

Can We Scan the Piggin?: Revisiting Early American Material Culture and Campus Collections across Pandemic Time



Among the many early American material culture items I have encountered across the Northeast, a certain chest of drawers has captured my attention. This chest, with its striking wood grain, veneering, contrasting coloration, and brasswork, offers a story worth telling about objects and their continuing trajectories in the twenty-first century. It also invites reflections on the experiences of learning, researching, and teaching with material culture across the COVID-19 pandemic, which has necessitated abrupt transitions to the virtual domain—then back again. As with many multi-layered stories, this one begins with a photograph that invites us into closer looking.

The bow-fronted chest at hand is described in the online catalog of the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) as a [mahogany piece produced in New](#)

[Hampshire between approximately 1795 and 1820](#). The majority of catalog photographs at WCMA are carefully staged and lighted. But this one jumped out to me as seemingly taken under more provisional conditions. It resembles a Polaroid snapshot more than a studio portrait and implies something distinctive about the human life that surrounds it in the present day. Pieces of modern life peek in upon the historic chest. A family photograph perches atop it, as does a computer printer or other electronic gadget, while power cables snake behind it. Like the Google Street View images that [capture unexpected human interactions with place](#), this snapshot directs us to different story of furnishings: their continuing re-purposing, re-signifying, and even contestation.



Figure 1: Museum catalog image for chest of drawers (object 43.2.12.A), Williams College Museum of Art. 35 mm. photograph by Rachael Tassone, Museum Registrar.

This chest wound up playing a role in “The Afterlives of Objects,” a course I regularly teach about early American material culture and its ongoing meanings. Working with original items—furniture, clothing, personal adornments, cookware, the built environment, and much more—opens different windows onto social histories, including the lives, aspirations, and actions of people who may not have left behind many, or any, written documents in conventional archival formats. As generations of scholars and communities have attested, these items are not distant or isolated “artifacts,” or static entities suspended in the past. They are materials intimately woven into the experiences and emotions of real individuals and collectivities.

The course, as I teach it, also consistently grapples with matters of power, ownership, stewardship, and knowledge production, prioritizing non-Eurocentric topics and methodologies. I have offered this course several times before coming to Williams College as a faculty member in history. In the Kwinitekw River Valley of western Massachusetts, my experiences at Mount Holyoke College and the University of Massachusetts Amherst made apparent how many interventions are happening across different institutions about “campus

collections.” Almost every institution is now grappling with and needs to foundationally re-assess how to frame and handle belongings that have been amassed within college and university walls over the centuries, through channels ranging from voluntary donations to coercion and outright theft.

Running this course entails special considerations around colleagues’ labor. It is logistically complex and time intensive for museum staff members to retrieve bulky items like furniture from a remote storage space, pack them in protective materials so they don’t become scuffed, dinged, or torn, and arrange their transport to the main campus museum. Then staff must situate them in a busy building so that students and faculty can view them. The items pulled for the [“Object Lab”](#) installation developed in conjunction with this course in spring 2020 required a high level of planning and coordination. The one furnishing present—a wooden chair with woven seat—was included partly because of its relative lightness and portability. Items’ very materiality helps shape what is visible and accessible.



Figure 2: Chair on display in “Object Lab,” Spring 2020, Williams College Museum of Art (object 1875.1). Photograph by Christine DeLucia.

With these labor matters foremost in mind, in very early 2020 I decided my class should instead visit additional furniture pieces that are already more accessible outside the walls of WCMA. I learned that the chest at hand presently resides in the house of the college president. Indeed, multiple early American furnishings are in this location rather than being neatly contained within art museum galleries or storage.



Figure 3: The President's House of Williams College, located on Main Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts, was built in 1801 as the Samuel Sloan House. It was purchased by Williams College in the mid-nineteenth century. Beyond My Ken, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The house is itself a material culture trace. Perched at the crest of a hill in a highly visible campus location, it dates to the early 1800s. It was built for [Samuel Sloan](#), a white settler colonizer, general in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, and tavern owner. This Federal-style building features elaborate woodwork said to have been imported from Boston, making it an expression of aspirational genteel architecture in rural western Massachusetts. The college acquired the structure in the nineteenth century and transformed it into a formal residence for the president, and it has since been expanded and renovated. Having taken my seminar members on a walking tour of the local vicinity in a prior week, for which we read essays on counter-tours and other critical vantages on memory-in-place, we were inclined to go deeper into this site and its contents. We had also delved into documentary and visual records about the house and its surroundings in the Library's Special Collections/Archives—such as picture postcards and photographs—which attest to its iconic presence in the local built environment.

