

A Strange Fascination Led me Thither: Civil War Relics and the Weakness of Words

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Major Sullivan Ballou's final letter to home, penned to his wife Sarah a week before Bull Run, has become something of a Civil War chestnut. Though he had written earlier that morning, when darkness overcame camp Ballou felt "impelled to write a few lines." He unconvincingly assured Sarah that something "whispered" to him that he would survive the anticipated battle. But forebodings soon crowded out hope. He apparently had heard other whispers. If he should fall on the field, Ballou begged and consoled her, "do not my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name." At the letter's sentimental climax, Ballou promised that if he should die he would return as a spirit to fan the cool breeze across her "throbbing temples." "Do not morn me dead" he continued, "for we shall meet again."

In his extraordinarily popular documentary, *The Civil War*, Ken Burns hooked the hearts of millions with Ballou's words, dedicating an entire segment to the soldier's moving swansong. The use of this moving letter exemplifies what Burns calls "emotional archeology" where the deeper we dig into the Civil War the more we find psychic remains that evoke our own buried emotions.ⁱ What fated this letter to be sifted and cherished over millions of others is Major Ballou's death at Bull Run a week after he wrote it. What might have been merely one of many purple letters from a New England soldier, filled with pre-battle jitters, instead became (from our end at least) a prophetic manuscript in tune with the cosmos and the real costs of the war. Ballou's pledge to spill his blood to pay down the debt owed to the heroic generation of 1776, his premonition of his own death and the haunting theme of unfinished love make this and similar sources from the war irresistible. Though rarely as rich, a similar nectar of pathos, romantic love and prophecy run throughout the war's surviving manuscripts.

For anyone who studies the Civil War era, words—for good reason—have a sort of magical pull. The crisis over slavery produced more than a few antebellum Ciceros. And while spellbinding rhetoric from folks like Stephen Douglas, John Calhoun, Daniel Webster, George Fitzhugh, Henry Clay, Frederick Douglass, and William Lloyd Garrison edged the nation toward war, the rising standard of rhetorical gifts helped pave the way for an upstart Republican who could craft plain-folk language with the sting and beauty of Dante. And when words soon gave way to black powder, Lincoln regularly disarmed his critics, shifted the war's course and lent meaning to massive death with exquisite proclamations, speeches, and eulogies. Meanwhile, Americans devoured the papers with ferocious appetite. And while editors ramped up the fustian, plain folk Americans, farmers, slaves, women, men and children—to a level scholars have failed to appreciate—filled hundreds of millions of sheets of paper with words. The Civil War was the apotheosis of American letter and journal writing.ⁱⁱ

With this embarrassment of archival riches it's tempting to think that by burrowing further into the heaps of letters, newspapers and speeches, historians will inch their way closer to some grand narrative that captures the "real war." There is something self-defeating in all of this, however. The act of war, after all, means that words have fallen short; that is, words have both incited and failed those who've chosen war over debate. Any "call to arms" is paradoxical in that it depends on rhetoric to convince folks of the futility of more talk. War, the most brutal kind of persuasion, wins arguments—not by debate—but by disfiguring limbs and littering fields with silenced bodies.ⁱⁱⁱ Like Ballou, soldiers who feared they would soon be silenced through death, hurried off letters, sometimes several before a looming battle, begging their loved ones to respond in kind. Anyone who has read war letters and diaries knows how the mail tormented soldiers who could never quite get enough: their lovers wrote too formally, too vaguely about home life, or the health of children, too infrequently, too briefly. Perhaps just as bad as getting no letter, was reading a missive that ended too abruptly, or knowing that letters had been lost in delivery.

The flood of Civil War writing did something notable to language—leaving it watered down, abundant yet elusive. No matter how rich to our taste—the stilted prose that abounded during the war rarely sated Americans’ desires. Everywhere, if we look for it, we find Americans—civilians, nurses, politicians, and especially soldiers—writing profusely yet despairing of the impotence of language. In his strangely brief address at Gettysburg (which followed a two-hour oration) Lincoln said that posterity would “little note, nor long remember what we say here.”^{iv} Because he was flat wrong about what future generations would remember, it is hard to take Lincoln’s claim at face value. Perhaps, though, our quest to understand the war primarily through the lilt of words prevents us from hearing what amounts to a disclaimer about language. Words alone, Lincoln intimated, could not hallow or consecrate a place that had already been transformed by battle and the presence of soldiers’ mute corpses. After clashes like Gettysburg letters consistently confessed how words failed to express what was seen, felt, tasted, smelled during battle.^v Typical is one soldier’s letter to his parents after Bull Run: “I hope to God I will never see another such a time....I have not power to describe the scene. It beggars all description.” Thirty years before he became President the soldier James Garfield wandered through the death scenes following the battle of Shiloh, writing his wife soon after that he could “never describe” what he called the “unwritten and unutterable horrors of the scene of carnage.”^{vi} After Gettysburg a young girl wrote about what she witnessed during the days surrounding the battle. Dashing off a letter “so long my hand trembles,” she wrote, “I scarcely know how to begin, so many things have happened and in so short a time that I have gotten things confused. It seems more like a dream than reality.” Incapable of even conveying the concussive thump of single fired cannon she asserted with confidence that “no one who has never heard it can form any idea how terrible it is.”^{vii} A year before he took a bullet to the head at Cold Harbor one Wisconsin colonel wrote about Gettysburg that a full account of the battle would never, “can never, be made.” No single soldier could take it all in, let alone capture it with a narrative. Instead, he fretted, some dubious history would be written by randomly picking from

