

Joan E. Cashin, "History and Material Culture: A Case Study"
Ohio Academy of History, 15 April 2023, Northern Ohio University

Someone told me long ago that if I was giving a talk in the afternoon, to keep it short. And if I was giving a talk after people had just had a meal, to keep it even shorter. So I will be brief.

In this address, I would like to make a pitch for material objects as a primary source. Material culture, defined by scholars as the "tangible yield of human conduct," can shed light on our work as historians. The field has roots in anthropology, but it has much to offer us. We have long relied on manuscript sources, which are of course essential to our discipline, yet the documents often suggest how important objects were to people in the past. Human beings often wrote about things they made, purchased, owned, or wanted to own, revealing their political, economic, and familial values, even as they highlighted issues related to gender, race, class, and ethnicity. We can also explore the objects themselves. Sometimes objects complement what the manuscripts tell us, and sometimes they communicate entirely new messages. But it seems clear that material culture studies can open up new worlds of meaning.¹

Over the last twenty-five years, historians have begun to make the material turn. They have written about the entire span of the American experience, from the colonial era to the twentieth century, and they have covered a dizzying array of topics. They have explored how people used objects to express their identities, demonstrate loyalties to larger social groups, prove their social status, pass on their values to the next generation, and function in daily life. Scholars have deployed both manuscripts and objects, including those found in museums, historical societies, and private collections. Historians have sometimes borrowed the perspectives of other

disciplines, beginning with anthropology, but they have also profited from the work of archaeologists, sociologists, geographers, art historians, historians of architecture, and other fields. Spirited debates about theory animate material studies, such as Bruno Latour's argument that objects have agency and by their very existence can provoke human action.²

The American family can provide us with one way to explore material culture, since the family is the basic social unit in most societies, a prism, the place where most people learn about the material world. While researching other books, I came across the Shelbys, residents of the Bluegrass counties in the center of Kentucky; they were related by blood and marriage to other regional elites. I soon realized they left behind a huge number of manuscripts, numerous material objects, plus several houses that are still standing. Most of them resided in central Kentucky, but they sometimes lived too far apart to travel in a day's ride on horseback or by carriage. So they wrote letters. Many, many letters. They also kept diaries. And since they sued each other rather frequently, they generated many legal records. The family included many strong-willed, articulate, and opinionated personalities.³

Isaac Shelby, the first governor of the state, valued artifacts and taught his children to do the same. A native of Maryland, he served with distinction in the Revolutionary War; his leadership at the Battle of King's Mountain in North Carolina in 1780 made him famous nationwide, thereby laying the groundwork for his political career. (Shelby County, Ohio, is named for him.) In 1792, he was chosen the first governor of Kentucky, virtually by acclamation. He also became a rich man. He snapped up many acres of land, and in the 1790s, he began buying

slaves. By the early 1800s, he owned forty-six slaves, as well as over ten thousand acres of land. I will discuss the issues of slavery and emancipation below.⁴

Long before he became governor, Isaac Shelby believed that artifacts had historical value. He collected them from Revolutionary battlefields, such as a British musket he found at King's Mountain, and he saved his own artifacts, such as the razor case he used in the war. He was a fervent nationalist, immensely proud of his role in the War for Independence. After he served in the War of 1812, he accumulated yet more relics, such as a spyglass from the Great Lakes campaigns. He gave some of these artifacts to relatives in his own lifetime, while others he bequeathed to descendants in his will. He was his own curator, writing up descriptions of his relics, making sure everyone got the message, and he preserved them at his home, Traveler's Rest. His wife Susanna Hart Shelby left few manuscripts, but her family preserved her spinning wheel, which she knew how to use, and a linen tablecloth she made from flax grown on the farm. These too became family artifacts. After the Marquis de Lafayette visited Kentucky in 1825 during his American tour, the family preserved the table where he dined. The collection and display of these objects not only illustrated the nation's history, they confirmed the family's personal involvement in that history, underscoring at the same time a strong sense of family identity. The Shelbys also embraced the consumer culture of the early national period, buying luxury fabrics such as silk from local merchants, and soon they filled the house with objects, handmade and storebought, many of them historical with a capital H.⁵

Members of the next generation cared deeply about these artifacts and the house itself. The sons and daughters of the antebellum era absorbed the message that material things have value,

above and beyond their dollar value. Isaac and Susanna Shelby's children preserved these objects, gave them as gifts to each other, and bequeathed them to their relatives. The bequests often divided up by gender, with the military relics usually going to men and domestic artifacts typically going to women. In their own lives, the next generation created artifacts and passed them on, memorializing certain experiences. The sons, such as Isaac, Jr., made walking canes from timber at Traveler's Rest and left them to their male relatives, and the daughters, such as Susan, preserved their parent's furniture. They too embraced consumer culture, which grew ever more abundant in the antebellum years. They purchased Brussell carpets, mahogany chairs, and marble-topped tables for the interiors of their houses. Articles of clothing, for men and women, could be transformed into heirlooms, with the object histories written up. Thomas Hart Shelby, one of the governor's sons, bequeathed a riding cloak to one of his offspring, complete with a notation on where and when he bought it—New York in the 1840s. The sheer number of objects preserved by the family is itself proof of how important the Shelbys believed them to be.⁶