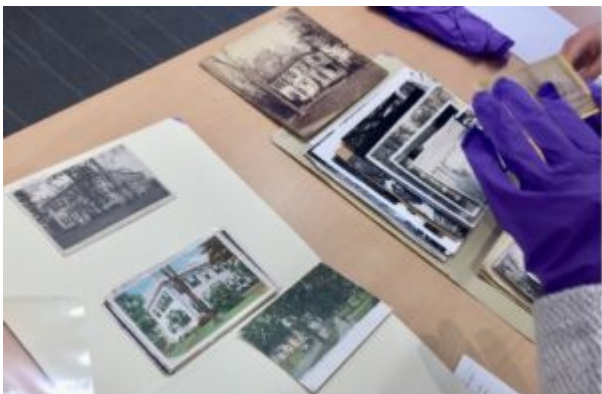


Figure 4: Seminar working with archival and photographic records of Sloan House in Archives/Special Collections, Williams College Libraries, February 2020. Photograph by Christine DeLucia.

Can you invite yourself over to someone's house? Under the aegis of "experiential learning," certain doors do open. The college's current

president, Maud Mandel, is a historian and Jewish Studies scholar by profession who is interested in memory, and she was receptive to the prospect of a class visit. Even with a generous invitation to bring my class over, entering this space involved other kinds of social maneuvering. While a campus art museum at a liberal arts college is expressly understood to be a learning space open to inquiry, the president's house is, well, a private residence. It's a place of retreat and respite for a family, set apart from the fishbowl of campus offices and outdoor greens.

Yet it does have a semi-public face as a place that hosts events for members of the campus community and visitors. Adding to these complexities, such houses can be viewed by campus members and town residents as architectural embodiments of institutional authority and privilege. For these reasons—as at many colleges and universities—[presidential dwellings](#) and other key campus structures (like the [administration building](#)) have been focal sites for student-led demonstrations, protest, and activism. Campus communities frequently engage with matters of power, equity, and justice through the highly articulated, symbolically rich terrain of the wider physical campus itself. When tangible belongings like a chest of drawers are situated inside these charged spaces, they're inevitably interwoven with these larger spatial dynamics.

Being *inside* this house thus created a specific environment for critically approaching early American material culture. Our visit in early March 2020 (note the date) gravitated around a constellation of furnishings: several late eighteenth or early nineteenth-century chests and tables, a tall case clock, a multi-sectioned desk. The group's energy centered not on a rarified colonial connoisseurship conversation, but on using these items to probe wide-ranging social and cultural experiences.

Sitting around them in a semicircle, students examined them as entry points into a dialogue about artisan labor, natural resources, wealth and property accumulation, and the politics of collecting. Who produced a chest like this? Were the people who used their skills and hands to harvest its materials and fashion it free, enslaved, indentured, or otherwise in bondage? African American people in Portsmouth, inhabiting a wide spectrum of bondage and liberation, were integral to that town's rise in the eighteenth century, as Valerie Cunningham and other collaborators on the community-led [Black Heritage Trail](#) public history project have powerfully demonstrated. Their lives and labors must be accounted for in discussing material production in this time and place. Where was the wood coming from, considering contexts of colonialist resource extraction from Indigenous homelands, and the violence of Atlantic World enslavement of African people and commodity trading? Portsmouth is located in the [homelands of Pennacook-Abenaki](#) communities, where intricate human-land relations were deeply disrupted by colonization starting in the seventeenth century, including Euro-colonial logging of white pines, birches, and other trees. The harvesting of mahogany, prized by furniture makers for its hardness and tight grain, occurred through the extreme suffering and exhaustion of [enslaved Afro-Caribbean woodcutters and processors](#)—men, women, children.

Their knowledge and forced toil is not credited or visibly acknowledged in the finished chest, yet they constitute the essential context for its very existence.

