was finally finished. During the third week of May, Confederate forces still operated in the Trans-Mississippi Theater, while a French puppet regime in Mexico edged toward the Texas border. A substantial number of Northern units, as a result, remained on active duty after Appomattox, including the United States Colored Troops, who were consolidated into a single corps and assigned to duty along the coastal areas in the South. Of the one million active Union soldiers in service at the end of the war, approximately 150,000 veterans from General George G. Meade’s Army of the Potomac (less its Sixth Corps), General William T. Sherman’s Armies of the Tennessee and Georgia, and General Phillip Sheridan’s cavalry were available to participate in the Grand Review in Washington, D.C., on 23–24 May, a military procession intended to honor the Union troops and to celebrate the end of the war. 29

En route to the nation’s capital from Richmond during the middle of May, four corps of Sherman’s army group traversed portions of the Spotsylvania, Wilderness, Chancellorsville, and Fredericksburg battlefields. The vast majority of the men were encountering the Virginia battlefields for the first time, except for one corps that was primarily composed of regiments that had fought at Chancellorsville. Those survivors of General Joseph Hooker’s debacle served as unofficial guides of the field. They told harrowing stories of survival on the spot where their units had fought two years earlier. Returning to the place of such awful violence actually helped some of the men heal from these painful memories of the war. Standing on the killing ground rekindled a connection to the dead by filling the living with

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tender sentiments for beloved friends and fellow soldiers who had been lost on other battlefields.30

Most of Sherman's men did not have a guide, however, and they were left to wander across the woods and fields. With every step, regardless of the direction, they saw trees chewed up by gunfire or skeletal remains protruding from the Virginia soil. Ohioan Marion Roberts, who slipped away from the marching column at Spotsylvania, stumbled upon piles of dead Union soldiers. That night he devoted his entire diary entry to the utter lack of respect and regard shown for the fallen. "Arriving near the spot we saw the timber cut the men were not t[ot]ally covered—and bones would protrude—often a head with gaping jaws, feet hands & c—passing thro' a strip of timber some of the party counted 67 unburied Union soldiers or their skeletons." Hundreds of skeletons, unburied and lying next to each other, marked the spot where they had fallen.31

Roberts expressed a recurring motif found in the writings of those who toured the battlefields around Fredericksburg. Their impressions, though varied in details, touched on four similar themes: that the indignities inflicted against the Union dead demanded immediate redress by the U.S. military; that the battered condition of the landscape conveyed the fury of combat as a physical truth; that the individual soldier mattered and that his personal story of suffering and sacrifice resided in the remains of the dead; and that the act of touring the fields elicited opposing feelings of the joy that came with surviving and the mournful sorrow for those who had fallen and would never return to their families. Sherman's men were not bone collectors in search of the macabre.32

Sherman's men did not try to purify the battlefield as a heroic space where war regenerated men or the nation. The badly scarred terrain, with its exposed graves and trees gnarled and twisted by artillery fire, reminded veterans of the hell that they had escaped. Every battlefield vista was one of human carnage, making it impossible to forget or suppress images of suffering soldiers who had died an agonizing death. Some skeletons at Spotsylvania revealed the last moments of a soldier's life to a touring Indiana veteran who saw that "some [men] had collected as they lay wounded such sticks and twigs as were within their reach and had striven to erect a barrier to protect them from further injury." Another skeleton had a knapsack strap across the leg, evidently in an attempt to stop a severed artery from hemorrhaging blood. "And now," he concluded, "the leather lying loosely about the bone told pathetically of the vain effort."33

Returning to the battlefield prompted Sherman's veterans to remember the fallen as men who had personal life stories that mattered more than any
symbolic connection to the Union cause or the end of slavery. The sight of so many graves—without any marker of respect or show of decency—enraged Sherman’s touring soldiers. Members of a Pennsylvania unit, while walking over the ground where they had fought at Chancellorsville, could not return to marching column without first caring for the dead. Once they had located their fallen comrades, according to veteran Michael Schroyer, they “picked up the skeletons and brought them home with them.” They even found the partial remains of their colonel’s corpse, whose body, as Schroyer explained, had soil shoveled up and tossed over his body, a haphazard process known as sodding. “He was lying on his back and was recognized by a tooth brush and several other articles, which were found in his clothing,” Schroyer noted. “The bones were placed in a box, put in an ambulance, taken to Washington and then shipped to his home.” It was not uncommon for soldiers in Sherman’s command, who never fought in the Fredericksburg area, to take out shovels and dig proper graves for the unknown Union dead that they found.34