“the chaos of trash and falsehood that the newspapers hold, out of the disjointed mass of reports, out of the traditions and tales that come down from the field.”^{viii} The sense of futility is repeated everywhere in letters, memoirs, and news reports: “No pen can describe”; “the most gifted writer could not give the slightest shadow”; “no tongue can convey.” Soon into the war, expressing how one lacked words became its own cliché. That is, soldiers and others quickly found themselves unable to convey their inability to convey the experience of war.

In his *Monuments at Gettysburg*, J. Howard Wert—two decades after the battle—continued to wrestle with his desire to communicate what he experienced during and after the conflict. Throughout the guidebook, (which was part narrative, part tour of the battle’s monuments) Wert insisted again and again in the war’s ineffability. Attempting to summarize the regimental movements at the Peach Orchard, for example, Wert admitted that it was “almost impossible” to present the action of that “death dealing afternoon” within the limits of an ordinary book.^{ix} Though he claimed his pen was powerless, Wert depicted Gettysburg as a phantasmagoric hell that confounded the senses with putrid smells, “strange, unearthly noises,” and the open air filled with “shattered fragments of human bodies.”^x When his narrative reached the “whirlpool” of the battle known as the Wheatfield, Wert warned his readers that the “repulsive sights of every portion of the battleground were intensified to a degree which no words can hope to adequately portray.” Like so many of his comrades, Wert blended horror and hyperbole, evoking images of crimson streams, sod that when pressed by heels “oozed forth blood,” and so many dying and dead bodies that the surviving had to walk on top of bodies.^{xi}

Monuments provided a virtual tour of the nearly one hundred stone monuments that veterans’ and women’s clubs and organizations had erected since the summer of 1863. Throughout, Wert toggles wildly between sensitive descriptions of stone work of obelisks in the 1880s, to graphic, if exaggerated, recollections of battles of the past. For Wert granite served as a kind of portal between the present and the violent past. Alternating sections, for example, bring his readers to imagine a

masterfully crafted monument set on an idyllic knoll, twenty years removed from the war, and then suddenly into the teeth of combat. Wert seemed to think that the power of the monuments to evoke the past was something most visitors sensed. That is, many folks found life in the chiseled stone. After drawing attention to one monument graced with a granite knapsack and rolled blanket, Wert wrote that what “especially attracts” the attention of visitors, particularly veterans, was the stoneworkers’ use of “appropriate and suggestive military accoutrements.” “Mute and motionless,” as Wert described them, these common objects of the war “yet seem to speak” of “things of life.” Though faces of commanders, poetic descriptions and tributes had been chiseled into stone, it was these humdrum, perfectly still shapes of cannon balls, knapsacks, artillery boxes, kepi hats, swords, canteens—that somehow spoke to the living.^{xii} For Wert, at least, the basic military accoutrements, scattered amid the dying and dead, spoke to his own living soul when in 1863 he toured the fields during and after the battle.

Half way through the tour, Wert adds a strange twist to *Monuments*. After journeying with his readers to a high ridge and reflecting upon a monument erected there, Wert gets swept away by a nightmarish memory of all the death struggles that took place below. The reader learns that a knoll a short distance off reminds Wert how swollen bodies of dead Confederates had partly damned a stream nearby creating great ponds. But though his readers already know that Wert did not play a typical military role in battle, they do not know yet how the author came to know this death scene so intimately. “The writer,” Wert for the first time confesses about himself, “wandered over these fields immediately after the fierce strife had ceased,” witnessing “death in its ghastliest and most abhorrent forms, everywhere. Festering corpses at every step”—scads of partly buried cadavers, many more left to rot or to be gnawed on by swine. Much of the vast area below, Wert tells his readers, was a “vast hideous charnel house,” with the dead sometimes amounting to a “few mutilated fragments and pieces of flesh.” In trying to describe the indescribable, Wert demurs as did millions of soldiers, that “words have lost their power and language is weak.” The best attempts

at describing battle experience, he goes on, fail to capture “the full intensity of both splendor and horror.” “It must be seen and experienced to be understood.” But if no wordsmith has every truthfully depicted battle, Wert wondered, “how must be the failure to describe the field of conflict when the passionate strife has ceased”—once the pomp and drama have petered out, leaving only the “horrible remains in its ghastliest and most terrible forms.” In other words, through his meditation on various monuments, and visiting parts of the field, Wert had seemingly been transported to death scenes he still could not describe.