Who purchased and owned such an item, and what did they intend its display to communicate in their houses? What do its tiny keyholes indicate about evolving concepts of privacy and security? How may gendered processes of colonial familial inheritance and property ownership have shaped the intergenerational transits of this chest? Why did this item eventually wend its way from the Piscataqua River region of the Atlantic seacoast to the comparative rurality of western Massachusetts? Comparisons with similar furnishings from the region's workshops (some of which are sold [privately at antiques auctions](#) today or featured on the PBS [Antiques Roadshow](#) program) may provide one avenue for deepening our contexts for this particular piece and the capitalist marketplaces in which it exists. In addition, we might reflect on how individuals' own positions and interests shape the salience of such items. I know that this chest caught my attention partly because I grew up in New Hampshire, and recognize that the northern parts of "New England" have been comparatively less well represented in many historical accountings and collections than the southern reaches.



Figure 5: Chest of drawers in Sloan House during class visit, Williams College, March 4, 2020. Photograph by Christine DeLucia.

Our close-looking session brought in many voices and perspectives on material study. Special Collections/Archives staff members shared how manuscripts and printed records held in those sites provide additional information about histories of accessioning and deaccessioning. The [Charles M. Davenport Collection of furniture](#) at the college, for example, coalesced in 1943 from the commitments that collector had to a particular vision of early America, closely focused on Anglo-American New England. The Davenport Collection illuminates how alumni networks and bequests have fed into campus collections. Davenport graduated in the class of 1901 and was an avid supporter of as well as donor to the growing college art museum. Head of Special Collections Lisa Conathan and Archivist Sylvia Brown underscored the importance of holistically researching across several types of repositories, rather than being limited by oftentimes

artificially imposed boundaries of material types.

Gathering in this space also provided a vivid look at how items' meanings shift depending on the social and cultural settings where they are situated. This private home is not an art museum, even though certain of the furnishings here inhabit a kind of liminal space of affiliation with WCMA. It's not a house museum, either—there hasn't been a curatorial effort to recreate a certain moment in time. There *are* artworks on the walls that have been selected for display for the family currently in residence, not unlike U.S. Presidents' [assembling](#) of pieces in the White House that signify many personal, public, and political meanings. But overall, there are not pre-formulated interpretive labels to tell you what the items in it are, or to suggest how to think about them. Its contents are not sequestered in glass cases with security alarms. They are not organized chronologically, thematically, by maker or consumer, or with a specific scholarly argument in mind. It's a living space shaped by the aesthetic tastes and identities of its twenty-first-century inhabitants, as well as the happenstance of which furnishings are available for loan.

Inside this active home-space, residents and staff members may develop any number of relationships with the objects that populate its rooms. They may store picture frames, or flowerpots, or computer gear on the surfaces. Lauren Barenski, a presidential office staff member who oversees events at the house, described to us her regular winding of the tall clocks. This testified to a nuanced form of care-work and technical knowledge required to maintain the functionality of these historic items. Steve Simon, presidential spouse, related to us how housecats and their claws may pose challenges to the material integrity of, say, sofa upholstery. (A solution: scratching posts.) These commentaries cast the space of an art museum, with its specialized hands-off protocols and climate-controlled conditions, in a different light and helped our group consider the wider range of settings in which objects may be activated.

This up-close encounter with early American furnishings *in situ* also prompted a complex discussion about presence and absence. What kinds of material items are amassed, stewarded, and prominently featured in a private, wealthy institution like this? What narratives and values do they propound? What of the enormous world of objects or belongings is *not* represented—discarded, dismissed, built over, deemed irrelevant, relegated to storage? "Campus collections" are by their nature uneasy sites of inquiry, never innocent or neutral. As [Craig Steven Wilder](#) exposed in his pathbreaking *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities* (2013), North American colleges and universities have arisen through historic and ongoing processes of accumulation that are inextricably intertwined with settler colonialism and racial capitalism. Williams College, founded in 1793, is no exception. Its campus collections reflect these realities in countless ways, [as multiple colleagues and students have explored](#) over the years. Some of these inquiries have arisen through academic endeavors (ranging from American Studies to Art to History and many additional fields), while others have been propelled by activism,

organizing, curatorial and creative interventions, community projects, and other forms of engagement with the past.