In no way did the sight of trenches, rusty bayonets, or discarded swords awaken a romantic view of warfare among Sherman’s bummers. The mangled landscape elicited common phrases like “deplorable losses,” “fearful fighting,” and “dreadful history” in journals and letters home, where they denounced the inhumanity of killing and refused to mythologize the war. “In our imagination,” wrote a Pennsylvania soldier from Chancellorsville, “we could see the awful battle raging; columns moving back and forth, men cheering and cursing and swearing, the cannonading, the volleys of musketry, the moaning and groaning of the wounded, the stampede of the army, the woods afire from exploding shells and filled with the dead and dying, the wounded praying that we would help and save them.” And yet Sherman’s soldiers were drawn to things that attested to unrecorded acts of bravery, even willing to pay money to see relics that testified to the ferocity of the fighting. Scores of Sherman’s soldiers saw the stump of the famous twenty-two-inch oak tree, its massive trunk felled by intensive musketry fire at Spotsylvania’s “Bloody Angle.” The remains of the tree were on display in a Spotsylvania courthouse building, and the custodian of the relic charged a modest price for a view. At the same time, a steady stream of Union soldiers headed to the actual site of the famous tree. Curiosity, of course, drew them to the battlefield, but the existence of the tree materialized the violence and terror of combat. If there was any question about the killing power of Civil War weapons, the twenty-two-inch oak verified the lethality of the battle while implicitly affirming the bravery of the rank and file for withstanding missiles that carried such a destructive force. Every trench, shell hole, and
bullet-riddled tree marked the soldiers' place in time, but these marks, as the men discovered, were not indelible. The unmarked graves, abandoned and uncared for, warned Sherman's men that the battlefield landscape was in the hands of others, that their sacrifices would not always be perpetuated, and that landmarks of heroism and suffering would erode and be forsaken.\textsuperscript{35}

By 17 May, the last of Sherman's forces had moved north of the Fredericksburg area, leaving behind a war-ravaged landscape for a victory celebration in Washington. Waiting for his comrades to reach the nation's capital was Pennsylvania's John Smith, whose mania for relics brought in a bonanza of choice items from Appomattox. The campaign had taken a toll on his only pair of shoes, forcing him to march in bare feet, and by the time his unit had reached Richmond, Smith could barely walk. A surgeon sent him to a Washington hospital to recuperate while the rest of the Army of the Potomac completed their overland march across Virginia. Even though he had comrades in adjoining hospital beds, Smith felt unsettled, telling his mother on 8 May that "I feel lonesome being away from the Regt." Yet when he looked around the ward and saw so many wounded and maimed soldiers, he stopped feeling sorry for himself. "I look at them," he added in the same letter, and "I feel grateful that I came through it unharmed with my legs and arms all right."\textsuperscript{36}

Smith was not one of the 150,000 white veterans who were part of the Grand Review on 23–24 May. The lacerations and cuts on his feet had not healed, and marching with his unit was out of the question, but the doctors gave him a pass for two days so that he could stand on the sidewalk and celebrate the Army of the Potomac on the first day and Sherman's veterans on the second. Smith was among 100,000 visitors who poured into the city to celebrate the end of the rebellion and pay tribute to their veterans. Smith's eye, as usual, did not just track the people but also focused on the things of war. The torn bunting from Lincoln's presidential box at Ford's Theatre, which had been ripped by John Wilkes Booth's spur when he jumped to the stage after shooting Lincoln, caught his attention as a sad reminder of Lincoln's absence. The passing of brigade after brigade marching in lockstep with veteran precision thrilled Smith, who could barely contain himself when his own regiment, the 118th Pennsylvania, passed by and the crowd erupted in applause. The tattered regimental flag, with a knot of campaign ribbons hanging from the staff, drew everyone's attention, according to Smith, who saw the banners as proof of his regiment's bravery. As a material relic that had passed through the gauntlet of war, it had fluttered in the smoke of battle; it was riddled by enemy bullets; and it was carried by men who had devoted their lives for the honor to be its
bearer. The flags kept alive a heroic image of the rank and file as saviors of the Union but at the cost of important context. The campaign ribbons told their own story of hard fighting, and for the veterans, these streamers affirmed how they wanted to see themselves—as dependable soldiers who never shirked in battle.37