Monuments leads the reader to believe that these dim, indescribable scenes came to Wert as he actually climbed to this marker on the crest, gazed at the ravines below, and remembered the carnage. But here, roughly halfway through the book, Wert reveals to his readers that it wasn’t an actual landscape, or even the monuments (with their chiseled army rifles or knapsacks that “seemed to speak”) that brought the hellish memories rushing back. It wasn’t his diary, war letters, or reminiscing with comrades that collapsed the distance between the past and present. Instead, Wert reveals that the grim visions were called forth by dozens of relics that he had gathered long ago from the bloody ground. “As these lines are penned,” he reveals, from the walls around, cartridge box and cap-box, bayonet and sword, canteen and canister, with a hundred other relics gleaned twenty-three years ago from the fields and woods we are now traversing, look mutely down upon the writer and vividly recall the sorrowful appearance of the bloated and blackened dead that lay close beside^{xiii}

In the summer of 1863 the Union army hired Wert, a 22-year-old Gettysburg local, as a special government scout, hoping his intimate knowledge of the area would aid the Union in thwarting Confederates’ penetration in the North. It isn’t clear how Wert fulfilled these duties, but immediately after the battle, if not during, he began what he called his “daily rounds”—wandering over the battlefields and by the field hospitals.^{xiv} Sometime during his rounds, Wert began touching, handling, and pocketing items from the fields. Wert’s father and grandfather had accumulated

various artifacts and documents pertaining to the American Revolution and the Wert family in general. Perhaps young Wert imagined his activities as a forward looking continuation of the kind of cultural preservation and commemoration that antebellum Americans increasingly engaged in, especially with relics and objects pertaining to the Revolutionary struggle.^{xv} But soon Wert's interests consumed him.

Why Wert picked through the carnage and gathered items from the hellish scenes, he did not tell us. What pushed him to inspect the remains of what he frequently described as ghastly we can only guess. "Immediately after" the engagement at Culp's Hill, for example Wert found tiny shattered pieces of a daguerreotype mingled with the "mangled shreds of a soldier." Wert suspected he found a shredded image of a wife or some loved one, probably held in the breast pocket of a soldier until a shell ripped into his body. Sympathizing over the aching heart of a wife or mother Wert picked through the scrambled breast of a dead man, pocketing "a couple of those fragments."^{xvi} Although rare, we know that troops or burial teams occasionally found a killed soldier in the field, holding before his lifeless eyes a picture of his lover or children, clasped in stiff hands.^{xvii} But over the following days and weeks Wert gathered so many daguerreotypes and photographs that he had enough images of small children alone to fill a small mahogany box.^{xviii}

During the battle soldiers from a Pennsylvania regiment were burned alive in a barn. Not long after the embers cooled, Wert scavenged through the rubble, taking away fragments of a US belt buckle and parts of a musket.^{xix} At Culp's Hill he bagged hundreds of flattened bullets. Similar to other contemporary descriptions of the aftermath of battle, Wert drew attention to the "thick littered debris" scattered with the blood and festering corpses: "broken muskets and soiled bayonets, shattered caissons and blood defiled clothing, trodden cartridge boxes and splintered swords, rifled knapsacks and battered canteens."^{xx} Wert never admitted to "rifling" through knapsacks and pants pockets, or to contributing to the confusing litter; but he did testify to the "thousands" of civilians at his side—from all corners of the Union who swarmed the fields to locate,

often dig up, the body of a son or husband. These grieving souls desperately scoured the hospitals and battlefields hoping to identify their dead—occasionally depending on the fragments of a blouse, a wedding ring, cartes de visite, a customized sword—the same kinds of objects, in other words, that Wert hunted daily.^{xxi} That is, many thousands besides Wert hunted—relic seekers, scavengers, impoverished farmers, speculators, and curious citizens.

We know a great deal about what happened during the Civil War from the scads of narratives that follow the gun smoke of battles. Thanks to more recent scholarship, we also know a good deal about how Americans, years and often decades later, came to remember those battles and assign meaning to the war through the reburial of bodies, the rise of veterans' associations and the memorializing of war with granite, national reunions, maudlin poetry and parades. The recent boom in memory studies has been fruitful in tying the legacy of the war to the last four decades of the nineteenth century (especially through material culture); but by and large the literature depicts war memory as something that emerges only with the rise of formal organizations that contested the war's meaning. In doing so, it fails to trace war memory back to its earliest, inchoate beginnings, back to memory's most delicate and seminal point of departure when just after bone-jarring experience soldiers and civilians began piecing together the meaning of something that for them was a holocaust of the senses. No doubt, some of the most critical formation of war memory happened when, right after battle, soldiers imposed a narrative on their experiences in letters to loved ones. But these letters brimmed with confessions that words could never suffice. And civilians read, over and again, that millions of their sons and husbands now stood on the other side of an emotional and experiential gulf. No wonder then, that because so much talk about the war admitted to merely buzzing about but never capturing what had to be experienced through the senses, Americans, like Wert, came to believe that they could somehow capture its essence by holding small objects, gathered just after battle, in the palms of their hands.