To put it otherwise, we cannot naturalize or uncritically center the extant assemblage of materials. We must historicize and contextualize *why* certain belongings, stories, and memories are visible, and others much less so. This particular institution has begun to reckon with its location in the historic, ongoing, and future homelands of the sovereign Stockbridge-Munsee Community, and to [formally partner](#) with this Native nation, which has long engaged in caretaking and stewardship of its cherished eastern homelands, as well as restoration of ancestors and belongings through repatriation. Students, faculty, and staff are also beginning to account for the colonizing Williams family as dispossessors of this nation and [enslavers of African-American people](#), and with the [legacies of college-affiliated Christian missionaries in Hawai'i](#) and other Indigenous places. Such multi-faceted “memory work” has direct bearing on how a campus and communities well beyond it frame conversations and actions around “collections.” Moreover, these dialogues are never only or even primarily about the past *in itself*, but also about how pathways forward can and ought to be different. WCMA, for instance, has begun to formulate transformative acquisition priorities that [center BIPOC and LGBTQ+ artists](#), among others, planting seeds of change for the future form of the collection. The wooden chest thus can be a springboard for broader critical dialogues about how collections form and transform, and are rendered legible and valuable.

Having this in-person encounter with the ongoing transits of early American furnishings brought tremendous momentum to our seminar. . . and then everything shut down as the severity of COVID became evident. All classes went virtual with barely a moment's notice, as so many educators experienced across North America and globally. From a pedagogical perspective I despaired. For a subject and methodology so intimately grounded in the tangible, the in-person, and the experiential, how could we migrate online? Is there anything in my teaching portfolio worse suited to Zoom than material culture, when all has seemingly become immaterial?

But we adapted. Through the remainder of spring 2020, and across additional classes in the following academic years, we explored virtual alternatives. Students and colleagues deserve enormous credit for improvising and inventing as we went, while I investigated alternate modes of engagement. Along the way we found that the digital domain presented unexpected opportunities for re-assessing materiality that were incisive and thought-provoking. I have no desire to transmute a horrific global crisis and intersecting social inequities into a smoothed-out lesson about COVID-era pedagogy. These impacts are devastating, ongoing, and very unequally experienced, as many have attested to with eloquence and urgency. Some forms of associated loss and social rupture remain unspeakable. With that always in mind, this experience has caused me to reflect on what we have been processing and reassessing, and what we may carry forward.

Consider the piggins. The college art museum has two of these wooden vessels in its collection ([one plain](#), [one decorated](#)), both attributed to the late seventeenth century (whether accurately or not). They are typically considered utilitarian liquid or dry-goods storage objects—not dissimilar from firkins, wooden tankards, and other containers for household use—rather than high-art pieces, and they do not regularly come out on view inside the galleries. Two museum specialists invited me to work with them to make digital three-dimensional scans of selected objects available to students. Drawing upon her longstanding expertise in braiding together technology and the arts, Beth Fischer, Postdoctoral Fellow in Digital Humanities, used photogrammetry to digitally render several items, [including one of the piggins](#), an eighteenth-century [coffee grinder](#), and others. She then made them accessible in SketchFab, a 3D modeling platform that enables the renderings to be published online and shared.

Under the lighting of the scanner, the piggin revealed a lively floral design that is harder to see in person. During our group Zoom sessions for the seminar, Elizabeth Gallerani, Curator of Mellon Academic Programs, adroitly walked us through exercises for close looking and interacting with this digital object. We were able to zoom in to see its hinge mechanism more clearly, and rotate it for scrutiny from multiple angles. Both actions would have been difficult as a group gathered around a table, even with a magnifying glass.



Figure 6: Three-dimensional scan of a wooden piggin (object 43.2.113) in the collections of the Williams College Art Museum. Rendering produced by Beth Fischer, Postdoctoral Fellow for Digital Humanities.



Figure 7: Detail of floral design on wooden piggin (object 43.2.113) in the collections of the Williams College Art Museum. Rendering produced by Beth Fischer, Postdoctoral Fellow for Digital Humanities.

The critical insights presented through this virtual transition were surprising. Beth explained how the photogrammetry process operates, affording insights into just how many decisions and subjective selections are made at every step to render the object. Objects that are too shiny or transparent do not make good candidates for scanning, so the very choice of materials to digitize is influenced by their physical properties. A [glass flask bearing Benjamin Franklin's visage](#), produced at Kensington Glass Works in the 1830s and illustrative of the popular commodification of the "Founding Fathers" in the early U.S. Republic and antebellum era, was thus regrettably off the digital table. But the piggins' wooden surfaces worked well. This helped us understand scanning as interpretive work rather than "mere" mechanical replication. It is every bit as bound up in matters of judgment and analysis as other forms of inquiry.



Figure 8: Glass flask bearing image of Benjamin Franklin (object GA.5), shown in standard catalog photograph rather than 3D rendering, Williams College Museum of Art.