Smith returned to his regimental camp after the Grand Review, and when he was not occupied with the harmless drudgery of drilling and guard duty, his thoughts drifted to the future. He wondered how family and friends would receive him, even though he knew that he had “earned” his reputation through fighting, having compiled an impressive combat record and a promotion to corporal. Yet Smith worried about preserving his standing as a soldier when he knew that some veterans would come home fabricating tales of heroic adventures and peddling stories for profit, even though they had essentially been “playing” soldier for four years without having to do any of the bloody work. Smith had noticed how established shirkers suddenly worried that they might be exposed as scoundrels when the regiment returned home. They were angling for ways to cover their tracks so that they might be received as combat veterans. “I often told you about the pot robbers men that cook for officers so they wouldn’t have to go in a fight,” an indignant Smith wrote to his mother. “Would do anything to keep out of a fight well they are getting brave now and want to come back [to] their company and take a gun [now] the fighting is over.” He likely imagined them showing off their weapons to family and friends or prominently displaying them in their parlors, always present to welcome guests to the “home of a veteran.” Smith hoped that the War Department, whether intentionally or not, had put up a barrier to the ploys of these quasi-soldiers when it refused to issue new muskets to the troops. Smith understood the cultural power and status a musket imparted to a veteran returning home, since anyone would assume that a man with a rifle must have killed rebels. He wanted the world to know that he was a “fighting man,” and he would not let his hard-earned reputation stand on his words alone. He knew that this weapon would help validate his service in the immediate future and tell stories about his history long after he was gone. In one of his final letters before going home, Smith decided that he would purchase his weapon, informing his mother that “as the Government demands $6.00 for the gun I have decided to take my gun home.”38

Throughout the summer of 1865, Union soldiers were mustered out of service at a startling rate, but administrative delays continued to keep Smith in the ranks until the middle of July. While waiting for the necessary paperwork to pass through army channels, he occupied himself with

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checkers, reading, letter writing, and taking stock of his extensive collection of military souvenirs. On 2 July he compiled an inventory of his relics as part of a letter to his mother: “I sent a Rebel jacket by a man by the name of McCarthy. Fix it up and wash it, Mother. Also three rings made from a Rebel shell fuse; I received them at Appomattox C.H. The gold ring that I had on my finger broke while I was on the skirmish line at Gravelly Run. I was firing at the Rebls. I sent you a Rebel $100 note. Save these relics for me.” Except for the broken golden ring, Smith did not explain why he collected these items or what they meant to him. He clearly treasured these mementos, but he never instructed his mother as to how she should display or care for them. Maybe Smith intended to keep his mementos in a box so he might release the memories of the military campaigns that had resulted in the capture of Lee’s army and effectively ended the Civil War.39

In the end, there is no narrative that emerges from Smith’s relic collection; we have to put together the pieces of a puzzle that can never be fully reconstructed. The evidence is too fragmentary, but these relics possess interpretive possibilities that open pinholes into the past that cannot be discerned in written sources. Smith’s passion for Confederate items, including a shell jacket, is certainly unusual, and Smith must have gone to extraordinary lengths to keep and transport the coat, even asking his mother to clean it so that it might be properly preserved. Maybe these Confederate items were exotic to him, or possibly he treasured them as the fragments of a regime that had fallen to mighty Union armies. Nothing in his Confederate collection hints of vindictiveness toward the enemy, nor do the items capture the trauma of combat. Smith did connect the broken ring to a skirmish at Gravelly Run, pointing out that he cracked it while shooting at the rebels, but he said nothing more about the incident. What is striking is the lack of mementos from his beloved 118th Pennsylvania. Smith did save a piece of a canvas from his shelter tent, but that is the only recorded item connected to his daily experiences in the ranks—a shocking fact, since he felt an incredible bond with his comrades.40

One curious item in Smith’s collection was a Confederate letter found at Jettersville, a town located along Lee’s retreat route to Appomattox. Smith offered a pithy summary of the letter for his mother: “The Reb writes to a friend that he is afraid that this Company will have to go to the front and fight and he don’t seem to like that. He don’t know what soldiers enlist for.” In his own letter, Smith scoffed at this rebel soldier—not because he fought for the Southern cause but because he did not live by the soldier’s universal calling to fight. The respect that Smith typically accorded to the enemy grew out of his experience around Petersburg, where he routinely fraternized

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with Lee’s men to trade for Southern stationery, songs, and even buttons. His face-to-face interactions with Southern soldiers might explain why he became such a committed collector of all things Confederate. Smith’s Confederate mementos speak to his empathy for the enemy as fellow soldiers who happened to fight on the wrong side. His collection gets to the pulse of a political moderation rooted in Smith’s commitment to union. Such a position helped encourage sympathy for the very men who had been trying to kill him for four years.  