A week after Gettysburg, Sarah Broadhead wrote in her journal, after turning away many strangers seeking out beds in her home (which already overflowed with wounded soldiers), that she could not fathom how her little town could hold the throngs who for “various motives, visit the battlefield.”^{xxii} Broadhead rightly perceived that “various motives” drew Americans to the charnel house. No doubt, many were thieves and speculators. One veteran recalled how at the base of Little Round Top maggot-filled corpses lay everywhere, “nearly all of them” with their “pockets turned inside out showing that human ghouls had here robbed the dead.”^{xxiii} Another early witness at Gettysburg noted how the rotting dead lay with pockets turned or slit open for quicker access. He believed that burial teams had spent more time ferreting for rings and money than interring the dead.^{xxiv} Less than a week after the battle’s end a New York paper reported that “all over the field are numerous men from the country, engaged in gathering whatever is of value. A few are merely in search for relics, but most of them are bearing away any and everything that they consider of pecuniary value.” In one orchard the reporter discovered men cutting off the harness from a bloated horse; others gathering blankets—others muskets.^{xxv} This went down, of course, while locals read published pleas in town papers from the US Sanitary Commission begging for donations of food, blankets and sheets. Locals also read published warnings from the acting Provost Marshal who threatened to arrest and punish “Citizens visiting the battle-field” who walked off with government property.^{xxvi} Perhaps aiming to prick consciences, this same local paper printed the full letter from a soldier who just before expiring at Fredericksburg wrote his wife to tell her, among other things, that his portfolio, one hundred dollars, his watch, jack knife and canteen had all been filched by Alabama soldiers, probably as he writhed in death agony. The dying husband only hoped that his regimental doctor could find and sell the soldier’s horse, saddle and blankets—and hopefully send the money to his wife. But the report left readers to wonder not only if his blankets

and saddle had been carried off, but if the widowed woman ever laid eyes on this original letter.

The report only stated that this “touching” missive was “found” on the soldier’s person.^{xxvii}

Who found it? A reporter, the soldier’s father, a comrade, a ghoul, a relic hunter? This confusion was born out of the fact that all kinds of folks converged after battles, contesting these small objects that had pecuniary, emotional, familial, regimental, spiritual, patriotic values. These elusive, if conflicting, values and the quest for meaning drew people into these death scenes. They did not come out of caprice, or on a whim. If they did, they left the field thinking like one soldier who wrote in his journal: “May God spare me from ever witnessing another such a scene...I will never again go over a battle-field from mere curiosity, before the dead are buried.”^{xxviii} Soon after Gettysburg many civilians dealt with the stench by walking about with open bottles of peppermint and pennyroyal. Most accounts depict similarly gruesome scenes: bloated corpses ready to burst “asunder” from the building pressure of “foul gases and vapors,” men on burial duty dropping to their knees to vomit “profusely”; “corruption” flowing the corners of discolored mouths.^{xxix} And for those who wandered the fields before flesh began rotting, their descriptions attest to a different kind of hell: eerie nights filled with moaning, wounded soldiers gibbering insanely; terrorizing cries for loved ones, pleas for water or for someone to end the suffering; fresh blood on rocks and leaves; the bodily remains of soldiers recently “brained” by the end of a rifle or stones, or disemboweled by a shell.^{xxx} Yet people came in droves. As a Dartmouth graduate and Union officer, Frank Haskell, reported only two days after he survived the battle, he “could not repress the desire or omit the opportunity to see again where the battle had been.” Though Haskell had fought and watched comrades die there three days earlier, he found himself pacing toward the place where the gunners laid into Pickett’s Division: “a strange fascination,” he wrote, “led me thither.”^{xxxi}

Strange fascination led many, many more. Only two sunrises after the battle ceased almost everything of value especially “small arms and the accoutrements” had been carried away, leaving the scattered debris of empty knapsacks, “bruised” canteens and shreds of clothing. Haskell noted

how one could use the debris to know “where the fight had been hottest.” Venting some of his frustration about civilians trespassing hallowed, bloodied ground, Haskell confessed irritation with the “numbers of civilians and boys, and some girls even, curiously loitering about the field, and their faces show not sadness or horror, but only staring wonder or smirking curiosity.” They told Haskell that they were there for mementos, but Haskell guessed by the gathered firearms and untorn blankets that they had profit on the brain. “Of course,” Haskell continued, “there was not the slightest objection to their taking anything they could find now; but their manner of doing it was the objectionable thing.”^{xxxii}

A young boy, Albertus McCreary, walked the fields where he found a dying soldier who, in exchange for water, gave young McCreary a hammered coin, a relic he said he found at Fredericksburg. Wandering inside of an abandoned home the boy encountered the still body of a young Rebel soldier who lay with a tempting medal pinned to his breast. The boy hesitated and finally resisted, figuring that that this potential relic would lead to the body’s identification. With his chums McCreary combed the fields for deposits of bullets, and pried open the cap-ends to explosive shells to sell the lead to unnamed adults for thirteen cents a pound. Perhaps they sold the relics to a man that one witness recalled “came along from New York a few days after the battle and told the children he would buy any relics they could pick up.”^{xxxiii} As the boys scoured the fields, an exploding shell killed McCreary’s own schoolmate, a fate that papers reported about other men and children who gathered firearms and explosive relics.^{xxxiv}

The children’s curiosity overlapped with mounting demand from the home front. “Visitors soon began to come to see the battlefield,” he recalled, “and all wanted relics.”