The limits of the digital also prompted discussion. In a different, pre-COVID seminar of mine a student who encountered the piggin in person approached it to smell it. That inclination opened a rich conversation about multisensory experiences and the still-overwhelming emphasis on the visual in art museum contexts. In the virtual realm that type of olfactory engagement is not possible (unless 1960s Smell-O-Vision technology comes back in vogue). In addition, working in the digital domain caused the physical campus setting in which these collections currently exist to recede substantially from our discussions. The campus did not go away entirely, but it held a less prominent place in how we approached these materials. That subsuming of institutional context may benefit certain seminar dynamics. Students may feel freer to interact with items from the comfort of their own spaces, as compared to inside a museum classroom or presidential living room. Or they may be more able to take a camera-off moment for quiet reflection in the midst of weighty topics. The digital space may constrain other aspects, including a sense of class cohesion and shared investment in dialogue, which can be difficult to cultivate across a grid of Zoom squares.

We also used the 3D replica as a springboard to discuss digital surrogates, repatriation, and sensitive ethical considerations that Indigenous and other communities have had to navigate as they work with—or contest—museums that still lay claim to ancestors, valued belongings, and cultural patrimony. Is [“digital repatriation”](#) a process that can meaningfully serve communities’ goals of caretaking for and interpreting their own belongings? There are potent examples of sovereign Indigenous nations proactively mobilizing technology and collaborations with external institutions. In other instances, this emerging practice can be yet another version of colonialist gatekeeping and an excuse for institutions to maintain possession. This, despite the requirements of federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) law to [facilitate returns](#), bolsters what Rae Gould, a Nipmuc community member and repatriation specialist, has described as “retentive philosophies.”

Not least of all, engagement with the digital material culture world underscored how all of this was possible because of existing human expertise and technological resources at WCMA, such as the photogrammetry studio space. The financial and personnel infrastructure required for digital humanities work of a serious kind relies on institutional capital. That in turn is interwoven with fraught histories and presents: where do college resources come from and how are they allocated? And it is entwined with the asymmetries and contingency of the employment landscape in the arts and humanities.

When I first tried to conceptualize the transition to Zoom teaching with early Americana, I imagined it as a placeless experience. We were no longer all convened in a single campus space but dispersed in some nowhere-ether. We’d lose the ability to work with the materiality of the built environment and tangible things, right? Not quite. I soon realized that the class became an emplaced experience in a very different register, with its members now immersed in multiple locations. Hastily sent away from their campus residences, students

returned to their home locations, or to other sites where they could continue their studies for the remainder of the spring. These transitions have been arduous. They have thrust students into precarious situations, exposed longstanding structural inequities, exacerbated mental health crises, and removed the potentially more equalizing terrain of a seminar room.

Faced with these tremendous challenges, students nonetheless organically reoriented themselves to connect with their own local settings. They explored commemorative landscapes (monuments, markers, cemeteries) in their midst that they knew well, or maybe explored for the first time, framing them through different interpretive lenses and methods. They entered dialogues with family members, community neighbors, and friends about their own forms of knowledge and memory related to material culture, shifting well beyond textual archives or museum collections into other modes of relating and being. They deftly handled belongings in their own lives to ask probing questions about memory, inheritance, representation. The resulting final projects that each member produced were reflective, inventive, and capacious. Many interleaved the academic and the personal in moving ways, and sought different voices and formats in which to communicate.

For example, Isabel Cushing explored traditions of scrapbooking by weaving together items from a personal archive—ticket stubs, receipts, “I Voted” stickers, newspaper clippings—to address “the radical potential of ephemera to tell history.” In a colorful project that took the form of a collage rather than a standard academic essay, the work meditated on how tangible mementoes, which may be only partially legible to outsiders, can serve as “markers of relationships, carrying meaning and memories.” Eugene Amankwah drew upon digitized objects in collections beyond campus, like a violin covered with written inscriptions at the National Museum of American History, to investigate musicians’ roles during the U.S. Civil War. These items provided a springboard to a larger social history about how “drummer boys” and others took part in this pivotal conflict, and how these items can shape remembrances of this time.