Smith’s exceptional documentation of material culture and his rich letters to his mother sustain such an argument. What if the correspondence did not exist? What interpretive value would his collection possess? While an absence of evidence would certainly close off some lines of inquiry, not all would be lost. This “what if” offers an important reminder that when working with material culture, it is crucial to keep the focus on objects as tools of historical action and not just as mundane things that reflect beliefs. We would do well to remember historian Sara Pennell’s warning that to appreciate the full significance of objects, we must recognize that texts cannot always account for the knowledge and emotions inextricably tied to the materiality of the objects themselves. The skeletal remains gathered by Sherman’s veterans at Chancellorsville, for instance, embodied the physical sacrifice of departed comrades in ways that language could never capture. Rotting bones of men who had died for their country, scattered carelessly across the ground and denied a proper burial, darkened the mood of Sherman’s men toward their former enemies and jeopardized the spirit of reconciliation that came from the terms at Appomattox.

The material artifacts associated with Union victory and Confederate defeat reaffirms James Deetz’s argument in his influential *In Small Things Forgotten* that commonplace objects are pregnant with ideological, emotional, and metaphorical power. The physical touch of surrendering a musket, a shard from the Appomattox apple tree, or a piece of a rebel banner cracked open the emotional world of soldiers at the very moment they were leaving a life of killing and destruction. The material culture of defeat does not call into question long-established views about the psychological turmoil of defeat for white Southern men. The desire of Lee’s veterans to have a physical reminder of their time in the ranks, however, shows that not all ran away from the memories of war in shame. Ex-Confederates turned to the things of war to confirm their standing as men of honor. Keepsakes such as shreds of battle flags, sidearms, swords, parole passes, and even muskets offered incontestable evidence of having passed through the blood ritual of battle. What little they carried home was not necessarily a source of embar-

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rassment for ex-Confederates, who thought their shoddy physical appearance conveyed their nobility in defeat.43

Confederate relics collected at the end of the war served many purposes, but they were more than nostalgic signposts that led to a harmless stroll down memory lane or containers of memories. They could shape behavior, filter perceptions, and serve as conductors of action. The souvenirs of soldiering—as seen in the example of John Chamberlayne—could free the imaginations of former rebels to roam in the dark and dangerous world of reactionary politics during Reconstruction. A Confederate musket over the mantle or a cavalry saber unsheathed during a town parade could inspire feelings of white solidarity in violent acts against African Americans. It is easy to lose sight of the agency that seemingly harmless war relics possessed, since these same mundane objects had acted as peacemakers during the surrender at Appomattox, where a spirit of conciliation prevailed among bitter enemies who had survived four years of cruel and constant death.

Notes

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6. On Confederates who were in Appomattox denial, see Jason Phillips, Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility (Athens: University of Georgia Press), especially chapter 5.

7. The transition into veteranhood has been explored in rich and innovative ways


17. John H. Chamberlayne to Sally Grattan, 1 August 1865.


19. My insights on General Orders No. 9 draw from the conclusions of Varon, Appomattox, chapter 3. For the quote, see p. 70.

20. Email correspondence with Patrick Schroeder, Appomattox Court House National

21. The anecdotes from Perry and Roller are taken directly from Varon, *Appomattox*, 104-5.


23. Joshua L. Chamberlain to Sarah B. Chamberlain, 13 April 1865, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain Collection, George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine (hereafter cited as BC).


25. Joshua L. Chamberlain to Sarah B. Chamberlain, 13 April 1865, Chamberlain Collection, BC.

26. John Smith to his mother, 28 April 1865, John Smith Papers, PHS.

27. Smith to his mother, 28 April 1865.

28. Smith to his mother, 28 April 1865.


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36. John Smith to his mother, 8 May 1865, John Smith Papers, PHS.

37. Smith to his mother, 8 May 1865. An excellent account on the Grand Review can be found in Gallagher's Union War, especially chapter 1.

38. John Smith to his mother, 13 June 1865, John Smith Papers, PHS.

39. John Smith to his mother, 2 July 1865, John Smith Papers, PHS.

40. For an incisive analysis of soldier material culture, see Nelson, Ruin Nation, 228–39. Brian Jordan offers useful insights into the ways that Union veterans used material culture and visits to the battlefield to convey their understanding of the war. See his Marching Home, 95–102.

41. On the ways that material culture conveyed the sentiment of union among Northern soldiers, see Gallagher, Union War, 54–60. John Smith to his mother, 2 June 1865, John Smith Papers, PHS.