We were always on the lookout for bullets and pieces of shell, in fact anything that could be easily handled to sell to them. We found that a piece of tree with a bullet embedded in it was a great prize and a good seller. Every boy went out with a hatchet to chop

pieces from the trees in which bullets had lodged....Lamps were made of round shells.

The caps were taken out, a tube for a wick was placed in them, and the shell was fastened to a square block of wood, thus making a very useful and convenient relic^{xxxv}

Soon after getting word of the conflict in a town some hundred miles from Gettysburg, Reverend Schantz joined several other men on an eleven hour wagon ride to administer to the wounded. Besides making the rounds to makeshift hospitals Schantz and his party wandered the fields of destruction, gathering relics as they went. He discovered a pair of pantaloons and after digging in the pockets a little silver coin and a soldier's medal. On the return home Schantz's party passed "many men" racing toward the battle field, braving "great dangers" like fording swollen streams in order to get there as soon as possible. Posted soldiers halted Schantz's party and others, inspecting departing wagons "to learn whether any of the relics carried from the battle field were such as ought to be taken" back from the civilians, suggesting that while all wagons returned with relics, some relics, like firearms were forbidden. One of the pastor's party hid a rifle in the wagon, while a farmer held solid shot wrapped in a bandana. Schantz trucked with him a bible with its cover ripped off, a broken lock of a musket and a "bayonet that was greatly bent by hard use." He also carried with him an envelope, pierced by a bullet that he eventually—perhaps after his conscience pricked him—mailed to the unknown woman addressed on it.^{xxxvi}

In Chambersburg, following the news of Lee's retreat, so many people rushed to the town of Gettysburg, that Jacob Hoke could not find a conveyance. Instead he and others walked for several hours. Immediately after securing a place to sleep his party "sauntered out to see whatever" they could before sunset. Hoke had already witnessed similarly macabre scenes at South Mountain, but his uninitiated companions were "shocked and horrified." In the early hours of the next morn, they headed for Culp's Hill where they found a leg severed from the body by a shell. Nearby somebody found part of a pocket Bible that had been ripped into two by a missile. They compared the jagged

tears of the leg flesh with the pages in the Bible, agreeing that the same shell tore through them. They discovered a rebel song inscribed in the final pages. The party then divided the blood-stained pages among themselves. Hoke had so many that he later gave some to a friend who sold them at a New York Sanitary Commission Fair where citizens regularly paid high dollar for relics and mementoes from the war still raging. By the midday Hoke's team began its several hour walk home, "bringing with us, as did almost everyone else who visited the field, some relic."^{xxxvii}

The hours and days following Gettysburg mirrored what happened throughout the war. Comrades, battlefield vultures, wives, fathers, and relic hunters flocked to the immediate aftermath, sifting through human debris in hopes of obtaining small, precious talismans, mementoes, relics and items containing magical, emotional and monetary values. In less than two weeks after Bull Run, a Virginia paper reported that "of relics of the battle, already but few remain. The field has been searched and gleaned by daily crowds of visitors seeking mementoes." After an "extensive ramble" the correspondent found little more than a few bullets and some bomb fragments, adding that civilians had begun cutting canes from surrounding trees, a relic "considerably in demand." Two months later a South Carolina correspondent reported his visit to the "the famous field of Manassas Plains," noting that the "Free Negro House" where "the old woman lost her life" had been stripped of its laths and weather boarding due to the "ridiculous custom of gathering relics." A cedar stake that had been erected to mark the place where General Bee fell had been whittled "pretty vigorously" down to just a few inches; the rocks surrounding the whittled stump, chipped and scattered by individuals looking to bring home a piece of the war in their pockets.^{xxxviii} And at the end of the war a Boston paper railed that "curiosity hunters are as destructive as locusts. Woe to the tree under which, the stump on which, or the house in which any memorable event of the late war has occurred. Every thing within hailing distance will be, if it has not already been, gobbled up by these relentless hunters of relics."^{xxxix}