The relations among people, materiality, and places anchored other projects. A painted, collaged tilt-top table at the Bennington Museum in Vermont became a focal point for Andrew Kensett, who had worked closely on conservation of this piece through the Graduate Art program. Examining the landscape representations that Anna Mary Robertson “Grandma” Moses created upon its surfaces, the project reconsidered how this work by a Northeastern “folk” artist and entrepreneur can be a lens for critically re-examining “origin stories” rooted in local, regional, and national forms of identity-formation, mythology, and nostalgia. Focusing on California and the homelands of Tásam Koyóm, Dylan Syben analyzed initiatives to repatriate land to Indigenous people such as the Maidu community. This digital project embraced multimedia and interdisciplinarity, bringing together historical sources, poetry, journalism, photography, and more to contextualize how tribal nations, the PG&E power company, and the state are relating through specific places of significance.



Figure 9: The replica “1753 House” in Williamstown, Massachusetts is a local colonial icon that has provided grounding for student research and critical interpretation. The house is shown before amended signage was added acknowledging its location in Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican Community homelands. Photograph by Christine DeLucia, February 2020.

The local built environment of campus and the surrounding town also provided grounding for research and interpretation. Leah Rosenfeld contextualized the “1753 House” (a twentieth-century wooden replica of an early colonizer structure) to critically examine which histories this town icon lifts up, and which it erases or treats as marginal—as well as considering how future iterations of local narratives and structures may be made more inclusive and accurate. Delving into the memory terrain at Williams College that has accreted through monuments and markers, Nicholas Goldrosen traced how certain of these installations “resist the usual incorporation into the College’s collective memory.” Such features are *on* the college grounds but not “of” the institution, the project argued, bringing in site photographs taken just before students abruptly had to leave campus. Both projects drew readers into closer scrutiny and understanding of seemingly familiar locales.

All exceeded and expanded the definitions of “early America” and “material culture” that I had envisioned at the semester’s outset. More than anything, participants in this co-learning endeavor leaned into the concept of “afterlives” to interrogate what we do with these stories in the twenty-first century, amid powerful calls for reckoning with history’s violences and exclusions, and moving toward greater justice in the present and future.

For myself, the pandemic shutdowns pushed me out onto the land. What began as fresh air-seeking walks and hikes soon morphed into more intentional visitation of regional terrain, including historic sites, cemeteries, and small museums, many of which have been able to carry on despite unprecedented staffing and operational challenges. The shutdowns have accelerated my engagement with the very local, and deepened my understanding of the importance of growing connections with the webs of people—in museums, archives, historical societies, tribal nations, and more—who caretake and steward these resources.



Figure 10: Found collections: assemblage of ceramics, glass, and other items along the Hoosac River, March 21, 2020. Photograph by Christine DeLucia.

Now that our campus (like so many others) is resuming in-person living and learning, I continue to ruminate on what lessons from the sudden remote turn will we carry forward, and which elements we will gladly leave behind. I recently discarded the hand-sewn mask I clumsily fashioned from a dishtowel in the spring of 2020, using the sewing kit I inherited from my late grandmother. Others are similarly deaccessioning—or preserving—the material traces of pandemic time. And they are delving into the [pedagogical implications of the transformations we have experienced](#).

What this means for the future of early America, and of the meaningful materials that endure today, is a matter still unfolding. The experiences of encountering tangible items in real space, as part of an in-person community, are not interchangeable with virtual approaches. But nor is this a simple case of “less than.” Instead, there are striking possibilities for *different* insights and methods, and even greater attunement to the many people needed to carry forward collaborative learning. I will likely continue to incorporate digital forms of material engagement in my classes in the future because they carry us into alternate relations: with significant items, with the spaces we inhabit, and with each other.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to the many colleagues, students, and community members who have collaborated on these topics and offered insights into the practices, politics, and ethics of engaging materiality and the peoples linked to it. Partners at Mount Holyoke College, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, the Five College Consortium, and Williams College have been especially instrumental in the work described here. Ned Cooke, furniture historian at Yale University, taught a graduate seminar on New Haven and American material culture that helped lead me to these fields. Colleagues at American Antiquarian Society and *Commonplace* previously helped me think through the [transits of materiality and heritage items in Indigenous-colonial contexts](#), and the need for continuing

restorative work around repatriation to Indigenous nations in and beyond New England. The work of [Akeia de Barros Gomes](#), Senior Curator of Maritime Social History at Mystic Seaport Museum, has also shaped my thinking.

I am especially grateful to members of “Afterlives of Objects” in Spring 2020 for their patience, care, and permission to reference their work. While space constraints prevent discussion of each project that seminar members created, I wish to acknowledge that every member of that collective learning space contributed insights, critiques, and creativity.