Some of these objects meant so much that they caused serious family conflicts. Jealousy and possessiveness can surface in every family, of course, and the Shelbys are not the only family to have property disputes. After the governor passed away in 1826, the youngest son, Alfred, inherited Traveler's House, and when he died in 1832, the oldest son James, an executor of his will, started embezzling money from the estate in what looks like an act of primeval revenge. James told a relative that he could not bear the idea of other people living there. The structure was more than a residence to him; it was also something like a private museum, a treasure hoard. Alfred's widow Virginia Hart Shelby discovered James's theft and sued him in 1834, although women in this family rarely filed suit; in the late 1840s, she finally prevailed. Her daughter

Susan Shelby Grigsby inherited the house in the 1850s and began a new round of spending and rehabilitating the structure, which was then about seventy years old. She was also an enthusiastic devotee of consumer culture, buying rosewood furniture, Danish lace curtains, and other expensive objects for the house.⁷

The Shelbys invested in different kinds of enterprise, such as banks, canals, and other businesses, but much of their fortune came from slaveholding. The governor bequeathed most of his slaves to his sons, who purchased yet other slaves, joining the plantation elite. Slave men and women labored on these plantations in the fields, raising tobacco, hemp, and food crops, and they worked in the houses, yet they almost never appear in the white correspondence. A few individuals are mentioned by name, such as Hannah, a house worker, and Stephen, an artisan, but that was rare. Unfortunately, none of the Shelby ex-slaves were interviewed for the WPA in the 1930s, and I have not found any documents by them in my research so far; I hope they do turn up. The white Shelbys held different views on the future of the institution of slavery. In the 1840s, Virginia Shelby remarried, and her husband was none other than Robert J. Breckinridge, one of the state's most prominent abolitionists. Virginia's daughter Susan expressed persistent doubts about slavery in her private letters throughout the 1850s, calling it immoral and contrary to the Bible, although she never publicly advocated for abolition. Virginia's brother-in-law Thomas Shelby, the governor's son, supported emancipation followed by voluntary colonization, as did some white conservatives in the South, while her brother-in-law Isaac Shelby, the governor's son, evidently had no doubts at all about bondage and supported the Confederacy when the Civil War erupted in 1861.⁸

This being Kentucky, the family divided politically during the conflict. Some of the men of military age served in the Union army, and some put on the Confederate uniform. Fiery arguments broke out, which caused estrangements in the different branches. As one kinswoman observed, each party thought they were in the right. Some relatives were nonetheless reluctant to choose sides. Susan Shelby Grigsby's husband Warren hesitated for a year before joining the rebel army, leaving her alone at Traveler's Rest. Beginning in the fall of 1862 with the Battle of Perryville, some fifteen miles away, thousands of troops camped in the area, foraging and skirmishing. Many of the slaves began to run away from the estate. Union soldiers cut down acres of trees on the estate, as the policy of "military necessity," as it was called, allowed them to do. (Both armies followed this policy during the conflict.) After some wrangling with different commanders, a kinsman persuaded a federal officer to pay something for the timber. When soldiers plundered the house, other relatives arrived to haul away the furniture to protect it or offered to buy it from the Grigsbys. Regardless of their different political loyalties, they all wanted to save the house and its artifacts. Many of them feared that Traveler's Rest might be burned down, which happened to other plantation houses in Kentucky, but a Unionist cousin persuaded a federal captain to protect the house, so it survived. Isaac and Susanna Shelby's descendants, despite their political disagreements, united to protect the house, the symbol and repository of the family history. Their wartime behavior would be incomprehensible without knowing the backstory, as it were, of their material history.⁹

The Shelbys illustrate in vivid detail how people have used material objects to make meaning. These men and women had a deep understanding of human-object relations, and these objects served multiple purposes. The family used objects to demonstrate their wealth and set

themselves apart, as have many other elites, but artifacts were not just about social class. The relics also illustrated shared events of American history, especially that central event, the Revolution, and the Shelbys' connection to that event. Material objects also had intensely personal meaning, confirming gender identities for men and women and preserving family memories. As scholar Michael DeGruccio has observed, language alone cannot communicate all of human experience. Things mattered to many people in the past; sometimes objects had more than one meaning. In fact, sometimes they inspired human action in ways that the makers may not have anticipated. So, it seems, objects should matter to historians.¹⁰

¹ Henry Glassie, **Material Culture** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 41. Scholars have debated the precise meaning of this phrase, but I prefer Glassie's definition.

² Joan E. Cashin, "Things Mattered and Why: Material Culture in the Civil War Era," **Ohio Valley History** 22 (December 2022): 3.