Soldiers hacked into pieces tables upon which treaties had been signed—carrying them off; after Lee’s surrender in Appomattox officers fleeced the parlor’s furniture and decorations; soldiers and civilians found or searched in bloodied uniforms for letters from strangers, reading them, sometimes sending them home as mementos; a mourning father carried the bullet that killed his son in his pocket; prisoners of war carved knickknacks from bone or gutta-percha and sold them to eager civilians. Soldiers carved rings and jewelry from the bones of a dead enemy and sent them back home to lovers.^{xi} So much did the quest for these material objects consume the minds of soldiers, that Braxton Bragg, in his official report of Shiloh, where he laid out the various reasons that prevented his troops from clear victory, blamed the hunt for spoils especially in the enemy’s abandoned camps, as a factor that “served to delay and greatly demoralize” the men.^{xii} For Civil War Americans, matter intensely mattered. The relics and mementoes that from the late nineteenth century to the present have fed antiquarian hunger for “old stuff,” or the romanticizing of the Civil War, or provided time-travel devices for re-enactors—were not gathered for the sake of museum curators, or antique collectors, but instead for intense immediate psychological and spiritual needs of those who gathered them. In the end, even money-crazed vultures depended on the desire of workaday Americans to display these objects on their mantles and tables, or wear breastpins carved in death prison on their lapels.^{xiii}

Given that northern and southern armies and both home fronts manifested intense desire for war artifacts it is odd that Civil War historians have mostly steered clear from the boom in material culture studies of the last three or four decades. Perhaps it has been a self-conscious attempt to distance “serious” scholarship from the quaint (if mildly embarrassing) zeal of modern-day bullet collectors and hobbyists. When objects *have* been taken seriously it’s often in the service of understanding, for example, how the rifled musket or other changes in firepower or war technologies altered the way armies fought.^{xiiii} But a history of war’s “things” can do more. Borrowing from anthropologists and folklorists, scholars of material culture insist that objects

made, modified, traded or desired, directly or indirectly reflect fundamental belief patterns of individuals and the larger society—so fundamental that these beliefs are rarely spoken or written.

^{xliv} Artifacts allow us to glimpse into past people’s most basic “way of knowing”—what one scholar has called their “sensory thinking.” “We have been so preoccupied with words,” this scholar warned fellow historians, “that we have neglected things.”^{xlv} An agricultural historian put it this way: historians “seem to believe almost anything as long as it is not three-dimensional.”^{xlvi}

Some material culture enthusiasts have abandoned reason, suggesting that the written word obfuscates more than it reveals, and that by approaching artifacts through our senses—touching, seeing them—we can commune with people of the past through our and their sensory thinking. As if rubbing my hands along the barrel of a gun speaks to me the same way it would have for John Dillinger.^{xlvii}

Major Ballou’s beautiful words tempt us to forget that his letter was, in fact, three dimensional. And if we are to tell an unvarnished story of Ballou’s demise, we can’t avoid these other dimensions. In fact, Ballou’s famous letter was not found among the many letters safeguarded by Sarah Ballou. There are copies of it, but none in Ballou’s hand. It’s possible, though I think unlikely, that Ballou never wrote this letter at all. That it was an attempt to fill the void of war with words. Perhaps relatives or even Sarah herself penned what they believed Ballou would have written if he only knew it was his last missive. It is much more likely, though, that Sarah took this letter with her to her grave. If she did, it was because the letter’s smell, its creases, edges and texture (which changed over time with the oil of her own hands)--mattered as much as the words themselves. People remember words, but they cling to objects. About nine months after Ballou’s death the Governor of Rhode Island and a large team scoured the Bull Run battlefield for officers’ graves, hoping to bring the heroes’ bodies back home. To their shock and horror they learned from locals (mostly African Americans) that rebel soldiers had dug up Ballou, decapitated the corpse, and tossed it in a fire to

burn off the flesh. One black woman testified that in order to avoid the stench of burning flesh, soldiers often boiled the flesh from corpses. Then they sawed off various bones, carving them into rings or jewelry, or crafting shinbones into drumsticks. She recalled one soldier swearing that on his wedding day he would press his lips to his prized relic--a Yankee's skull—and from it drink brandy. The Governor's party settled for Ballou's blanket, some clothes found in a nearby river, and a lock of hair that one black woman somehow salvaged for the sake of the dead soldier's family. What Americans said and wrote during the Civil War is the best thing we've got for writing their history. But until we reckon with the symbolic and spiritual power of things our narratives will paper over the confusion, skimp on the dimensions of pain and doubt, and flatten the intense rage and sorrow.

ⁱ Ken Burns's nine-part documentary, *The Civil War*, drew in some forty million viewers when it debuted on public television in September 1990; For a description of the ways in which Burns's use of this letter unleashed a storm of emotion and curiosity, see: Robin Young, *For Liberty & Love: The Untold Story of Major Sullivan Ballou & His Famous Love Letter* (New York, 2006), xxviii-xxxiii.

ⁱⁱ For the degree to which the many papers informed the secession crisis and the war's execution, see: David S. Sachsman, S. Kitrell Rushing, and Debra Reddin van Tuyl, eds., *The Civil War and the Press* (New Brunswick, 2000); Edward Ayers, "What Caused the Civil War?" in Edward Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections of the South and Southern History* (New York, 2005), esp, 137-42. There is no work to my knowledge that assesses the magnitude and cultural impact of letter writing during the war. See, Michael DeGruccio, "For I Shall Write Anyway" -----XXXXXX

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on the ways in which disfiguring bodies is central to war and legitimating new regimes, see: Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); XXX contact Doug Archer to verify the relevant literature.