Further reading

These are a few resources from the “Afterlives of Objects” syllabus that shaped our in-roads into furnishings and other material items, and their contexts both inside and beyond museums: Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, et al., “Introduction: Thinking with Things,” in *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1-20; Fred Wilson and Howard Halle, “Mining the Museum,” *Grand Street* (no. 44, 1993): 151-72, including three page contextual explanation of the exhibition (170-72); Howard Mansfield, “In the Memory House,” in *In The Memory House* (Golden CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1995), 5-20; Nina Simon, selections from *The Participatory Museum* (Santa Cruz: Museum 2.0, 2010): “Preface: Why Participate?” and excerpts from ch. 4, “Social Objects”; D. Rae Gould, “NAGPRA, CUI and Institutional Will,” in *The Routledge Companion to Cultural Property*, ed. Jane Anderson and Haidy Geismar (New York: Routledge, 2017), 134-51; James Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz, “A Few Things Needful: Houses and Furnishings,” in James Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives: Life, Love, and Death in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); Elaine Sesma, “‘A Web of Community’: Uncovering African American Historic Sites in Deerfield MA,” *Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage* 2 (May 2015): 121-36; R. Eric Hollinger et al., “Tlingit-Smithsonian Collaborations with 3D digitization of Cultural Objects,” *Museum Anthropology Review*, 7 (Spring-Fall 2013): 201-53; Yale University Art Gallery, film clip, “[Studying American Furniture in the Present](#),” 49 min.

On Portsmouth material culture, and the social lives of enslaved, indentured, and free people in this town, see Mark J. Sammons and Valerie Cunningham, *Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African-American Heritage* (Lebanon: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004); [Valerie Cunningham Papers](#), MC 321, University of New Hampshire Library, Milne Special Collections and Archives; Brock W. Jobe, [Portsmouth Furniture: Masterworks from the New Hampshire Seacoast](#) (Boston: Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 1993); Rick Russack, “[Four Centuries of Portsmouth Furniture](#),” Portsmouth Historical Society, May 16, 2017.

Critical engagements with “campus collections” across New England, North America, and globally are wide and growing. Students, faculty, curators, and community members are doing essential interdisciplinary work to revisit, contextualize, and transform these spaces and practices. For a small sampling of initiatives just in the Northeast, at a range of private and public institutions, see [Americas Research Initiative](#), Rhode Island School of Design Museum; [“Dialogue with the Collection Program” and collaboration with Fred Wilson](#), University Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Massachusetts Amherst; [The Lost Museum: The Jenks Museum of Natural History and Anthropology](#), Brown University; Dorothy Wang and Kevin Murphy, [“Uncovering Williams”](#) class and WMCA exhibition (2019); Sonnet Kekilia Coggins and Kailani Polzak, [“‘The Field is The World’: Williams, Hawai‘i, and Material Histories in the Making”](#) (2018); Horace Ballard, Kevin M. Murphy, and Elizabeth Sandoval, [“Remixing the Hall: WCMA’s Collection in Perpetual Transition”](#); Destinee Filmore, Jordan Horton, and Nicholas Liou, [“Curatorial Close Looks: Remixing the Remix”](#); Lisa Conathan, Lori DuBois, Anne Peale, [“Teaching with Primary Sources at Williams College”](#) (2020); [Places, Nations, Generations, Beings: 200 Years of Indigenous North American Art](#), Yale University Art Gallery (2019-2021); Christine DeLucia, “Fugitive Collections in New England Indian Country: Indigenous Material Culture and Early American History Making at Ezra Stiles’s Yale Museum,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 75 (Jan. 2018): 109-150; Ethan W. Lasser, ed., *The Philosophy Chamber: Art and Science in Harvard’s Teaching Cabinet, 1766-1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

Communities and institutions are partnering in new ways, such as an [innovative museum endeavor by the Tomaquag Museum in conjunction with the University of Rhode Island and RISD](#). Foundational ethical and human rights matters involving [repatriation](#) and [restoration of belongings](#) to communities remain major concerns at museums, despite important steps forward.

This article originally appeared in July, 2022.

Christine DeLucia is Associate Professor of History at Williams College and the author of *Memory Lands: King Philip’s War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). Her work has appeared in *The Journal of American History*, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, *Commonplace*, *Native American and Indigenous Studies*, and other publications. She researches and teaches in areas including Native American and Indigenous Studies, early American history, material culture and museums, and community-engaged work.