³ Mary Jo Maynes and Ann Waltner, **The Family: A Global History** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Leonore Davidoff, **Thicker Than Water: Siblings and Their Relations** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, **Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life** (New York: The Free Press, 1988). The family's papers and material objects can be found at the University of Kentucky-Lexington [UKL]; the Filson Historical Society in Louisville [FHS]; the Kentucky Historical Society [KHS]; and the State Archives and Record Center in Frankfort. Some of the objects are described in Anna Mary Moon, **Sketches of the Shelby, McDowell, Deaderick, [and] Anderson Families** (no pl.: A. M. Moon, 1933), 27-28.

⁴ June Lee Mefford Kinkead, **Our Kentucky Pioneer Ancestry: A History of the Kinkead and McDowell Families of Kentucky and Those Families Associated by Marriage** (Baltimore: Gateway Press, Inc., 1992), 329-330; Moon, **Sketches**, 18, 21-22; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shelby-County-Ohio>; James C. Klotter and Craig Thompson Friend, **A New History of Kentucky**, Second Edition (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 72; List of Isaac Shelby's Taxable Property 1809, Shelby Family Papers, Library of Congress [LC].

⁵ "Senate Chamber Contains Priceless Museum," **Kentucky Progress Magazine**, 1 February 1931, p. 43; Musket, Catalog number 1939.224, Object Record, KHS; Sawyer, **Firearms in American History**, 93-96; Straight Razor, Catalog number 1952.44 [dup 2], Object Record, KHS; Isaac Shelby, **Battle of King's Mountain** (Lexington, Ky.: T. Smith, 1823); "Revolutionary Relic," **The [Sandersville] Central Georgian**, 2 February 1859; Transcription of the Governor's Will, 13 Nov. 1826, Shelby-Bruen Papers, FHS; Statement by Isaac Shelby, 20 February 1817, Isaac Shelby Papers, KHS; Moon, **Sketches**, 22-23, 28; Scrap of Linen, Catalog unnumbered-832, Object Record, KHS; No author, "Donations Received on Boone Day, June 7," **Register of the Kentucky Historical Society** 10 (September 1912): 81; "McDowell House Table Is Attention-Getter For Youths," [Danville] **Advocate-Messenger**, 3 January 1971; Gov. Isaac Shelby, 1796, Nicholas, Gillespie, & [Birneff?], Shelby Family Papers, LC. Their house, Traveler's Rest, was constructed in the 1780s. See National Register of Historic Places, Inventory--Nomination Form, Traveller's Rest, January 7, 1976, n. p.

⁶ Moon, **Sketches**, 27-28; Will of Elizabeth S. Irvine, 1 June 1915, Elizabeth S. Irvine (Mrs. William B. Irvine) Papers, MSS CI, FHS; Susan Shannon to Virginia H. Shelby, 18 April 1834, Grigsby Family Papers, FHS; Receipt, 1841, Thomas Shelby paid to James March, Shelby Family Papers, UKL; Receipt, Thomas Shelby to James March, May 1841 to November 1841, Thomas Hart Shelby Papers, UKL; Genevieve Baird Lacer and Libby Turner Howard, **Collecting Kentucky, 1790-1860**, Photography by Bill Roughen (no pl.: Cherry Valley Publications LLC, 2013), 320; Codicil, Will of Thomas Hart Shelby, Sr., c.1865, Shelby Family Papers, UKL.

⁷ Davidoff, **Thicker Than Water**, 134, 157-159; Geoffrey L. Greif and Michael E. Woolley, **Adult Sibling Relationships** (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 99, 102-6; William P. Hart to Virginia H Shelby, 5 Oct. 1833, Grigsby Family Papers, FHS; Frankfort, 15 Jan. 1842, J. P. Mitchell and Joshua Bell, fee for James Harlan, Virginia Shelby v. Alfred Shelby's Execons., commenced Lincoln Circuit Court, 1834, terminated in the Mercer Circuit Court, Court of Appeals, State Archives and Record Center, Department of Finance, Commonwealth of Kentucky, Fayette County, Circuit Court Clerk, Chancery Court Decided Cases, Year Sent & Lot No. 1972, Container Number 139, Inclusive Dates 1826-53; Description of Contents: Drawer No. 1230 thru 1238; J. [Harlan?], Breckinridge v. Shelby, Brief for Susan Shelby, n. d. [1849], Shelby Family Papers, in Wilson Vertical File Coll, UKL; Amanda B. Shelby to her cousin [no name], spring n.d. 1852, Shelby-Bruen Papers, FHS.

⁸ Joan E. Cashin, "The Shelbys, the Harts, and Their Houses: Material Culture in Wartime Kentucky," **Ohio Valley History** 22 (Winter 2022): 58.

⁹ Cashin, "The Shelbys, the Harts, and Their Houses," 58-60, 63.

¹⁰ Michael DeGruccio, "Letting the War Slip Through Our Hands: Material Culture and the Weakness of Words in the Civil War Era," in **Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges**, Edited by Stephen Berry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 17, 27-28.