^{iv} Lincoln, Abraham. Fehrenbacher, Don Edward and Alfred Whital Stern Collection of Lincolniana (Library of Congress), *Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (New York, 1989), 536; also note how in

his Second Inaugural Address Lincoln resisted talking at length as he had done in his first address.

With the profusion of declarations and war talk he felt compelled to speak to the point. See: *Ibid*, 215-24 and 686-87.

^v Any reader who doubts this only need read a handful of war letters or memories to see how much this confession of insufficient language became a cliché—though soldiers, I believe, wrote this more out of sincerity than convention.

^{vi} James Garfield in James Lee McDonough, *Shiloh: In Hell before Night* (U of Tennessee, 1977) p213 (I have the original in my notes somewhere).

^{vii} Reflections on the Battle of Gettysburg, edited by Ralph S. Shay, Vol XIII 1963. No. 6., pp 278-84.

^{viii} John Casler, *Four Years in Stonewall Brigade*, p. 37; Frank A. Haskell, *The Battle of Gettysburg*, edited by Bruce Catton (Cambridge, YEAR?) xvii (Haskell is the one drawn to the dead bodies)

^{ix} Wert, Monuments at Gettysburg--- 131, 108-110;

^x Wert Monuments (see pages, 82 and 84 for example.

^{xi} Wert, Monuments, 99.

^{xii} Wert, Monuments, 46-8. Because the moments stood for something living, Wert betrayed his frustration that certain monuments had not been erected on the precise place where a regiment charged, or an officer died. See page 100.

^{xiii} Wert, Monuments, 109-10.

^{xiv} Wert. Lost Children

^{xv} Bruggerman _Here GW—pp. 27-8; Bruggerman argues that the revolutionary generation built very few monuments to itself, tended to look forward; Caba, Wet—Lost Children, pp 10-11. .

^{xvi} Wert, Monuments 199.

^{xvii} Humeston story

^{xviii} Wert, Caba—Lost Children, pp. 8-9. Neither Wert nor those who have written about his collection have answered how it is that Wert found all of these precious relics. While it is believable that Wert

found some of the images by or around the bodies of the dead, it is much more likely that Wert did as many of his contemporaries did: rifle through the pockets of the dead.

^{xix} Wert *Monuments*, 134.

^{xx} Wert, *Historical Souvenir*, 26, 41; Wert, *Monuments*, 109; Wert was more than a battlefield scavenger; he spent significant time around the field hospitals, particularly the “White church” close to his home where he watched men from the Iron Brigade suffer on cots. He “learned to love” these suffering soldiers. Perhaps he brought them comfort. Certainly he found more than one relic in a place where men with jewelry, pictures, and precious possessions died daily. Wert, *Monuments*, 93, 161; Within a few days of Lee’s retreat Wert helped a New York woman named Annie Roberts search for her husband and brother who had been reported dead or severely wounded. They traveled from hospital to hospital, looked over dug up bodies. See Wert, *Monuments*, 162-3.

^{xxi} Wert, *Monument* 204; A Union officer who was charged with organizing the burial teams and recovering government property—that is what was left of it—recorded in his diary that the “Swarms” of civilians who swept and plundered the area, could be traced back to the “Copperhead fraternity of Gettysburg & the country about.” Patrick, ed. Sparks, *Inside Lincoln’s Army*, 268. Provost Martial General, Marsena Patrick (Army of Potomac).

^{xxii} Sarah Broadhead, July 12 (Alexander and Slade—*Civilian Voices*, p.161)

^{xxiii} Captain Musgrave, 94. Later, this same captain transferred to the Fort Ridgely where he began hunted for and collected relics—bones, skulls, pipes--from the remains of a massacre of Indians in 1862. When “pretty ladies” visited the fort he made a point to show off his collection.

^{xxiv} Mr. Benner quoted in *Civilian Voices*, 147.

^{xxv} *New York Herald*, July 9, 1863

^{xxvi} *Adams Sentinel*, July 7, 1863 and July 14, 1863 “Help the Wounded Soldiers”; “Flags Captured at Gettysburg”; “The Death of General Barksdale”; “Special Notice”

^{xxvii} From one local paper alone we glimpse the confusion surrounding these small things. Above a report of how blood spattered flags had been captured from the field and sent to the War Department, the paper recounted to its readers how a dying Rebel officer safely placed his “large” gold watch and trinkets in the hands of a subordinate to be returned to Mississippi; *Adams Sentinel*, July 21, 1863—see “Dearest Anna”; In a report entitled “Touching Incident of the Battle-Field” readers learned that a soldier “picked up” among the “relics of the dreadful fight” a small paper with two locks of hair from attached with “Our Darlings” written below. Though the locks had probably been carried, pressed to the heart of a father, the newspaper contemplated how “strangers now posses the tender relic.” (July 21, 1863—“Touching Incident of the Battle-Field”)

^{xxviii} Brown, 27th Indiana—394-5.

