instructor: Ryan K. Smith

course title: Topics in History: American Material Culture

institution: Virginia Commonwealth University

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What is “material culture?” In short, the term means all things created or modified by people – clothing, tools, furniture, works of art, books, buildings, and even landscapes, for example. So the study of American material culture is an attempt to learn about American society by examining its artifacts and architecture.

This may seem like a simple proposition, but it is not. For the bulk of American history has been written from literary sources rather than material sources – from the words left behind in letters, diaries, court records, newspapers, and other documents and books. And despite the richness of America’s physical heritage, there may be good reason for this. Archaeologists, art historians, and others confronting artifacts have had to work hard in order to make non-literary artifacts speak.

Our class will explore this dilemma. Following a rough chronology of American history, we will consider representative topics from several related academic disciplines. We will also pay particular attention to the role of politics in the preservation and exhibition of material culture, and we will make a few excursions outside the classroom. Finally, true to time-honored traditions, each student will complete a substantial research project focusing on a particular artifact or landscape feature.

In the end, students will be better prepared for careers in public history and for historical research in general. And they may gain a new appreciation for flea markets and trash dumps.
Required books:
All the following books are on reserve in Cabell library on one-hour loan. Other reading assignments will be posted in .pdf format on Blackboard.


Henry Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1975)


Assignments and grading:

Class participation, including on-time attendance and involvement in discussions, activities, and field trips, is essential. Other assignments include a paper on probate inventories (5 pages), two reading response papers (3 pages each), an object bibliography, and a final research paper (15–20 pages) with oral presentation. The percentage breakdown for the final grade will be:

- Class participation: 25%
- Probate paper: 15%
- Reading responses: 10% (2 @ 5% each)
- Object bibliography: 5%
- Final research project: 45%

Attendance is mandatory at every class meeting. Students missing more than two class meetings will fail the course. All
assignments must be handed in to me in person, and those handed in late will lose one-half letter grade for each day late.

Academic Integrity:
All work in this class is pledged work under the “VCU Honor System,” available online at http://www.students.vcu.edu/rg/policies/honor.html. Any cheating or plagiarism will result in failing the course.

Disabilities:
If you have a physical or learning disability, please notify me with appropriate documentation as soon as possible.

Class outline:
This is a rough outline, subject to change at any time.

Week 1 (8/20) – Introduction
Reading:
  * Verne E. Chatelaine, "A National Policy for Historic Sites and Monuments," (1934)

Week 2 – (8/27) – The range and purpose of artifact research
In-class roadshow; bring in an older object for discussion
Reading:

Week 3 – (9/3) Theories and origins of the field
Reading:
  * Henry Glassie, Folk Housing in Middle Virginia (1975)

Week 4 – (9/10) Historical archaeology, race, and early America
Visit by Matt Laird, James River Institute for Archaeology
Reading:
Week 5 – (9/17) Ceramics, textiles, and production
Due: Probate paper
Reading:
* Chapter 7 “Cider” through Chapter 17 “Pottery” in The Book of Commerce by Sea and Land (Philadelphia: Uriah Hunt, 1837), pp. 31-58

Week 6 – (9/24) Art History: march of the styles
Visit by Susan Rawles, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
Reading:

Week 7 – (10/1) Meet your local curator/object research day/no class meeting
Reading:
Week 8 - (10/8) Gentility and consumerism
Due: Object bibliography, and at least one reading response paper by now
Reading:

Week 9 - (10/15) Reading Day/landscape - no class meeting

Week 10 - (10/22) Religion and the material world
Field trip to cathedral and synagogue
Reading:
* James Deetz, Chapter 4 “Remember Me as You Pass By,” in *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 89-124

Week 11 - (10/29) Fin-de-Siècle consumption and landscape
Possible field trip
Friday 10/30 is last day to withdraw
Reading:
* Kate Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings” (1897)
Week 12 - (11/5) Modern tools
Reading:

Week 13 - (11/12) An archaeology for today; final presentations
Last day to turn in second reading response paper
Reading:
* William Rathje and Cullen Murphy, Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage (2002)

Week 14 - (11/19) Indians and museums; final presentations
Reading:
Week 15 - (11/26) Thanksgiving holiday – no class

Week 16 - (12/3) Last day of class; final presentations

Final paper due on or before 5pm on Thursday, December 10, 2009