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Getting In Touch with the Civil War: An Interview with Jason Phillips

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Abstract

Today we are speaking with Jason Phillips, Eberly Family Professor of Civil War Studies at West Virginia University. He is the author of *Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future* (Oxford University Press, 2018), *Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility* (University of Georgia Press, 2007), and the editor of *Storytelling, History, and the Postmodern South* (Louisiana State University Press, 2013). His current research explores the material culture of Civil War America. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Getting In Touch with the Civil War: An Interview with Jason Phillips

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2019 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Jason Phillips, Eberly Family Professor of Civil War Studies at West Virginia University. He is the author of [Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future](#) (Oxford University Press, 2018), [Diehard Rebels: The Confederate Culture of Invincibility](#) (University of Georgia Press, 2007), and the editor of [Storytelling, History, and the Postmodern South](#) (Louisiana State University Press, 2013). His current research explores the material culture of Civil War America.



Dr. Jason Phillips

CWI: What windows into the long Civil War era does material culture open for us? How can material culture complement, or challenge, the knowledge that we can mine from more traditional elements of the historical record, such as primary source documents?

PHILLIPS: Studying material culture puts us in touch with Civil War Americans and their world in unique ways. The conflict and its aftermath created, circulated, and destroyed a vast material world of possessions, resources, buildings, and other things that people cherished, stole, lost, gave, or saved, because those objects signified their lives and sacrifices. When we visit museums and gaze at Civil War artifacts, we encounter these things. Each of them has a story to tell, a narrative that can be as compelling and human as any diary or letter. Of course, things cannot speak for themselves; their stories are not as forthcoming as documents. So we ask them questions. If we're interpreting a bowie knife for example, where and how was it made, what was its purpose and design, who owned it, was it perhaps a gift or a battle trophy, did someone pose for a picture with it and why, where was it carried, what history did it "witness," why was it preserved, and what did it mean to its owners? Answering these questions deepens our understanding of Civil War America by teaching us how people related to their physical surroundings, how they valued personal objects, and how they used the material world to forge relationships, express ideals, and fight enemies. These insights remind us that the Civil War was more than a clash of cultures and causes. It was a physical fight over tangible things.

CWI: What role has material culture played in your own personal research of the Civil War era?

PHILLIPS: My new book, *Looming Civil War: How Nineteenth-Century Americans Imagined the Future* illuminates the material culture of Civil War America by studying things that people gathered and interpreted as portents of the coming conflict. When I started this project, I assumed visions of the future rested upon intangible fantasies or abstract fears. What could be more immaterial than the future? But as I started to research how Americans thought about the looming war, I learned that popular visions of the future relied upon material foundations. Worrying about and contending for real things, especially weapons including knives, pikes, and rifles, grounded Americans who fixated on tangible futures. Opposing sides of the sectional crisis stole and showcased their enemies' weapons to disarm and unman the opposition and to prove their opponents' malicious designs for the future. Diverse people coveted these weapons as omens and relics of the coming war. In the process, antebellum groups grasped these things to prove their prophecies of the looming conflict, just as postwar groups relied on historical artifacts and monuments to substantiate their memories of the past war.



One of John Brown's pikes
(courtesy the Smithsonian)

CWI: Can you give us a preview of your upcoming conference talk on John Brown's pikes?

PHILLIPS: John Brown brought almost a thousand pikes to Harpers Ferry, intending to circulate them to the slaves that he expected would gather and fight for his cause. When that army did not materialize and Brown's attack failed, diverse Americans scrambled to acquire the pikes as historical artifacts, battle trophies, and portents of a looming civil war. As my research on the pikes deepened and I asked questions about them, I uncovered a much bigger story that began years before Harpers Ferry and continued long after Brown's death. In each chapter of this larger saga, some form of the pike foretold a different kind of looming conflict—a frontier war, a class war, a race war, and a revolution—depending on who possessed it when and where. This tale contains a host of characters who encountered the pikes, some of them famous folks like J.E.B. Stuart and P.T. Barnum and others obscure but equally fascinating.