^{xxix} See: Hoke, *Great Invasion*, -- Burial worker, rebel prisoner quoted in *Firestorm at Gettysburg*, 147.

^{xxx} See: Hoke, *Reminiscence of the War*, 484-5.

^{xxxi} (Haskell, *Gettysburg*, 147-8, 154)

^{xxxii} (Haskell, *Gettysburg*, 147-8)

^{xxxiii} Nathaniel Lightner quoted in *Civilian Voices* 166.

^{xxxiv} *Adams Sentinal*, The *Sentinel* also reported the death of a boy shot by his brother as they played with a gun they “picked off” the battlefield; also that Samuel Warner, a gentleman, was killed in a similar way, the gun shooting through his heart (*Adams Sentinel*-- July 7, 1863); “We have learned only of the following:”—Sam W—“Incidents of the Battle Field”); Jacob Hoke heard, but could not vouch, for talk that recalled that folks collected bullets by the bucketful selling them to dealers. See Jacob Hoke, *Reminiscence*, 173.

^{xxxv} *Gettyburg: A Boy’s Experience* (Albertus McCreary) pages 250-253.

^{xxxvi} Shay—*Reflections of the Battle of Gettysburg*, 286-301. When Schantz returned to Gettysburg later that fall, he met another minister from the region that the soldier who left behind his pants

apparently called home. Perhaps out of duty and some guilt, Schantz gave the soldier's medal to the minister to return to soldier if surviving, or the family.

^{xxxvii} Hoke, *Reminiscences*, 172-3.

^{xxxviii} October 24, 1861—Charleston Mercury, Title: "The Campaign of the Potomac Camp of Bonham's Brigade, S.C.V. Our Own Correspondent"

^{xxxix} Boston Transcript report repeated in *The Christian Recorder*, May 27, 1865—"The Gatherers of Curiosities"

^{xl} Confederate soldier John Casler wrote about war prison that, "those who had no friends to send them money were always making rings, breastpins, fans, watch-chains, etc., out of gutta-percha, and put silver and gold sets in them. It was like a manufactory every day; and we could sell them to the guards and they would sell them again down in the city for double what they gave for them. There was a continual trade going on all the time." Casler also tells a story about prisoner fabricating stories about so-called relics, like a watch that Stonewall Jackson supposedly wore, and selling the items to gullible guards. Casler. *FOUR YEARS*, 279-80, 284 (LOOK for sources from Richmond/Seven pines files for rings made from bones); See Paludan for father with bullet in his pocket.

^{xli} OR—X, part 1, (chapter XXII, pages 463-70; report no. 166; John Casler wrote in his memoir that at Cedar Creek too, the triumphs of the Confederate Army were nullified by the plundering that ensued after capturing enemy camps. Of course, this had much to do with obtaining food and alcohol for weary minds and famished bellies. But plundering camp certainly involved related searched though haversacks, stealing of items, watches, and any accoutrements left behind. See Casler: 242-3.

^{xlii} Scanning the *Confederate Veteran Magazine* one finds that by the late nineteenth century and first third of the twentieth, war relics had become a way for Southerners to preserve the Lost Cause. Logs taken from Chickamauga, pen's made from Stonewall's house, canes made from Jefferson Davis's home, bullet penetrated Bibles with prophetic messages where the bullet stopped, hooves

from General Forrest's horse, the bullet that wounded Forrest, wreaths made from rebel generals' hair, confederate flag made from southern bride's dress, personal effects and things "picked up" from the fields, pieces of rebel flag cut up and hidden in soldiers' clothes to prevent its capture. The list goes on and on. The point is, though, that while these relics had much to do with postwar memory, they were primarily gathered in the earliest inchoate moments of memory formation.

^{xliii} It was a Civil War historian who leveled one of the most dismissive critiques of material culture studies. William Hesselstine suggested that material objects can do little more than illustrate what has already been proven by rigorous examination of words. Objects have only "illustrative value"—that is, material culture helps bus loads of children visualize some fragment of the past, but do not speak to the historian the way that letters and written records do. See: William B. Hesselstine, "The Challenge of the Artifact," in Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America*, 93-100; For material culture and the Civil War see: Hess's new book; plus others where technology provided the advantage to the Union, etc

^{xliv} For a thorough discussion of the rise and guiding assumptions of material culture studies, see: Thomas Schlereth, *Material Culture and Cultural Research* (1-27). For material objects articulating the unspoken and unwritten, see: Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History of Fiction," in *History from Things*---- p. 3-6.

^{xlv} John A Kouwenhoven, "American Studies: Words or Things?" in Schlereth, *Material Culture Studies in America*, (80-83, 90)

^{xlvi} John T. Schlebecker, "The Use of Objects in Historical Research" in *Material Culture Studies in America*--- (106-113).

^{xlvii} For some provocative, if questionable essays about approaching history through the senses, see: Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History of Fiction," in *History from Things*, 1-19.